

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Glyptic

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Introduction

In ancient Near Eastern studies, the term glyptic, derived from Greek *glyphein* (to engrave, to carve), exclusively designates carved seals whose designs were engraved on the material in reverse and appeared in relief when the seal was impressed on soft material, most often clay. There were two basic types of seals: stamp seals and cylinder seals, or, rarely, a combination of the two. Stamp seals were in continuous use from the seventh millennium BCE until the Seleucid period and even later; in fact, they are still in use today. Usually one flat or slightly convex side bears a carved design, while the other side can be shaped as a knob, cone, scarab, or other animal.

A cylinder seal is a small cylindrical artifact into whose convex matrix the design was engraved, enabling an endless band of images to be produced. From the mid-fourth millennium BCE onward, the cylinder seal progressively replaced the stamp seal in Mesopotamia, Syria, and western Iran, while in other regions of the Near East (such as Palestine or the Iranian plateau) stamps continued to be used. The cylinder found its way to these regions only during periods of intensive economic and political exchange with Mesopotamia, for example, in Anatolia during the Old Assyrian Colony period in the early second millennium BCE.

Why did the cylinder seal replace the stamp seal? One theory argues that rolling was faster than impressing, and therefore better suited to covering large surfaces. The essential advantage, however, was probably that the cylinder could accommodate more information on its surface. As a result, it

was favored during the emergence of urban civilization in the later fourth millennium, when an increasingly sophisticated administration required complex and efficient information storage.

While the cylinder was the predominant seal type in Mesopotamia during the third and second millennia, it was increasingly supplanted by the stamp type during the first millennium, probably because many scribes were of Aramaean origin and thus more familiar with the stamp. Near Eastern seals also prompted the manufacture of cylinder and stamp seals in Egypt during the fourth millennium, in Greece in the third millennium, and in Crete, the Gulf region, and Central Asia in the second millennium BCE.

Material, Form, and Size

By far the most seals of any type were made from stone. Limestone, steatite, serpentine, chlorite and jasper, lapis lazuli and rock crystal were the preferred stones in the fourth and third millennia, but the core of large marine shells, with a dense surface and attractive ivory color, was also popular. The development of improved tools between the fourth and first millennium allowed the use of increasingly hard materials. Fairly hard iron oxides (hematite, goethite, magnetite, limonite) of dark color and an attractive luster were favored in the early second millennium. From the sixteenth century BCE onward, faience—a composite material consisting of a sintered quartz body and a glaze—often replaced stone. This material was easy to produce in every desired color, and was therefore preferred particularly for mass-producing inexpensive seals, especially for private individuals. During the first millennium, attractively speckled semiprecious stones or varieties of quartz (chalcedony, agate), often translucent, prevailed. Certain materials undoubtedly represented prestige, especially eye-catchingly colored and exotic ones such as blue lapis lazuli or red carnelian, which had to be imported from regions as far as modern Afghanistan and Pakistan (Figure 17.1). Metal seals were extremely rare, as were seals made from bone and ivory. Wooden seals also existed, but have hardly ever been preserved in the Near East, in contrast to multiple specimens from Egypt.

If a legal transaction required the use of a seal when none was available, a seal was made impromptu from clay. Some of these so-called *burgul* seals (named for the seal-carver, Sumerian **burgul**) lack an image, bearing only the name of the person involved in the transaction (Al-Gailani Werr 1988). Others were crudely adorned with sticklike figures, carelessly scratched and drilled into the soft clay; the simplest clay seals were decorated only with imprints of fingernails. Some of these “one-way” seals were apparently



Figure 17.1 Cylinder seal inscribed for Ginadu, official of King Inshushinak-sharilani of Susa, and modern impression. Lapis lazuli and gold; 2.1 × 1.1 cm. Iran, Haft Tappeh; Middle Elamite (fourteenth century BCE). H. T. 10–32–26. From B. Mofidi-Nasrabadi, “The Grave of a *puhu-teppu* from Haft Tappeh,” *Akkadica* 132 (2011): 151–6, fig. 6. Photograph courtesy of Behzad Mofidi-Nasrabadi.

thrown away after use, as the relatively large number of original clay seals found in excavations indicates. Impressions of these seals demonstrate that they actually served administrative purposes and were not simply decorated beads (Otto 2004: 159, pls. 94–100, for examples from the Old Babylonian palace at Tuttul).

Cylinder seals vary in length between 0.5 and 7 cm, but are typically between 1.5 and 3 cm long; the length of stamp seals varies between 1 and 10 cm. Seals were furnished with fixtures enabling them to be worn: the cylinders were usually pierced along the axis or a suspension loop was added. The seal was attached to a string or wire and worn around the wrist or neck, rarely around the finger, or suspended from a pin that secured the garment. This practice is known from a few representations and from the evidence of graves, where in some cases seals were found near the head or arm of the deceased.

A few cylinder seals were decorated with metal caps, that is, plain or decorated sheets of metal, chiefly gold, which frequently overlapped the edge of the cylinder and thus obscured part of the image (see Figure 17.1). These metal caps had a double effect: they marked the visible cylinder immediately as especially valuable, and they left deep grooves in the clay, thus testifying to the value of the seal even on sealings. In both ways, the seal’s owner was immediately identifiable as a high-ranking person. In fact, the salient features of seals belonging to high-ranking individuals were less a particularly original image or exquisite style, but instead their size and above all their gold settings—further evidence that ancient criteria for evaluating a work of art differed from modern ones. The significance of the caps as a marker of status and prestige was so well

known that attempts were made to imitate caps by cutting horizontal bands with triangles and other designs along the cylinder's upper and lower edge, or by impressing the back of a knife in the soft clay to achieve the effect of a precious setting (Matthews 1990: 64–66).

Sealings: How Seals Were Used

Even today original seals are attractive miniature artistic masterpieces, but only sealings—pieces of clay on which the seals had been impressed or rolled—tell us about their use (Frangipane 2007; Otto 2010). Interest in the reverse side of the sealings began only in the 1970s, when Enrica Fiandra (1975) recognized that their analysis permitted deep insight into administrative and social processes. Lumps of clay were either directly attached to containers (jars, sacks, boxes, baskets, bales) by closing the mouth of a jar or by enclosing the tie fastening of a sack, or by hanging them as a label on the cord that was wrapped around a good. In fairly large administrative units, such as palaces or temples, whole rooms (especially storage rooms) were often sealed instead of the individual goods that were kept inside. The doors were sealed by tying the door leaf to a plug in the wall with a cord. A lump of clay was then pressed around the knotted cord and sealed. While the sealing offered no protection against burglary, if undisturbed it did affirm that no unauthorized persons had entered the room.

Knowing which objects were sealed is important not only for those interested in social and administrative processes; for art historians it is equally crucial to analyze the reverse side of the sealings. Since a door sealing was certainly locally made, it shows that the seal was used on-site—if not necessarily created there. If a series of door sealings repeatedly shows similar designs or style, it strongly suggests that they were produced nearby, and forms the most reliable way to define local or regional seal groups. On the other hand, container sealings could in principle have been produced on-site; alternatively, the containers could have been sealed elsewhere and then imported to the site. In this case, other criteria help distinguish between imported and local sealings. Locally mined clays exhibit similarities that can be determined through chemical analysis, and differ clearly from the clay of alien sealings. The seal image itself provides no reliable information on the origin of the sealing, because seals were often used far from the place they were produced. If a certain seal image occurs only once or in a few examples within a large corpus of sealings, however, it may have been imported; this is undoubtedly the case when additionally other features such as clay or type differ from those locally known.



Figure 17.2 Clay tablet inscribed with cuneiform text and partial impression of dynastic seal of King Abban (ca. 1700 BCE). Tell Atchana (ancient Alalakh), reign of Niqmepa (ca. 1450 BCE). H. original seal (with caps) ca. 2.4 cm. British Museum ME 131467. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Cuneiform tablets or their envelopes, mainly letters and administrative or legal documents, were also sealed (Figure 17.2). Letters were sealed by the sender, while contracts, treaties, and other administrative tablets were sealed by the seller or lender, debtor, guarantor, tenant, claimant, recipient, the contracting parties, or one or several witnesses. Sealings on documents recording legal transaction had very much the same function as the signatures of the involved parties today.

Ceramic containers and so-called models of wagons and beds were only rarely sealed—before firing, of course. In some cases, especially if the sealing covered a large part of the container’s surface, the sealing will have had only an ornamental function. In other instances, the sealing might have been applied for administrative purposes, such as to identify the sender or the container’s contents (Mazzoni 1992).

In general, ancient seal impressions seldom show all the details of a seal and are thus less valuable than original seals for art historical study. But they do allow a precise analysis of administrative processes and the associated responsibilities of administrative units and individual officials.

Moreover, sealings that were certainly imported permit conclusions about the long-distance contacts of the respective administrative unit—always provided that the seal was used to seal goods at its place of its origin and not elsewhere. In the palace of Tuttul, for example, a vast quantity of broken sealings was found in a room directly next to the entrance. Sealings on baskets, sacks, and boxes bearing seal images from Anatolia, southern Mesopotamia, and Assyria had obviously been delivered to the palace from distant regions. In this control room, several persons were apparently responsible for receiving the goods. They broke open the transport sealings, examined the merchandise, transferred it to other containers, sealed them with their official seals (which identify them as “servant of King Shamshi-Adad” or “servant of King Yasmakh-Adad”), then had them transported to and arranged in the storage rooms (Otto 2004: 150–56, pl. 35). From the contemporaneous “Grand Palais” at Mari we know a great deal about the (clearly regulated) responsibilities of those persons authorized to seal at the Royal Court. For instance, one text reports that not even a sack of wool sealed by the king could be opened by anyone other than the king himself or his wife (Biro and Burke 1964: no. 10).

Purpose and Importance of Seals in Antiquity and Today

In antiquity, seals served myriad purposes. As already mentioned, seals served as judicial tools to mark property or signal affiliation with special administrative units. They did not protect against abuse or burglary—it was not difficult to break open a sealed room or container of merchandise and take possession of its contents—but they did guarantee that the sealed object was intact. The amuletic character of seals was also highly important. Worn directly on the body, the seal or its carved designs protected its owner. It is not surprising, therefore, that gods or positive, apotropaic spirits were frequent subjects of seal designs and that negative elements or scenes were never depicted. In addition, seals revealed a lot about a person’s social status.

The value of seals in antiquity also derived from their long lives, which even extended over several centuries: they could be passed on from one generation to the next and used as a dynastic seal, transported over hundreds of kilometers, and kept as exotica far from their place of origin. In regions where seals were less common, people could continue to use old seals either by recarving them or simply leaving them unaltered. In the Old Assyrian colonies in Anatolia, for example, approximately 10 percent of the seal images were produced with seals originating from distant Babylonia, which in some cases were already

several centuries old (Teissier 1994: 61–65). In various places in Syria and northern Mesopotamia, too, about a third of the seal impressions were already “antiques” at the time they were used. In Munbaqa, a settlement on the Upper Euphrates River in Syria, twenty-one of the seventy-one seals impressed on tablets of the fourteenth century were considerably older. The seal of the town god even dated to the Akkadian period, thus at the time of its impression it was already a thousand years old (Werner 2004). It seems as if the elites of a community in particular preferred old seals, perhaps because they were able to produce a long line of ancestors—or wished to suggest it.

The value of seals for a modern understanding of ancient Near Eastern art cannot be overestimated. Since seals were abundant, small, stable, and almost indestructible, thousands have survived. Seals are the only medium of ancient Near Eastern pictorial art exhibiting an uninterrupted development from the fourth to the first millennium. In addition, they are extremely valuable in excavations, since they can be dated more precisely than pottery or any other finds, except for dated written documents. Unfortunately, seals are often discovered in illegal excavations and—because small and easy to transport—end up in collections all over the world. Under these circumstances, essential information gets irretrievably lost. Another consequence of the high value of seals today is that the majority of seals offered on the art market are in fact forgeries.

Seals as the Mass Media of Antiquity

The relationship of seals to large-scale monuments is not always evident, since only a few seals are carved with narrative scenes comparable to those found on reliefs, stelae, or wall paintings. More often, seals exhibit emblematic designs that transmit an encoded message. Yet some seals bear scenes markedly similar to those on large-scale monuments, demonstrating a close relationship between the different media during certain periods. For instance, the motif of the king as a worshiper standing opposite an enthroned god who holds a rod and ring appears almost identically on the famous Hammurabi Law Code (see Figure 16.1 in Suter, this volume), and on the seal of the powerful contemporaneous ruler of northern Mesopotamia, Shamshi-Adad.

Seals were an excellent means of disseminating pictorial motifs and ideas, since they were small and easy to transport, and every legal entity possessed one. For this reason, seals were deliberately used to circulate the royal image and, thus, to propagate royal ideology in the second millennium BCE. Even if images of the most important royal aspects were erected at selected places in the empire in the form of stelae or statues, the question remains

how the illustrated royal ideology could become known beyond these places, since the sphere of influence of stationary works of art was naturally restricted.

In this context, seals played an important role, since they disseminated over vast areas the specific concept of kingship of a particular ruler. Indeed, royal seals from the region of Mesopotamia and Syria exhibit a strikingly uniform repertoire of themes and motives. In the period from the mid-third until the early first millennium, most depicted the king himself in a few predetermined ways that obviously showed his most important aspects. As a pious ruler, he approaches a deity in adoration or brings offerings. As an eternally victorious warrior—a pose dating to the Akkadian king Naram-Sin (2254–2218 BCE), which appeared on seals for the first time in the nineteenth century BCE—the king is armed and active, as expressed by his wind-blown beard and short kilt. With a few exceptions, the only other motifs on royal seals were animal contest scenes, where the protagonists were either heroes or genies (Figure 17.3) or, in the first millennium, the king himself (Figure 17.4). The enormously important role of the king as protector of law and order was apparently expressed not only through the metaphor of a “shepherd” in cuneiform texts, but also through visual images. In the third and second millennia, however, this abstract aspect was transposed to a supernatural level. The extremely popular scene of the protective genies *lahmu* (depicted as a human-like hero with tightly curled hair) and *kusarikku* (a bull-man), who defeat the wild animals (see Figure 17.3), may therefore be understood as a metaphor for instituting law and order and the victory over chaos (Otto 2013).

The iconography of gods and demons must also have been diffused via the minor arts, especially seals. How could we otherwise explain how these beings exhibit identical attributes, dress, and poses in places in the Near East that are hundreds of kilometers apart? Equally, without seals we can scarcely



Figure 17.3 Cylinder seal and modern impression: contest scene. Provenance unknown; Early Dynastic (ca. 2500 BCE). Aragonite; 4.3 cm. British Museum ME 89538. © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 17.4 Stamp seal and modern impression: Achaemenid royal hero as master of animals. Provenance unknown; Achaemenid period (ca. 550–330 BCE). Agate; 3.1 × dia. base 2.5 cm. British Museum ME 89891. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

account for the preservation of motifs over long periods when they were not depicted. For instance, many glyptic designs used in the Akkadian period completely disappeared from the repertoire of pictorial art in the following Ur III period, but reappeared in Old Babylonian glyptic after an interval of about two hundred years. Since seals were passed from father to son and in some cases remained in use for centuries, they were an ideal means for preserving an enduring tradition of motifs. Thus, the thesis that seals must have served as *the* mass media of the ancient Near East—in an era when there were few means of disseminating images and the mobility of most people was restricted—seems to be justified.

Private Seals vs. Institutional or Group Seals

According to the Greek author Herodotus (*Histories* I.195), “every man” in Babylonia owned a seal. He was probably not far wrong in this statement, for at least every “legal person,” female or male, possessed at least one seal, which was used within the framework of legal procedures. We would in fact expect that seal images were intended to differ from one another in design and inscription, since their purpose was to guarantee the intactness of objects in the name of a specific, identifiable person, or to verify legal actions.

Yet hundreds of seals now dispersed all over the world show strikingly similar images—and what has survived is only a fraction of what once existed. If we meticulously compared the seal images that have been carefully

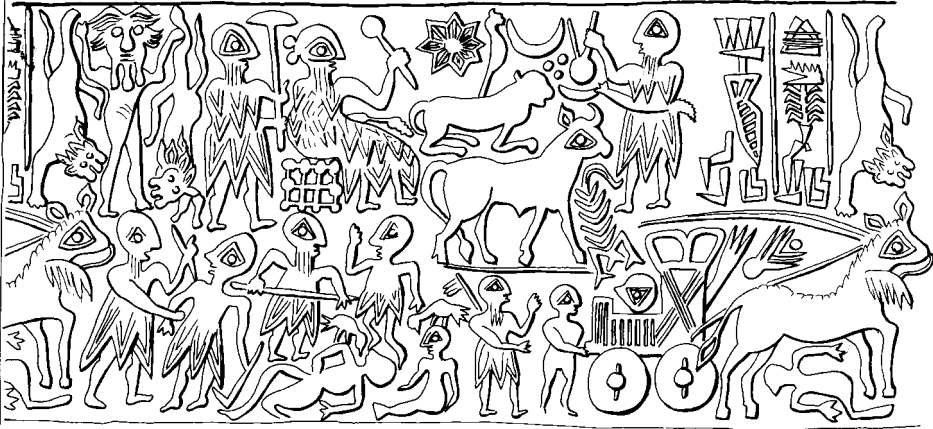


Figure 17.5 Composite drawing, Seal 1 of King Ishgi-Mari of Mari (ca. 2300 BCE). Drawing by Dominique Beyer from multiple seal impressions found in the palace at Mari. Courtesy of Dominique Beyer.

impressed using modern, fine-grained material, we would observe only minor deviations among individual seals. But in ancient times, seals were often carelessly impressed on clay that had already become too hard or that contained impurities, so that in many cases only part of the image and no details were visible. Today it often takes several days for archaeologists to generate a composite drawing of the entire seal image from the tiny fragments of ancient seal impressions (Figure 17.5). So how was it possible in antiquity to identify a seal impression as the signature of a specific person?

There are three answers to this question. First, the act of sealing was often more important than the image impressed, as demonstrated by seal substitutes in the form of garment hems, fingernails, or shells. Second, many seals were impressed so that only the inscription with the owner's name was visible and only a small part of the seal image was preserved on either side of the inscription (see Figure 17.2). Thus, there was no need for the images to differ. Finally, the similarity of the images was often intended, as the following discussion explains.

Royalty and other high-ranking persons were allowed to own two or more seals simultaneously. The seal of the Neo-Assyrian king—a stamp with a fairly simple device of the king stabbing an upright standing lion—is known in 104 variations on documents from Nineveh alone (Herbordt 1992). These documents date from the ninth to seventh centuries BCE, demonstrating that this was no personal seal of the king, but the royal Assyrian office seal, for official state use by a multiplicity of individuals, and in use as far afield as Samaria (Winter 2000: 57). A similar situation can be assumed for earlier

periods, since a systematic examination of royal seals shows that many kings from the third and second millennia likewise possessed more than one seal, which often differed little from one another (Otto 2013). For example, King Zimri-Lim of Mari (1776–1760 BCE) owned at least five seals, all of which depicted the king holding a mace standing opposite a suppliant goddess. They were probably also used as office seals, for most of the seals of high-ranking officials who served Zimri-Lim bore the same design. Clearly, there was an “official” design whose use was mandatory for members of the dynasty and the royal apparatus, but forbidden to private persons outside the royal sphere (Otto 2004: 175). The devices of official seals often seem to have become a kind of coat of arms. When documents with such an emblem were sent all over the world, the sealed images decisively contributed to promoting the visual royal ideology.

Thus the similarity of many seals was clearly intentional, to identify the individual seal owner immediately as part of a certain political, administrative, economic, or social unit. This phenomenon is attested for the first time on sealings from the Neolithic Burnt Village at Tell Sabi Abyad, in Syria, around 6000 BCE, where several sets of similar stamp seals were probably used by various members of different households, families, clans, or other entities, to mark their collective property (Akkermans and Duistermaat 1997). There is also evidence for manifold variations of similar seals for the Late Uruk period. The design with two interlooped snakes and birds, for example, varies among the individual seals either in the number of birds or the direction they face (Boehmer 1999). The findspots of sealings in the Eanna precinct at Uruk, associated with lists of professionals, suggest that individual members of an administrative unit used the seal variants.

Even collective institutions such as the “Elders,” the “Brothers,” the merchant community, or the “Town,” were allowed to own seals, which could remain in use for several generations (Collon [1987] 2005: 123–34; Beyer 2001: 430–45). A good example of the latter is the seal of Dummuqu, the principal official of the city of Assur (^{LÚ} *ša muḫḫi āli ša* ^{URU} *libbi- āli*). His successors in this office continued to use his seal on real-estate documents during the eighth and seventh century BCE (Faist and Klengel-Brandt 2010).

The Iconography of Seals: Between Narrative Medium and Symbolic Representation

Every single motif depicted on a seal bore a specific meaning. In general, seal images were meant to be powerful symbols or icons representative of the seal owner. They rarely included narrative scenes, but were densely packed

statements, encoded in a complex manner and not always easy to decipher today. Since seals also served as amulets, they drew only on positive or apotropaic themes.

Purely decorative seals were rare, except perhaps for some Neolithic stamp seals with geometric patterns and cylinder seals of the early third millennium with brocade-like decoration. Equally rare were narrative depictions of everyday life. When they occur, their purpose is highly specific: seals from the Late Uruk period or from the Seal Impression Strata 8–4 at Ur, for instance, feature economic activities such as weaving and spinning, pottery-making, and manufacture of dairy products (Legrain 1936: pls. 16–18). These seals may be understood as identification badges for the staff working in the relevant economic units.

The depiction of historical events, or even a detailed rendering of hunting, sport, warfare, and building activities, was also rare. In this respect seals differed markedly from large-scale monuments, which do show narrative scenes. Scores of Neo-Assyrian reliefs or wall paintings in various palaces depict the Assyrian army in battle, for example, while not a single contemporaneous seal shows a similar scene.

There are exceptions to this rule, however. Some seals of the late Early Dynastic and early Akkadian periods in northern Mesopotamia depict victorious military campaigns and the ensuing rituals. The seals may reflect real historical events in the fierce competition between the city-states, which resulted either in the complete breakdown or flourishing of the most powerful cities of Ebla, Mari, Nagar, and others. An excellent example is the fascinating seal of King Ishgi-Mari of Mari (Beyer 2007) (see Figure 17.5). The lower register depicts a war chariot drawn by a kunga equid—the “Mercedes” of the third millennium—on which a human head is prominently displayed, thus probably depicting victory over an enemy king. Following the chariot is a naked prisoner, driven on by a victorious soldier. Two soldier combats are still in progress, while two vultures feast on defeated, naked enemies. The upper register shows the seated king holding his scepter and a frond in his hands, while a servant holds an umbrella above him. Another figure offers a libation to a bull, a crouching lion with a lion scimitar, a star, a crescent, and three dots: these are presumably symbols of the king’s major gods. In the remaining space of the upper register are the king’s name and title (Ish-gi-Ma-ri, LUGAL Ma-ri) and a heraldic rendering of the naked genius *lahmu*, who holds two lions by their hind legs—the only element that seems out of place on this seal, which otherwise celebrates the king’s piety and deeds. But if this emblem is understood as the symbol of law and order, the seal may be deciphered as follows: King Ishgi-Mari, venerator of the great gods Enlil, Ishtar, Sin, and Shamash (?) and protector of law and order, defeated the great enemy of Mari in a fierce battle.

The Main Themes and Motives on Seals: Seventh to First Millennium BCE

The earliest known seals, from the seventh millennium, exhibit mainly geometrical patterns. Animals and anthropomorphic figures become more common from 6000 BCE onward (von Wickede 1990). A rich repertoire of supernatural creatures, such as the goat-demon composed of a human body and a goat's head, appears on stamps and later on cylinders from the region of modern Iran. Chalcolithic stamp seals often feature motives of wild animals attacking a herd animal. With the development of cylinder seals at the time when urban society and a powerful kingship emerged came an increase in themes illustrated on seals; human conflicts and their consequences were depicted for the first time.

In the third millennium, animal contest scenes were the most frequent theme (see Figure 17.3). These continuous bands of animals, heroes, and (less frequently) anthropomorphic figures, which Anton Moortgat (1940: 10) aptly called *Figurenband*, increasingly were arranged in an artificial vertical position. Banqueting or drinking scenes, featuring one or two seated persons drinking from beakers or with a drinking tube, were also common (Selz 1983). Since these scenes included musicians, servants, and sometimes also sports competitions, they were clearly not ordinary meals but ceremonies of such importance that they embellished the seals of the highest-ranking persons, for example, Queen Puabi, who was buried in the Royal Cemetery at Ur (Pittman 1998). Combat and warfare on a human level were far less frequently represented, and sophisticated war scenes with chariots and siege ramps were found only in northern Mesopotamia.

The Akkadian period witnessed a fundamental change of subjects. While images of deities had been exceptional before the Early Dynastic period, they now became among the most frequent motifs. Some deities were even involved in a fierce “battle of the gods.” This unusual theme was possibly prompted by the dramatic political events and cataclysmic social developments under the new Akkadian rulers, since political or historical events were seldom illustrated unless transposed to a mythical level.

Toward the end of the Akkadian period, the presentation scene developed and remained the most frequent scene of the Ur III period. Here a minor goddess, or rarely a god, introduces a human worshiper to an enthroned deity or king, or the goddess assists in the audience of the worshiper in front of the god. The adoration and worship of and offering to gods (or deified kings) remained the most common subjects during the first half of the second millennium and later (see Figure 17.1). Only in the second half of the

millennium did themes change fundamentally, possibly due to the influence of Kassites and Assyrians (Matthews 1990). Heraldic illustrations of gods or the “master of animals” were common in the so-called Second Kassite Style and—for the first time—individual, unmatched animated illustrations of animals and hybrid creatures appeared. Sometimes they give the impression of artistic studies: grazing deer; bulls and winged bulls; horses or deer in the so-called flying gallop; an ostrich mother who tries to protect her small chick while being chased; and other designs that testify to an unusual freedom of choice of subjects during the Middle Assyrian period. The seals of the early first millennium, however, did not at all reflect these lively, individual creations. Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian seals again favored ritual scenes, the adoration of gods, or the simple representation of hunting scenes, which were rendered in a stiff and inanimate way. This tendency continued with the Achaemenid seals, where the master of animals (see Figure 17.4), hunting, and war were among the most frequent themes.

Individual Themes and Motives

Deities, Genies, and Demons

Seals depicted a multitude of supernatural beings. Protective spirits and genies were particularly favored as seal devices (Wiggermann 1992). From the third millennium onward, Mesopotamian deities, genies, and deified persons could easily be identified by the horned crown: a flat, pointed, or cylindrical headgear adorned with horns (Figure 17.6). In Syria, Palestine, Anatolia, Elam, and beyond, however, thus in most of the regions outside Mesopotamia proper, deities were not necessarily rendered with horned crowns, which often makes it difficult to distinguish between mortals and immortals.

Some deities can be identified by their attributes and postures. In Mesopotamia, for example, the storm god frequently holds a lightning fork, while in Syria he is often armed and in a smiting pose, holding on a leash his attribute animal—the bull—while standing on two mountains (see Figure 17.6). Most deities in Mesopotamia wear long garments, whereas Syrian and Anatolian male gods may wear short kilts (see Figure 17.6). Other male gods that can easily be identified include the sun god, who holds a saw, and heavily armed warrior gods. Various goddesses are depicted, too, most frequently Inana/Ishtar, the goddess of war and love, shown holding weapons, and sometimes identified by a star (stressing her astral aspect as the morning and evening star Venus); she is often accompanied by her attribute animal, the



Figure 17.6 Modern impression of Old Syrian cylinder seal depicting the storm god and a winged, armed goddess. British Museum ME 132824. Hematite; h. 2.25 cm. Provenance unknown; ca. 1700 BCE. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

lion (see Figure 17.6). The suppliant goddess Lama, who mediated between humans and the great gods, was particularly often depicted, probably because of the seals' amuletic value. The identity of deities all too often remains unclear for want of typical attributes and explanatory inscriptions. Even the supreme Mesopotamian gods Anu and Enlil cannot be identified with certainty, let alone hundreds of other deities who are known from textual evidence.

Deities were not always represented in anthropomorphic form, but often instead as symbols (Seidl 1957–71). In Figure 17.5, for example, a person is about to pour a libation offering to several gods, which are represented by a young bull (= Enlil), a crouching lion with a lion-scimitar on its back (= Ishtar), the crescent (= the moon god Sin), and others.

Humans and the King

During the second and first millennia, an astonishingly large number of seals showed either a deity or the king. When we speak of “the king,” we mean the concept of kingship, not a real, individual person. Neither likeness nor portrait was intended; the seals illustrated instead the various aspects or roles of the king, which can be summarized as “the pious ruler” and “the victorious king” (Otto 2013). Humans other than the king mostly appeared in ritual

scenes, worshipping or offering to a god or deified king, or being introduced to them. Women were depicted less frequently than men, and children never, except for a few instances where they sit on their mother's lap. Rarely was any seal owner, other than the king, depicted in connection with his profession.

The third millennium was fundamentally different. Many Early Dynastic, Akkadian, and Ur III seals depict the seal owner on his own seal. This occurred with high-ranking people of the court, but also with other professionals. For example, some seals, impressions of which were recovered from a palace at ancient Urkesh (Tell Mozan), depicted brewers (brewing women bending over the beer vat), butchers (holding a bull's leg), or nurses (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2002). Female and male musicians, farmers, and handicraft people were also depicted. Even midwives in action, helping a woman in labor, were shown in lively scenes (Otto 2016). At the turn from the third to the second millennium in Mesopotamia, the individual disappears—at least in the pictorial representations preserved on major arts and seals, with the exception of cheap everyday objects such as terracotta figurines.

Myths

Representations of myths were rare. Mainly during the Akkadian period, when the number of subjects increased dramatically and a multitude of gods and other supernatural beings appeared, well-known myths were also rendered (Boehmer 1965). These include the legend of Etana, who flew to heaven on the back of an eagle; the myth of the predatory bird Zu, who stole the tablets of destiny; and the fight with the seven-headed monster. Later on, episodes from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* were more frequent, such as the slaying of the Bull of Heaven or of Humbaba, the giant guardian of the Cedar Forest, by Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu.

Animals and Hybrids

Quadrupeds, birds, scorpions, and fish were among the first motifs to appear on seals, as early as the Neolithic period. Animals continued to appear, either as part of a scene or as isolated elements. The symbolic value of some animals is clear: the scorpion and the hare were symbols of fertility, for example. Others, such as the fly, goat, or monkey, are more difficult to understand. In addition, a large number of hybrid creatures were formed by combining different animals, such as the lion-headed eagle, various forms of griffins, or the winged horse—an early form of the classical Pegasus—already attested

on Middle Assyrian seals. Some of these hybrid creatures found their way to Europe, and not only during the classical period; the goat-fish, for example, persisted until medieval times as a zodiac sign (Frankfort 1939: 308–19).

“Filling Motifs” and “Decorative Bands”

Throughout all periods, small, isolated elements frequently appeared between the major protagonists in the seal designs. They could be parts of animals or humans, especially heads; abstract objects, such as dots or chevrons; astral elements; altars and tables; plants and pots; and the enigmatic ball-staff. There must have been a reason (other than simply *horror vacui*) why seal designs so favored these “filling motifs.” Since they seldom appear on large-scale works of art, they are presumed to have had a symbolic or amuletic value and a meaning specific to the seal owner (Collon 1995). Even so-called decorative bands did not merely serve to adorn a cylinder, but had a specific meaning. The best evidence for this is the attractively decorative pattern of the guilloche, which consists of intertwined bands. This design derives from mating snakes, on the one hand, and flowing water, on the other. The guilloche was therefore easy to understand as a symbol both of the crucial fertility of the land, and the vital fecundity and reproductive capacity of humans and animals.

Composition and Style

Several themes and motifs had a lifetime of several millennia, differing chiefly in composition and style: compare the contest scenes in Figures 17.3, 17.4, and 17.5. The figures were not always placed on a single ground line; on some seals, the design was divided into two or more horizontal registers. On other seals, motifs were arranged at various levels within the field, which rendered the illustration enormously complex and dense (see Figure 17.5). The style of a seal decisively depended on the cultural conventions of the respective region and time, the tools used, and the individual abilities of the seal carver. Engraving designs manually with a stylus rendered the images highly differentiated, but this method was laborious. Mechanical tools facilitated work: a drill borer generated circular cavities; a hollow drill, rings; and a cutting wheel, straight lines. These forms could be left as they were, producing an abstract effect on the decoration, or reworked. In many cases, the eyes, muscles, shoulders, knees, or weapons were drilled and the other parts were later fine-finished by hand. Mechanical tools were also used to mass-produce simple seals in soft material, such as seals in the Mittanian Common Style (Salje 1990).

Correlation between Imagery and Seal Owner

Scholars have made numerous attempts to establish a plausible relationship between the figures depicted on a seal and its owner. Behind this effort is the assumption that the seal owner either had himself depicted or that he chose themes with a direct reference to himself, such as an activity related to his profession or passion, or his personal gods. Such correlations are the exception, however. In the case of certain royal seals, the king himself was clearly depicted (see Figure 17.5). Moreover, some seals were awarded as a personal emblem: the female servants or musicians buried in the Royal Cemetery of Ur, for example, were equipped with cylinder seals that represented musicians (Pittman 1998). If a worshiper was depicted, the seal owner may have identified with this person (see Figure 17.1). Just as with the seals of a king's servants, however, in most cases it was the king who was represented as a worshiper, and not the servant. Since most seals bear no inscription, it is often impossible to clarify the correlation between image and seal owner.

Equally numerous attempts have been made to discover a correspondence between seal inscription and image. For instance, if the seal owner called himself "servant of deity X" in the inscription, it was often assumed that the image represented this god. In fact, the opposite seems to have been the case: the gods mentioned in the seal inscription were only exceptionally depicted in the seal image. At least in the Old Babylonian period, seal owners were clearly eager to assure themselves of the protection offered by as many deities as possible. It seems to have made little difference whether they were rendered in anthropomorphic form, as symbols, or simply named in the accompanying inscription.

Conclusion

Seals are by far the most abundant and illuminating sources for ancient Near Eastern art. As *the* Near Eastern mass media, they served to disseminate images and transport ideologies over vast distances. Since they exhibit a continuous development from the fourth to the first millennium, they are most important for art historians in understanding the iconography and styles of different regions and periods. Because their date and place of origin can be determined with great precision, they are also extremely valuable for archeologists who find a seal impression or seal in its context. And since many seal owners are known by name and profession, the images on their seals allow deep insight into the self-conception of ancient Near Eastern women and men.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Collon (1987) 2005 is by far the best book on Near Eastern seals, appropriate for beginners and still a precious resource for specialists. The introduction in Porada 1980 provides an excellent overview. Gibson and Biggs 1977 and Klengel-Brandt 1997 offer comprehensive essays on the use, distribution, and iconography of seals. Amiet 1980 includes the largest collection of seal images from the fifth to the third millennium. For third millennium seals, see now also Pittman 2013. Porada 1948 is a useful catalogue and commentary on a major collection of seals.

Black and Green 1992 furnish a useful handbook for beginners learning Mesopotamian iconography.

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