



BULLAE

BULLAE, the sealings, usually of clay or bitumen, on which were impressed the marks of seals showing ownership or witness to whatever was attached to the sealing. Bullae or clay sealings were used in ancient Mesopotamia, but strictly speaking bullae came into general use after the end of cuneiform writing. The earliest bullae date from the Seleucid period of the history of Iran and they were in the shape of a “napkin ring” around a document. Seals were then impressed on the clay ring, usually with strings imbedded in it. This method of “sealing” documents apparently did not continue later, for under the Parthians we find a piece of clay placed over a knot that tied a folded parchment or papyrus as at Avroman. Finally, under the Sasanians at least two methods of attaching clay to documents or wares, and then impressing seals upon it, have been found. The first was simply to attach a small lump of clay to a slit or to the corner of a roll of parchment or leather, while the second, and most common, was the placing of a larger lump of clay on top of a tied document or usually on some bale of merchandise. This latter was not a bulla in the usual sense of the word but rather a clay sealing to mark ownership and/or control by government officials, or to indicate the seal impressions of witnesses, partners in commerce or for some other purpose. Göbl’s (p. 12) conviction that all lumps of clay with seal impressions on them must have been attached only to documents cannot be maintained since many are concave with marks of crossed strings on the back, not applicable to parchments or leather.

Bullae continued to be used into Islamic times until gradually paper and



sealing wax replaced clay. Clay bullae of the Sasanian type from the seaport of Sīrāf on the Persian Gulf are the latest in date that we have from archeological excavations.

The pre-Islamic Iranian clay sealing was called *gil muhrag*, as we know from the Iranian loanword *glmhr̄g* in the Aramaic Talmud. The vast majority of clay sealings date from late Sasanian times, and they have been found as far east as Mantai on the northwest coast of Sri Lanka. But such bullae are not peculiar to Sasanian Iran since bullae with seal impressions bearing Sogdian legends have been found in Ak Beshim, northern Kirghizia, and in [Panjikant](#) to the east of Samarkand.

We may assume a continuity in the use of bullae from the Seleucid into Islamic times, but what was their purpose? In Seleucia on the Tigris the bullae found there were mainly attached to contracts of sale in connection with which a tax was collected. The bullae served either as sealings to enclose the documents or as labels to identify or to attest the registration of the enclosed documents. Another group of clay sealings, usually larger and heavier than the first, were apparently attached to cords that fastened a container of merchandise, or they were applied directly on the container. We may assume that similar conditions applied to bullae in later periods.

The next question is what kind of seals were impressed on the clay or bitumen and for what purpose? A seal either identified the individual using it or it represented some authority, usually of the government, which could be identified by the impression. The latter “official” seals were usually larger than private seals and could be designated seals of office, with inscriptions only identifying the office. In addition, under the Seleucids, monograms on seals, or certain symbols such as the anchor or a horse’s head, were reserved for royalty or royal officials. By the Sasanian period, however, monograms (q.v.) were widely used by families or individuals, and many symbols are found on private seals. For the various categories of seals see *mohr*.

It should be mentioned that deposits of special clay or bitumen were utilized for bullae, usually fine and plastic, and such clay was shipped and sold for use as bullae. Many collections of bullae that have been uncovered by archeologists, such as at Qaṣr-e Abū Naṣr near Shiraz and at Taḳt-e Solaymān south of Marāḡa in Azarbaijan, were in archival rooms that were burned, thus baking the bullae. Although it is possible that the bullae were removed from documents and/or wares, to be baked and thus better preserved for archival



purposes, there is no evidence that this was the case.

Finally, the importance of the bullae for onomastica, both personal and place names, as well as for the administrative divisions of the state and various offices is great. The large role of the priestly class in the legal and administrative organs of Sasanian Iran is revealed by the number of seal impressions of *mōbads* and other Zoroastrian priests on the bullae. In the Middle Persian lawbook *Mādayān ī hazār dādestān* (93.4; Perikhanian, p. 270), the *muhr ī pad kār framān dāšt* “the seal possessing executive power,” is mentioned as held by officials or magistrates, including the priesthood. Few of these seals have survived, which enhances the importance of the clay sealing on which their impressions are found.

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