



SEALS AND SEALINGS

SEALS AND SEALINGS IN THE EASTERN IRANIAN LANDS. An overview of Eastern Iranian seals encompasses a vast geographical area, from the eastern borders of the Iranian plateau in present day Afghanistan to the northwest of the Indian subcontinent, where in successive periods Iranian dynasties created kingdoms of great political importance; from the former Soviet territories between the *Āmu Daryā* and the Syr-Darya (thus leaving Parthia and Margiana to Persia proper) to Chinese Eastern Turkistan (Xinjiang), and to the steppes to the north of this belt of predominantly settled peoples.

The bulk of the material known at present is of antiquarian origin and was gathered between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries when European and Russian scholars and collectors turned their attention to these previously unexplored regions. The collections assembled by N. F. Petrovskij and B. N. Kastalskij from Russian Central Asia, held largely in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, have their counterparts in the large collections in the Indian Museum in Calcutta and in the Peshawar Museum, due respectively to the efforts of General Pearse (Chanda, 1928-29) and of Sir John Hubert Marshall (Callieri, 1997, pp. 17-18), both of whom were representatives of the British presence in India. Likewise, the Central Asian collections in Berlin, Paris, and New Delhi were the fruit of the rapacious explorations in Chinese Turkistan carried out at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Materials from archaeological excavations conducted in a scientific fashion follow the initial collecting efforts in the area, starting with the activities carried out by the British in the Northwest Frontier, the French in



Afghanistan, and the Soviets in western Turkistan. The collectors' preference for objects of aesthetic value is, in fact, a handicap in terms of the representational nature of the collections, and artifacts from excavated sites offer a much more reliable picture of the seals used in antiquity. This is well evidenced in the Northwest Frontier when comparing the materials in the Peshawar Museum with finds from the excavations at Taxila (Marshall, 1951, II, pp. 643-49, 677-82).

Progress in the techniques of excavation and retrieval has enhanced the documentation available for the study of seals, in that lumps of clay bearing seal impressions ("sealings" or "bullae") now find their place among carefully recovered objects. Indeed, most recent sigillographic finds in the eastern Iranian area are clay sealings; the corpus, originally centering on the Sogdian documents discovered on Mount Mug has increased, thanks to the sealings brought to light by archaeological excavations at Chaqalaq-Tepe (Mizuno, 1970) and Dzhiga-Tepe in Bactria, Kanka in Chach, Paikend and Kafir Kala in Sogdiana (see below). These materials represent what remains of ancient archives and which originally sealed batches of merchandise and documents: examples of the latter can also be seen in the Bactrian documents which the looting of Afghan antiquities has brought into the antiquarian market (Sims-Williams, 1997, 2001). While, on the whole, the study of the reverse of the clay sealings cast light on various aspects of sealing practices, the association of the sealings with many of the Bactrian texts will constitute a fundamental contribution to the understanding of the use of seals in everyday life, administration, and trade, as shown in a recent preliminary publication on this topic (Lerner, 2006).

The seals of the eastern Iranian area reflect the composite nature of the region's culture. On the one hand, this is characterized by the various local traditions and their contacts with South and East Asia and the Hellenistic world; on the other hand, there is the link with the Iranian plateau and its craft traditions, exposed to the influence of the Iranian dynasties from the Achaemenians to the Sasanians that held power in western Asia. Bearing in mind that seals belong to a category of artifacts closely linked to the social status of the owner, including his relationship with the ruling class, the fact that vast areas of Transoxiana, the Hindu Kush, and the northwestern parts of the Subcontinent were included, more or less permanently, within Iranian political entities has fostered the diffusion there of artifacts of the Iranian tradition proper, which have interacted with the craft traditions developed



locally.

In the particular case of engraved seal-stones, their production involved highly specialized techniques that the craftsmen could master only after a prolonged apprenticeship. The technique of engraving semi-precious stones with drills and emery flourished in Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean basin in pre-Classical and Classical times, giving rise, on the one hand, to the tradition of the Mesopotamian seals, stamps, and cylinders in all their chronological and regional variants, and on the other to the production of intaglios, those refined engraved gems of the Greek and later the Hellenistic World. Other, local traditions of seals in metal or terracotta developed in some regions of the area, including Central Asia. On the whole, therefore, it is easier to follow the development of the various groups of seals than it is with other craft classes.

The Iranian world, beginning with the glyptics of the Achaemenian period, recalls both the Mesopotamian and the Greek traditions, with the Achaemenian cylinders on one side and the so-called Greco-Persian gems on the other. In the Arsacid and Sasanian periods, we see the birth of a local glyptic production germinating from the Mesopotamian stamp seals of the Achaemenian and Seleucid periods. We also see a quantity of intaglios of Hellenistic tradition, probably imported.

In the seals of the eastern Iranian area we find the same craft traditions with regard both to local productions and imported seals. The earliest well-defined glyptic output of the eastern Iranian area goes back to the Bronze Age, with the stamp and cylinder stone seals of the Bactro-Margiana Cultural Complex (Sarianidi, 1976; Winkelmann, 1999), and the coeval copper/bronze compartmented stamp seals, previously known as “Nestorian Seals” due to their frequent cruciform shape (Biscione, 1985; Baghestani, 1997), that were prevalent from the eastern part of the Iranian plateau to Xinjiang (Sinkiang) and Ordos.

After the Achaemenid domination of Central Asia, which left scanty glyptic evidence (Pugachenkova, 1956; Collon, 1998), the most representative evidence stems from the Hellenistic period; at *Āy Kānom* seven intaglios (Hellenistic and Greco-Persian) and a dozen terracotta seals of Oriental tradition, along with a few clay sealings (Rapin, 1992, p. 131), represent the scant and heterogeneous evidence remaining of the widespread use of seals, well evidenced by the inscriptions on the Treasury pots. Seals of the same classes as those of *Āy Kānom* are also present among the furniture of the rich nomadic



tombs at Tillya-Tepe (Sarianidi, 1985).

In the following centuries the use of seals become increasingly common. Only a few regions of the eastern Iranian area, however, have been the object of a comprehensive study of the glyptic output, which allows a reliable stylistic and chronological understanding of the materials. Among these we may include the northern sector of the Indo-Iranian frontier, the area between Afghanistan and the northwest Frontier of the Indian subcontinent, with its multifaceted evidence (Callieri, 1997). Here we must distinguish between imported production and local production: an Iranian presence is evidenced in both.

In the former category, along with seals coming from the Classical Mediterranean area, northern and central India, and Sogdiana, there are two main groups of direct Iranian origin: “Greco-Persian” and Sasanian seals. In both groups, however, a few specimens show certain features that make a local origin probable. In the former group, we witness a phenomenon of exchange between the Indian and the Iranian cultures represented by the diffusion of Indian symbols such as the swastika and the “taurine” symbol on some of the “Greco-Persian” gems from [Gandhara](#), associated with the prevalent religious environment of the region (Callieri, 1996). In the latter group, that belonging to the Iranian glyptic proper of the Sasanian period, a few iconographic or epigraphic aspects specifically suggest a local origin in the Afghan area, corresponding, for some periods, to the realm of the Kushano-Sasanians (see below, and Bivar, 1968; Callieri, 1990).

In the second category, that of local production, along with seals in which the fundamentally Indian background of the northwest Frontier is evident, there are several groups of seals associated with the Iranian ethnic groups that took power in the broad region stretching across Central Asia and Northern India, although a geographic specificity is possible for only a limited number of these groups.

There is a group of seals representing male busts with the head in profile and frontal upper body rendered by means of three globular segments; characteristic of their technique and style is the undisguised use of rounded points of different size producing incisions of varying depths. The result is an image consisting of globular and dot-shaped incisions, globular for the upper body, neck, cheeks, and cranium and dot-shaped for details including the facial features. Thanks to the comparative evidence offered by a series of Parthian drachms with similar countermarks, the seals can be attributed to



the Sakas in Afghanistan during the first century B.C.E. (Callieri, 1997, pp. 226-27; Callieri, 2006). It was also the same Sakas who, in the northwest, adopted for their coinage the purely naturalistic style offered by the local craftsmen of Hellenistic tradition: this probably applied also to their seals, so far as we can judge from the evidence of the seal of a vassal king, Indravarma (Salomon, Callieri, and Schmitt, 1999).

An important chapter of eastern Iranian glyptics has to do with the Kushans, whose empire extended across the Hindu Kush, the Pamirs, and the Karakorums in Central Asia and India. The first studies dedicated to this class of artifacts (Bivar, 1955, pp. 208-10; Bivar, 1968, pls. I, XXVII; also Rosenfield, 1967, pp. 101-3) have identified a group classified as “Royal Kushan” on the basis of the presence of motifs and symbols similar to those on Kushan coins; the same definition was applied to a gem acquired in the northwest, characterized by the presence of a Bactrian Greek (?) inscription (Bivar, 1990). Four of these seals have also been recognized as belonging to the same technical-stylistic class, corresponding to the same production environment (Callieri, 1997, pp. 234-35). Despite a marked preoccupation with verism, their stylistic rendering is static and conventional, reminiscent of Kushan coinage and confirming the close link between coin-die engravers and gem engravers.

With the demise of the Great Kushans and their conquest by the Sasanians from the Iranian plateau, Sasanian seals began to spread in the area, and Sasanian influence remained strong in the glyptic output of the area for many centuries. Apart from the imported seals, some gems and seal-impressions display iconographic traits and Bactrian inscriptions linking them to the Kushano-Sasanian rulers and administrators (Bivar, 1968, pls. I-IV, XXVII; Kruglikova, 1984; Nikitin, 1994).

Also influenced by Sasanian glyptics are the seals of the various Hunnish rulers who replaced the Sasanians and Kushans in the region across the Hindu Kush, from the [Kidarites](#) to the [Hephthalites](#) (Göbl, 1967). Their glyptic output displays male and female portraits, sometimes accompanied by inscriptions in Bactrian, Brāhmī, or Pahlavi scripts which suggest the location of the personage’s realm. A few well-defined groups have been singled out, characterized by the same technical-stylistic traits, from the second half of the fourth to the sixth century C.E. (Callieri, 1999). Particularly important is the seal of Kīngila, where the portrait of the seated king is accompanied by a Bactrian inscription giving the name of this Hunnish leader, whose chronological position between Kidarites and Hephthalites is confirmed by an

analysis of iconography and style (Callieri, 2002).

Another region of the eastern Iranian lands where evidence of seals has recently increased, thanks to the discovery of seal-impressions, is Sogdiana. A comprehensive study of Sogdian seals has yet to be undertaken, and, apart from the sealings, knowledge of these materials is due mainly to a small corpus of inscribed seals (Abdullaev and Raimkulov, 1994; Livshits, 2000) and to two gems found in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent (Callieri, 1997, p. 131); several unpublished Sogdian gems and metal seals are also said to be in the Oriental Department of the Hermitage Museum (Livshits, 2000, p. 48). The presence of a Sogdian inscription, however, is in itself proof of a Sogdian origin only if the image and the inscription are homogeneous in technique and linked in composition; two gems with Sogdian inscriptions in the Indian Museum and in the British Museum belong to the same group of Hunnish gems that are more likely to have been engraved in the Indo-Iranian frontier area (see above). At the same time, the sealings from [Mount Mugh Kanka](#) (Bogomolov and Burjakov, 1995), Paikend (Semenov, 2001), and Kafir Kala (Cazzoli and Cereti, 2005), dating to various ages despite the fact that they were found in seventh or eighth-century C.E. contexts, evidence the circulation in Sogdiana and [Čāč](#) of gems of various provenance, from the Hellenistic East to Sasanian Iran. However, the extremely naturalistic traits which characterize stylistically a few intaglios with portrait busts, present both at Kanka and Kafir Kala, and which differ from the groups found in Bactria, in the northwest, or in Sasanian Iran, suggest the existence of a highly refined gem production which further study might possibly attribute to Sogdiana.

In the case of the Tarim basin, too, a comprehensive study of the seals is still wanting. Local glyptic output includes stone, metal, bone, and glass seals and shows how the region was open to the influence of the surrounding cultures (Maillard, 1977). Largely of circular and lozenge shape, the seals of this area display animal iconography, showing the important role of the nomadic culture, along with human figures influenced by the Iranian and Hellenistic worlds; the latter makes itself felt particularly at Niya and Hotan (Khotan), both with gems imported from the Mediterranean area and those produced in Hellenistic workshops in Asia. Sealings were often present on the many containers and documents that were preserved by the dry climate (Stein, 1912; Andrews, 1935).

FIGURE 1. Cat 7.17 (after Callieri, 1997) PM, Sir John Marshall's Collection. Ring bezel. Ba. Agate with beige and brown bands, blemished; whole. L. 20 x 16



Kashan king (?) on horseback in profile to the right, the stationary horse turned slightly to the right. The bearded rider's facial features are detailed; he wears a tunic and wide trousers and on his head is a tall, three-pointed diadem with two long streamers hanging down the back. He holds the reins and his feet seem to be in stirrups (?). The treatment of the horse's body is also detailed. Behind the head, top left, is a monogram, top right a Kharoṣṭhī inscription consisting of three characters reading from the outside: Iṭharva, 'Iṭharva'; and centre right a Kushan tamgha.

FIGURE 2. Cat 7.24 (after Callieri, 1997) PM, Sir John Marshall's Collection. Ring bezel, probably trapezoid in section. E6a? Honey-colored chalcedony; whole. L. 9.5 x 8; base: 1. 12 x 11. Male bust in profile to right, the frontal upper body rendered by three roughly circular segments. A narrow beard frames the face and the features are summary. The hairstyle shows a raised band (curls?) on the forehead.

FIGURE 3. Cat 7.34 (after Callieri, 1997) PM, Sir John Marshall's Collection. Ring bezel. Ba. Cornelian; whole. L. 12 x 10.5. Male bust in profile to right, the frontal upper body rendered by four roughly circular segments. The facial features are detailed and there is a raised band of hair round the head. An earring hangs from a bar, and the tunic has a high neckline.

FIGURE 4. Cat 7.42 (after Callieri, 1997) PM, Sir John Marshall's Collection. Ring bezel. Ca. Garnet; whole. L. 17 x 13.5. Male bust, frontal but turned slightly to the right, the right arm passing front of the body and holding an open flower to the right of the face. The eyebrows are long, the eyes open, the straight nose starts high on the forehead, the moustache is long and thin, the hatched hair forms round the forehead a curved band that seems much wider than the face. A diadem with three three-pointed elements (flowers?) crowns the centre of the forehead. The tunic with high round neckline and vertical folds reveals the characteristic polygonal segments of the upper body, partly concealed by the arm. To the right of the face, above the flower, is a tamgha, and to the left a Bactrian inscription: Bando, a personal name?

FIGURE 5. Cat 8.1 (after Callieri, 1997) PM, Sir John Marshall's Collection. Ring bezel. Eb. Amber-coloured chalcedony; rim slightly chipped. Diam. 14. An apparently girdled male figure in profile to left moves, left leg and right arm forward, towards a winged horse in profile to right. The body of the horse is well modeled and its head lowered. Sogdian characters, above prn, below [r(y), Farnvare, 'bringing fortune' (presumably personal name).



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