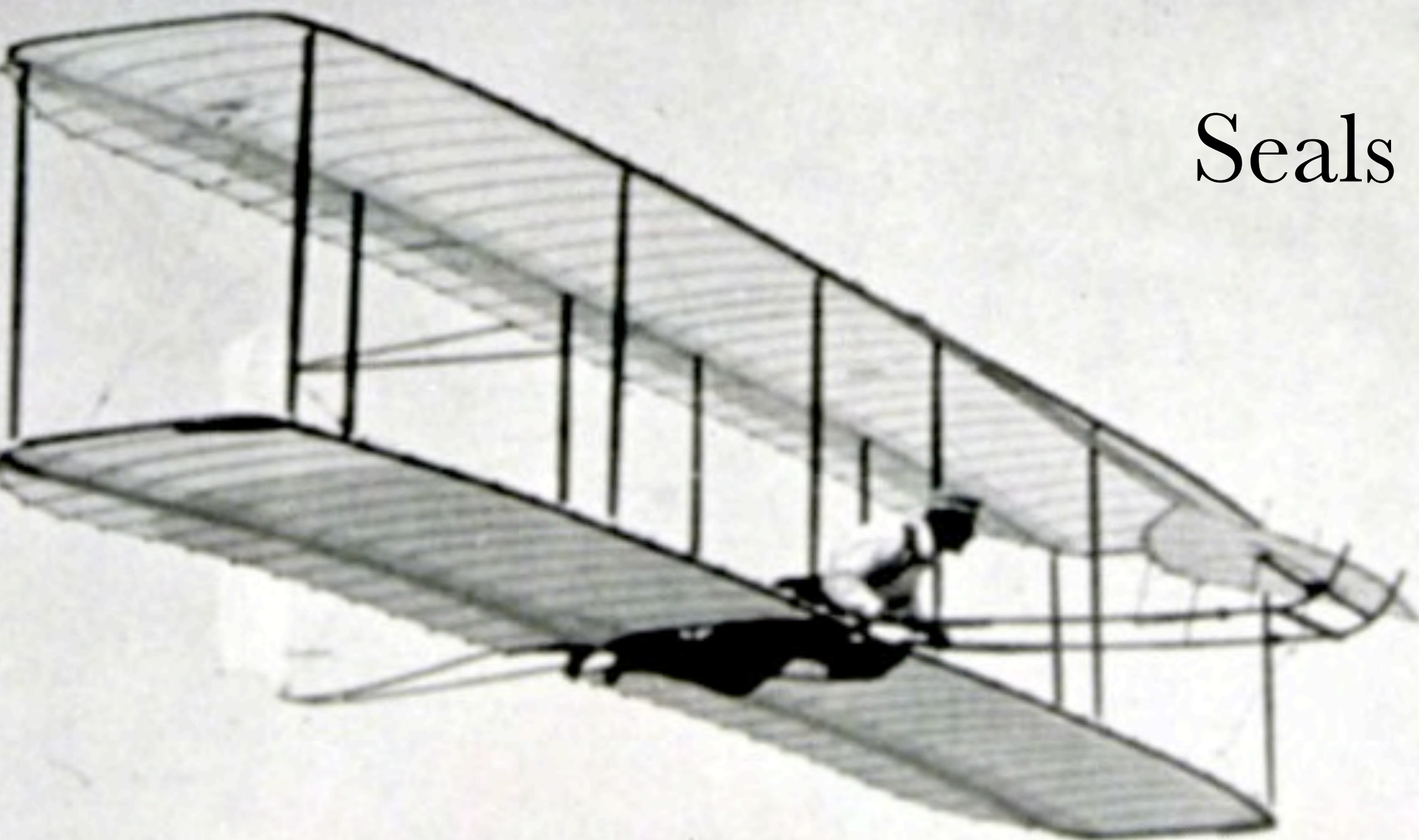


Seals



The Genesis of Flight

The Aeronautical History Collection of Colonel Richard Gimbel

At the United States Air Force Academy

Chapter 7: Seals

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Introduction

Although most of the major monuments of architecture and visual arts of the ancient civilizations of the Near East have long been buried under vast piles of melted mud brick, cylinder and stamp seals record for us in images and in texts some of the details of the lives of individuals who lived millennia ago. Because seals are small and made of durable materials, a good number of them have survived. The earliest seals, dating to around the sixth millennium B.C.E. (before the invention of pottery), were shaped stones whose flat surface was engraved with figures of animals or abstract designs. Seals are also referred to as glyptic art because their imagery is carved or engraved. In each seal, a hole was drilled for suspension. The engraved design was impressed many times on clay masses that had been put



To learn more about the seal in this image, see “Cylinder Seal 2: Cylinder seal with a hero and lions attacking a caprid.”

over strings that were used to close boxes, baskets, and leather bags.

We do not know for certain what specific meaning the engraved images carried, but we think that they were part of an administrative system that helped ancient people to monitor the exchange and the production of things necessary for survival—foodstuffs, clothes, raw materials. The cylindrical shape of seals was invented somewhere in the cradle of civilization in southern Mesopotamia in the land of Sumer lying between the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers, which is today known as Iraq. The cylinder seal was invented around 3400 B.C.E. along with that seminal creation of humanity—writing. Like the stamp seals, designs were carved around the vertical edges of cylinder seals and these designs were impressed on clay locks and clay tablets inscribed with cuneiform sign. They served for more than 3,000 years much as a seal or a signature does today: a guarantee that the content of a document has been accepted or that the contents of a package have passed inspection. These designs were most often images of gods in the Sumerian and Akkadian pantheon and images of rulers and military leaders. Frequently seals would be inscribed with the name and the title of the seal owner, and in some cases the political authority to which he was responsible. In addition to their

administrative importance, seals were potent magical amulets that protected the owner from harm.

The Colonel Richard Gimbel Aeronautical History Collection at the Air Force Academy Library has a fine selection of more than a dozen cylinder seals and two stamp seals from the civilizations of Sumer, Akkad, Babylon, and Assyria. Colonel Gimbel was surely drawn to these ancient stones because they are engraved with images of both real and mythical flying creatures. Indeed, the first seal described in this section depicts an Anzu bird, the mythical eagle that flew to the heavens with a man on its back. The seals range in date from the early part of the third millennium B.C.E. through the seventh century C.E. The catalogue entries describe the imagery carved on the seals and recorded in the photograph of the modern clay impression. In addition, the entries attempt to set those pictorial stories into the wider context of the civilizations that made them.



**Cylinder seal with hero
dominating caprids**

Southern Mesopotamia: ca. 2700 B.C.E.

Chalcedony quartz. h: 15.5 mm. d: 12 mm.

For comparison: Frankfort Xc; Ashmolean 157

A kneeling bald male figure, nude except for his belt, suspends two horned caprids by their hind legs. Separating this repeating motif on the rolled-out impression is an eagle with wings and legs outstretched. In the Early Dynastic period (ca. 2900-2350 B.C.E.) of Sumerian culture, depictions of a naked hero subduing various beasts are frequent. Heroes who wear belts, as does the figure in this seal, may have represented a recognizable mythic individual or perhaps category of individuals to the ancient audience. It is significant that nude, belted men are likewise represented in three-dimensional media at this time.

The eagle, frequently found in Early Dynastic glyptic art, is also a popular personality in Sumerian and Akkadian mythology—often cast in the role of a haughty and ambivalent character. It was the Anzu bird, described and depicted as an eagle or, more frequently, as a lion-headed eagle, who stole the tablets of life from the god Enlil. In the myth of Etana, a quarrelsome eagle assists the hero in his search for a fertility-inducing plant. Both myths apparently served as subject matter for a small number of Akkadian seals some 200 years later. Whether the eagle in Early Dynastic glyptic art is related to the eagles of Sumerian and Akkadian mythology remains unknown.

Parallel interior hatching, such as is employed here on the caprids and the eagle, is characteristic of an Early Dynastic II artistic style. The summary treatment of the human head, with its primary emphasis being the eye, and the lack of definition within the body are other markers of the period. Significant, too, are the bent legs of the eagle, which are rarely found represented in such a fashion after the Early Dynastic period.



**Cylinder seal with a hero and
lions attacking a caprid**

Southern Mesopotamia: ca. 2500 B.C.E.

Pale Limestone. h: 33 mm. d: 18 mm.

For comparison: Collon 83; Frankfort XIIc

Two rampant lions bite into the haunch of a suspended caprid. To the left of this group is a bird, which, by analogy to its contemporary parallels, should likely be restored with a lion's head. Crossing behind the lion to the right is a more immediately fortunate caprid who is grasped by a naked hero, probably originally possessing flame-like curls. This character was thought by several scholars at the beginning of the century to represent Gilgamesh, but this theory is too speculative to gain much currency in modern discussion.

Seals of the Early Dynastic III period (ca. 2500-2350 B.C.E.) frequently depicted the contest scene. At this time, many Sumerian city-states had developed into small kingdoms. The names of rulers are deciphered in contemporary script, and at Ur an extremely rich royal cemetery was discovered in the 1920s. When the names of royal males occur on seals, it is almost always the contest scene that is presented, the banquet scene being most frequently associated with royal women. Indeed, examples of these two genres are among the best modeled seals of the period and are occasionally found carved in lapis lazuli—a stone almost certainly imported from Afghanistan. Limestone and shell are also used for this style of glyptic.

This sophisticated version of the theme of the nude hero with animals stems from an earlier tradition, as may be appreciated when this seal is compared to the preceding one. The patterning of the suspended caprid and the upturned legs of the bird are artistic holdovers from the glyptic style of the Early Dynastic II period. The frontal view of the lions' faces and their tufting manes, however, are new developments and are significant for dating the scene.



**TWO-REGISTER CYLINDER
SEAL WITH LIONS, BIRDS,
AND A SCORPION**

Southern Mesopotamia: ca. 2500 B.C.E.

Black serpentine. h: 29 mm. d: 10 mm.

For comparison: Collon 83; Buchanan 239

On the upper register of this seal, two peculiar schematic birds hover above lions whose heads are raised and turned to look behind. Separating the repeating pairs is a scorpion, which faces downward, its pincerlike claws nearly brushing the ground-line and its tail extending in an arc above. In the narrower register below, four birds walk in a line. Crescent moons float above three of the birds.

The creatures selected by the artist were certainly not random. As two of the most fearsome and regal beasts of ancient Mesopotamia, the lion and the eagle served as potent talismans for the seal owner. Scorpions shared this dangerous and protective potential and possessed, as well, connections both to healing and to celestial forces. The depiction of the creature that hovers above the lion is unusual. Although there are renderings of two-headed eagles and lion-headed eagles that may serve perhaps as parallels, none is entirely convincing. Whether the neck of this animal commences in two separate heads facing in opposite directions or whether the head is to be understood as schematized into two gigantic eyes remains unclear.

Dividing the glyptic field into registers was common in the later Early Dynastic period, while the use of the

animal file as subject matter harkens back to the Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr traditions of *ca.* 3200-2900 B.C.E. This type of compact and highly stylized art served as the inspiration for some regional styles as late as the beginning of the Ur III period, around 2100 B.C.E.



Cylinder seal with a suppliant goddess leading a worshipper before a storm god

Southern Mesopotamia: ca. 2000 B.C.E.

Black hematite. h: 26 mm. d: 15 mm.

For comparison: Tessier 109; Collon 153

A worshipper in a fringed gown is led by a suppliant goddess Lama into the presence of the storm deity, Adad, or Ishkur, who stands in the "ascending position" with one leg bare and rests his foot upon a symbolic mountain. The god holds a lion-headed scepter. This lion motif is further emphasized in the decoration of the cultic stand separating the god from his visitors; the creatures at the base of the stand are winged lion-dragons, totems of the god, and symbolic forms of the storm. A rectangular frame, enclosing an inscription too faint to be read, is positioned behind the storm god. Above the goddess Lama hangs a crescent moon. The popularity of the latter deity, in her role as mediator between the gods and human-kind, is attested by her frequent manifestation in the visual arts.

During the Ur III period, after Sumerian rulers had regained control of southern Mesopotamia from the mountain tribes of the east, artistic themes became exceedingly pious. The presentation scene, in which a worshipper is led before a deity (or perhaps its cult statue) by a goddess (or a priestess in the guise of a goddess), developed in the Akkadian period, became dominant in the Neo-Sumerian period, and survived to succeeding ages. In this particular seal, the worshipper's

hatched headgear and beard betray his non-Sumerian character. Likewise, the weather god's pose and attributes are not traditional in the Ur III repertoire. The fact that the goddess still stands before the mortal, instead of behind him with arms raised, however, is evidence that the Ur III kingdom is not long fallen. This seal appears to date to the early Isin-Larsa period of competing, often Amorite, dynasties.

Hematite first became popular as a material for seals in the Ur III period and later became almost ubiquitous. According to an Assyrian dream book, "a man shall lose what he has acquired" if he dreams of a hematite seal.



**Cylinder seal with a man and
Old Syrian creatures**

Syria: *ca.* 1920 - 1840 B.C.E.

Black serpentine. h: 13 mm. d: 6.5 mm.

For comparison: Buchanan 1182; Ashmolean 899a

A robed male figure with right arm raised faces a kneeling, bird-headed griffin. The latter possesses wings instead of arms, but exhibits fully human legs and wears an open garment. A curling feathered lock may be seen on its head. Free-floating between this pair is a "ball-and-staff," and low in the register, behind the left foot of the griffin, is an isolated lion's head. A full-bodied rampant lion stands behind, facing the same direction. The last element in the design is either the disembodied head of a hare or a motif of unknown significance.

The Old Syrian and the Syro-Cappadocian glyptic styles of the early nineteenth century coincided with the emergence of Old Assyrian presence in northern Syria. At this time Assyria became involved in long-distance trade with Anatolia, exchanging textiles and tin for silver and gold. Due to far-flung trading contacts, the Old Syrian style became widespread, and elements of its iconography are still to be traced in the Neo-Assyrian art of the seventh century B.C.E. Indeed, the winged, eagle-headed genius, so ubiquitous in the palaces of Nimrud and Khorsabad, has its prototype in the griffin portrayed here. In later times this figure is a markedly benevolent force who seems particularly concerned with the tending and

purification of the king and the sacred tree. The "ball-and-staff" is a filler motif, which was very popular in the Old Babylonian period (*ca.* 1800-1600 B.C.E.). It seems to be especially connected in glyptic art with the "nude goddess" and the "man with the mace"—both presumably Amorite imports to the Babylonian pantheon.

Stylistically, this glyptic period is characterized by curvilinear forms, a high degree of modeling, and many filling devices of unknown meaning. The armless griffin in his robe and the rampant, leaning lion are frequently represented in this art.



Cylinder seal with two winged bulls frolicking

Assyria: *ca.* 8th century B.C.E.

Black serpentine. h: 32.5 mm. d: 15 mm.

For comparison: Frankfort 35h; Pittman 63

Two winged bulls are glimpsed in mid-gallop as they gambol through a cosmic landscape. Although the linear style in which they are defined is fairly schematic, details such as the rib cage and the individual wing feathers are clearly defined. The tails of the bulls curve downward, and the horns are seen in side view—a naturalistic solution not always followed in ancient Near Eastern art. Seven stars, a common representation of the Pleiades, hover protectively over one bull, while two crescent moons are suspended above the second. Separating this repeating image is a star and a rhomb; a linear border frames the scene top and bottom.

As an artistic motif, the winged bull became especially popular in the Middle and Neo-Assyrian periods. During these periods the bulls may have been viewed as the wilder cousins of the beneficent *lamassu*, human-headed winged bulls who guarded the entranceways of Neo-Assyrian palaces. More importantly, however, in Middle Assyrian and early Neo-Assyrian art, winged bulls are frequently connected with celestial elements, particularly with the Pleiades. This association is not surprising as the second month of the Babylonian year (our mid-April to mid-May) shared both the winged "Bull of Heaven" (later known as Taurus) and the Pleiades as its marked constellations.

Because a knowledge of the stars was thought to allow the ancient astronomers access to divine messages, astrology was of utmost importance to official and popular religion in the first millennium.

Originating in Middle Assyrian glyptic, this linear style was common in the ninth and eighth centuries B.C.E. The arched necks and curved tails of the bulls may indicate the later date is to be preferred. The dark serpentine stone, the linear bordering, and the seal's relatively tall and thin shape are further evidences of Neo-Assyrian date of manufacture.



**Cylinder seal picturing
a winged genius
dominating two mixed beings**

Assyria: *ca.* 8th-7th century B.C.E.

Pink carnelian. h: 22 mm. d: 12 mm.

For comparison: Frankfort 36e; Forte 50

A supernatural personage with four wings and a partially open robe grasps the forelegs of two rampant mixed creatures whose faces are turned in opposite directions. Standing just to the left of the scene, as if observing it, is a small man in a full robe. Above this figure is what appears to be a winged sun disc. A star and crescent moon hang suspended in the firmament.

The winged male figure in this scene is perhaps to be identified with the *apkallu*, a category of semi-divine, antediluvian sages who are particularly connected with magic and arcane knowledge. *Apkallu* are variously represented as anthropomorphic and winged, as eagle-headed, or as garbed in the skin of a fish. The former category of being is closely associated with the Assyrian king in palace relief. In this period the winged sun disc perhaps indicates Assur, patron deity of the empire.

Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian glyptic styles are often difficult to distinguish because they often tend to draw upon a shared corpus of artistic themes and motifs. Although the four wings of the anthropomorphic figure are Babylonian-inspired, we think Neo-Assyrian artists represented the upper set of wings as being shorter than the lower—as is the case in

this seal. The pose of the central male is dubbed "master of the animals" and finds its origins in the protohistoric times of the mid-fourth millennium B.C.E.



**Cylinder seal with a man
facing a mixed being**

Babylon: *ca.* 7th century B.C.E.

Pink carnelian. h: 19 mm. d: 8 mm.

For comparison: Frankfort 36c; Collon 370

A bearded, kneeling man wearing a fringed robe faces a rampant mixed creature. The man grasps a stick or a weapon of some sort in his right hand and raises his left arm. When the seal is rolled out to create an impression, the repetition of the schematic star between the shoulder of the man and the wing of the beast serves to border the scene.

The fantastic creature of this seal and the two like it in the preceding seal share in common their general composition (a human head combined with the body of a winged, hooved quadruped) even down to the angular twist of the tail. This type of creature shares affinities with depictions of bullmen, centaurs, and ibex-men. Although the bull-man had an extremely long tenure in Mesopotamian art, centaurs and ibex-men were relatively late developments, stemming out of Middle Assyrian tradition. The latter creature was particularly popular with Neo-Babylonian glyptic artists.

Unfortunately, because the nature of these creatures has barely been illuminated by textual references, whether their characters were essentially protective or malevolent remains a mystery.

The use of the cutting wheel at this late date is characteristic of both Neo-Babylonian artists and their

Assyrian counterparts. Carnelian was favored by both as well, although the relative thinness of this particular seal may indicate that a previous design had been erased. Recutting was a not uncommon practice of seal cutters once seal designs became out-moded or a seal changed ownership.



**Cylinder seal depicting
a fabulous beast
and its earthly relative**

Assyria: *ca.* 7th century B.C.E.

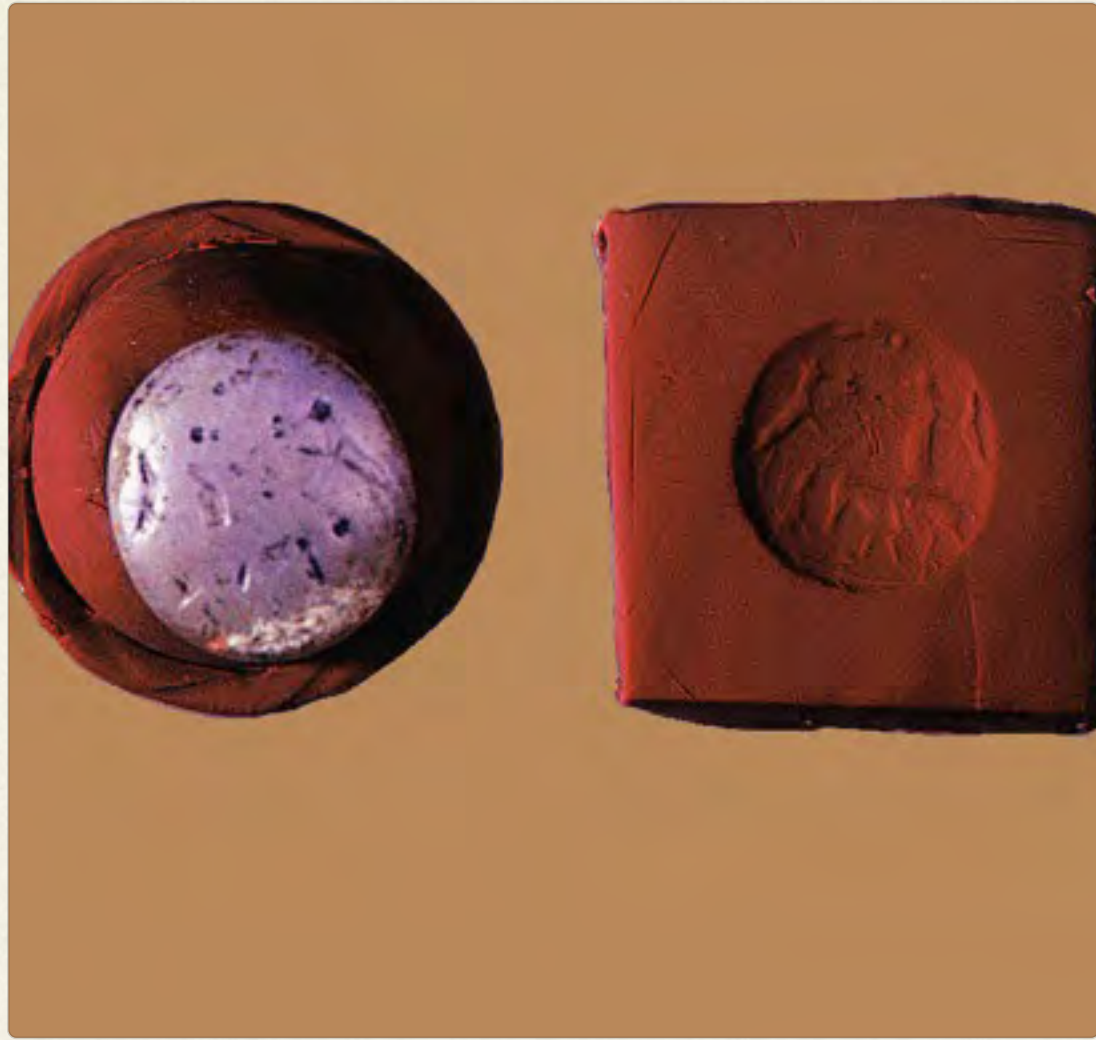
Alabaster onyx. h: 20.5 mm. d: 10 mm.

For comparison: Tessier 247; Collon 334

In this highly schematic seal, a winged quadruped confronts its earthly counterpart—identical save for its wings and mane. The latter animal, perhaps a caprid or an equid, appears to be on the descent from a sharp leap. Drill points, a schematized star, and a crescent moon further enhance the otherworldly atmosphere of the scene.

Neo-Assyrian art owes much to Syrian and especially to Mitannian art of the mid-second millennium B.C.E. These earlier traditions perfected the art of creating composite beasts of the type that are well known from their borrowings by Egypt and the Aegean. The Assyrians adopted many of these creations into their artistic repertoire and developed a predilection for pairing the fabulous with the mundane. Thus, it is not uncommon in Assyrian glyptic to find eagles hovering above griffins, lions sparring with lion-demons, and creatures such as those depicted in this seal interacting with one another.

The use of a cutting disc and drill was responsible for the schematic nature of this drilled-style seal. Although presumably this method of fashioning a seal was comparatively economical, it seems to have constituted an aesthetic taste in its own right in the ninth to seventh centuries B.C.E.



**Stamp seal with various
animals pictured**

Near East. *ca.* unknown period C.E.

White chalcedony. h: 26 mm. d: 18 mm.

The central figures on this seal appear to be dogs or dog-like creatures personified. The dog to the left rides an animal, which is perhaps to be understood as a donkey, and is hailed by the dog to the right who stands upon two legs. To the upper left of the group is a rooster, and the sun appears at the top of the seal.

This ring bezel, in opposition to the two following stamp seals, does not draw upon any known ancient Near Eastern official or court style. It possibly was fashioned in a region peripheral to the major spheres of artistic and political activity or it is an example of folk art. The lively arrangement and personification of the two major figures make it quite likely that the subject matter was drawn from a popular tale of the day.



**Stamp seal with a standing,
human-headed winged bull**

Sasanian: *ca.* 5th century C.E.

Chalcedony. h: 20 mm. d: 17 mm.

For comparison: Bivar EJ 5 and EJ 7.

**Stamp seal with a kneeling,
human-headed winged bull**

Sasanian: *ca.* 5th century C.E.

Dark brown jasper. h: 14 mm. d: 14 mm.

For comparison: Bivar EH 4-7.

Human-headed winged bulls had been present in Mesopotamian art since the Early Dynastic period (3000-2350 B.C.E.) and became especially popular during the Neo-Assyrian era. At this time they were known as *lamassu* and were frequently carved in stone at palace doorways to guard the building from evil, both mundane and supernatural. Following the Neo-Assyrian monumental tradition, the Persian king Xerxes carved a winged, human-headed bull on his gateway at Persepolis.

This prototype was very likely adopted by the Sasanians, later Iranian rulers who like the Persians practiced the Zoroastrian religion. It is thought that during the Sasanian period the winged, human-headed bull may have represented Gopatshah, a mythological being mentioned in the *Menog-i Khrat* and the *Bundahisin*, religious Pahlavi texts dealing with Zoroastrian themes.

Stamp seals began to replace cylinder seals as early as the eighth century B.C.E. when Aramaic, written on perishable materials as opposed to clay, largely superseded Akkadian as the lingua franca of the ancient Near East. As documents following this transition were commonly sealed with dollops of clay or wax, a smaller, more discrete impression than that of the cylinder seal became practical. Stamp seals such as these were placed in rings and used as signets.