**Seals, visual traditions, and material practice:
early writing in comparative perspective**

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abstracts

Sealing versus writing: materiality and practices of the early Egyptian script
by Richard Bussmann

Traditional narratives of the origins of Egyptian hieroglyphs departed from the assumption that writing was invented for administrative and ideological purposes. Political centralisation, the development of new forms of display, the notation of phonetic language, and the emergence of bureaucracy have been treated as a cluster of self-evidently interrelated phenomena. However, comparative research over the past twenty years has shown that this bundle needs unpacking in order to model the invention of writing more productively. This paper discusses how sealing and writing were embedded in wider social and material trajectories of the Lower Nile Valley in the late Fourth and early Third millennia. It is argued that a stronger line needs to be drawn between sealing and writing. Sealing is part of practices in the realm of three-dimensional elite visual and material culture whereas handwriting is a secondary offspring that requires a broader range of skills and has a different scope than phonetic script on seals has.

Patterns, space and meaning: Seals as a springboard to writing on Crete
by Silvia Ferrara

Images on ancient seals offer affordances. As portable objects, they pass around individuals and groups and in these patterned movements they become a mobile reservoir of icons that become suggestive of other meanings than the ones they literally show. As such, their relation to incipient writing is almost obvious. Yet, in certain contexts they have been only marginally considered as an actual springboard to a formalized inventory of signs. This presentation forays into one such underrated trajectory, on the island of Crete in the II millennium BCE, where the earliest attestations of writing have, all too often, been vaguely tied to an Egyptian influence. Instead, here local evidence will be presented, drawn directly from seal imagery, with a close focus on patterns, the ordering of space, and the conceptualization of meaning, to frame how Cretan icons become Minoan signs.

Private person or public persona? Exploring the use of seals in the Indus Civilization as visual identifiers of formal socio-economic roles
by Dennys Frenesz

Stamp seals made of high-fired steatite engraved with a standing animal (real or mythological) below a short string of Indus writing signs are one of the most distinctive productions and archaeological markers of the Indus Civilization, which developed in present-day Pakistan and

northwestern India between c. 2600 and 1900 BCE. However, despite a century of continuous research and analysis, the system of semantic rules and socio-economic practices behind their sudden introduction in the first half of the 3rd millennium BCE and their prolonged use with little or no variation for almost one millennium is still far from being decoded. In particular, the identities and roles of the individuals represented by the inscriptions and iconographies on these seals remain elusive. This presentation will deconstruct the most distinctive features of the standard Indus seals and compare the resulting trends and patterns with those characteristics of seals developed and used in better-known contemporaneous administrative systems. Comparative analysis applying general brand development models in different marketing strategies allows some fundamental principles that have governed their production and use to be determined within a robust methodological framework.

- Frenez, Dennys, and Massimo Vidale, "Harappan Chimaeras as Symbolic Hypertexts: Some Thoughts on Plato, Chimaera and the Indus Civilization," *South Asian Studies* 28(2) (2012): 107-130.
- Frenez, Dennys, "Private Person or Public Persona? Use and Significance of Standard Indus Seals as Markers of Formal Socio-Economic Identities," In *Walking with the Unicorn: Social Organization and Material Culture in Ancient South Asia*, eds. D. Frenez, *et al.* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2018), 166-193.
- Frenez, Dennys, "Mirrored Signs: Administrative and Scriptorial Information in the Indus Civilization Clay Sealings," In *Studies on the Indus Script*, eds. K. Lashari and S.H. Khan (Karachi: National Fund for Mohenjodaro, Government of Sindh, 2020), 21-38.

'Divergent bureaucratic pathways: comparative analysis of seals and sealing practices in Mesopotamia and Iran at the dawn of the state'
by Roger Matthews & Amy Richardson

In this exploratory paper, we will investigate comparative and contrasting features of the practices of seal use in Mesopotamia and Iran. We will consider how seals and sealing practices were developed within specific socio-cultural contexts through several centuries of the Mesopotamian and Iranian past. The focus will be on administrative artefacts as components of complex social formations of the fourth and third millennia BC. While the evidence of seals and sealings from sites such as Uruk, Susa, and Chogha Mish indicates a role for seals within increasingly complex socio-political formations, the use of seals (and writing) in other sites and regions appears to relate above all to the administration of low-level rural production. In this paper, we will bring together data, results, and interpretations from our ongoing researches into deep-time perspectives on the materiality of the practices of sealing and administration in two of the world's great ancient civilizations: Mesopotamia and Iran.

Protodynastic sealing as a new technology of visualising knowledge: Praxis of administration, expression of ideology, intellectual pleasure ...
by Ludwig Morenz

In this paper I would like to discuss a dichotomy between the composition of seals and the practice of sealing in protodynastic and early dynastic Egypt. A group of early seals particularly from the royal necropolis of Abydos has a highly elaborated textual composition and a high readability expressing ideology. On the other hand the impressions go criss-cross and are often only very thin. Practically they seem unreadable. This discrepancy seems counterintuitive and we will discuss some potential aspects supplemented by a side view of early scribes as *homo ludens* (if time allows that).

The proto-Elamite classic style. Seals on texts, texts on seals: who was in charge?
by Clelia Paladre

In Iran, at the end of the 4th millennium BCE, the proto-Elamite classic glyptic style is closely linked to proto-Elamite script and texts. First, through its modalities of utilization: it is the most popular marking tool for sealing texts. Second, through its compositions, which skillfully blend iconographic motifs, semiological codes and epigraphic signs.

Recently, A. Alizadeh raised the question "Who was in charge?" in Susiana during this period[1], implicitly asking whether local or southern Mesopotamian people were actually at the origin of the development of social complexity in Iran. The same question can be raised considering the internal organization of the administrative process, while a number of Iranian sites face an original proto-urban phenomenon, the so-called proto-Elamite one.

Classic style seals are engraved by craftsmen, used by administrators or scribes and undoubtedly conceptualized to meet the needs and preferences of local elites, for whom administrators and scribes worked. Considering these multiple "trades" involved in the different stages of production and life of seals, I would like to understand who was in charge and of what exactly. Craftsmen were obviously close collaborators of scribes, as evidenced by the inclusion of signs in seals, but who was in charge of designing the compositions: elites, craftsmen or those who used seals? Were scribes the general administrators, or were administrators a separate trade? Were scribes independent or attached to administrators? Or was it the other way around? These are some of the questions I would like to address in this workshop.

From stone to clay and back again: An exploration of imagery's polyvalence and multimodality in early Mesopotamian glyptic
by Sarah Jarmer Scott

At the heart of any investigation of the relationship between art and writing – indeed, the birth of writing – is the status and meaning of imagery. In Mesopotamia visual communication took place across pre- proto- and early literate periods through seals and seal impressions as well as other media. In this talk, I will consider the status of imagery in these periods not only as it may have related to the emergence of writing within administrative, social, and economic domains – seals and seal impressions - but also as a visual communicator through other matrices. Through three brief case studies focusing on the nature of imagery and particular iconographies embedded within administrative contexts, I will then expand these examples to explore how they also participated in others. Such an expansion will look more broadly at how various phenomenological image-enhanced contexts may have contributed to the emergence of writing and the environments of early administration in Mesopotamia. By probing the various ways imagery functioned across media we can more deeply engage with the indexical nature of seals and their impressions.

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[1] See Alizadeh A. (2021) Susiana in the 4th Millennium BC: Who Was in Charge?, in: M. van Ess (ed), Uruk – Altorientalische Metropole und Kulturzentrum. Beiträge zum 8. Internationalen Colloquium der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft, 25. und 26. April 2013, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 1-26.

Why cylinder seal(ing)s? Material practices and visual trajectories
by Gebhard Selz

As mentioned in the projects description the evolution of early writing systems was far too long studied from a glottographic perspective (Gelb 1964); its semasiographic aspects remained widely ignored. Moreover, the oral/aural and visual properties (representations) were regularly perceived as separate domains, often ignoring the fact that writing – by definition - is a combination of both. This presentation attempts to show how the "visual traditions that precede early writing" influenced the formation of proto-writing. Methodologically we refer to the Material Engagement Theory (MET, Malafouris at al.) and the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT, Lakoff et al.) which are perceived as salient for any understanding of the process of signification. It is argued and hopefully demonstrated that the study of Mesopotamian cylinder seals and sealings is especially rewarding here: The object's affordances, its cultural specific use and semiosis, both are intertwined and essential for any understanding of the semasiographic aspects of the proto-cuneiform script. In a historical perspective writing rather reluctantly emulates visual features encapsulated in the much earlier visual traditions, especially cylinder sealings – such as the narration of (typical) events: Their progressive singularization, however, connects to the evolving linguistic features of the script, that is glottography.

Visual traditions and early writing on Egyptian seals of the late fourth millennium BCE
by Andréas Stauder

The paper asks about the role of seals in mediating between visual traditions and emergent writing in Egypt of the late fourth millennium BCE. The following topics will be addressed:
- the relation between the repertoires of graphic forms on the seals from Abydos, Umm el-Qaʿab, cemetery U (in tomb U-j and earlier tombs) and the graphic forms on the labels from the same tomb (the latter being, in this author's understanding, not writing yet, but an important step on a trajectory to writing);
- the relation between graphic forms on other seals of the time (in Nubia and elsewhere) and the contemporaneous development of royal iconography and writing;
- the integration of graphic forms harking back to earlier graphic traditions with signs of writing in the late Dynasty 0 and early First Dynasty, before dropping out of use.

Finally, the paper asks why Egyptian seals from the First Dynasty are covered in writing—in a remarkable contrast with notably Mesopotamian seals that remain primarily iconographic at the time.