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## NIKE ON THE CLAY SEALINGS FROM SELEUCIA ON THE TIGRIS

VITO MESSINA

THE seal impressions on the clay sealings found during the Italian excavations at Seleucia on the Tigris provide a very extensive collection of illustrations and form the most conspicuous mass of material found *in situ* of which we are aware.<sup>1</sup> Coming from an unmistakable stratigraphic context, they relate to a single administrative building and can be dated at the same point of time,<sup>2</sup> so that they offer a precious source of documentation on the trends in style and production of the craft workshops of one of the major centres of Hellenistic Asia.<sup>3</sup> An even more precious source if we consider that artistic creations of a certain level are almost completely unknown.

Scrutiny of the documentation leads us to conclude that many works can generally be attributed to the same productive context, *i.e.* to local workshops that have focussed their activity on a standardized production, while in other cases we may postulate a much wider diffusion, as shown by comparisons with sealings found in centres of the Eastern Mediterranean (particularly Delos and Kallipolis). A very complicated picture emerges, characterized by a certain artistic vivacity, probably favoured by the commercial vocation of the city, located at the confluence of major land and river communication routes and which became, as a crossroads of mercantile exchanges between the Mediterranean and the Middle and Far East, a noteworthy place for encounters and confrontation between different cultures.

Many themes appear on the seals from Seleucia – typically Hellenistic subjects, like Greek gods and portraits of the Hellenistic sovereigns, are flanked by more oriental ones such as sphinxes, winged bulls, serpo-dragons or worshippers –. The data emerging from study of illustrations of these impressions seems to confirm that the local sphragistic production, at the artisan and higher levels of quality, must have been vast and very varied, not infrequently experimenting iconographic and stylistic solutions which are quite innovative if compared to the contemporary glyptic documentation or to coins from the Seleucid mints.

Nonetheless, relationships with the coins are rather close in the case of certain raffigurations, such as portraits of the sovereign, the principal divinities of the Greek pantheon (namely Zeus, Athena and Apollo), or as personifications of fate (Tyche) and victory (Nike), bearing testimony to the ease of passage from one support to another in the ways of portraying certain subjects.

From this point of view, the portrayals of Nikai in particular lend themselves to a brief iconographic study, for their evident links with the contemporary production of coins. The Nikai are widely present in the Hellenistic period, on gems and seals as well as on coins. As a coin type these seem in fact to have been very widespread in the lands under Hellenistic rulers and their

<sup>1</sup> Between 1967 and 1972, the Italian Expedition in Iraq, headed by Antonio Invernizzi, found 25,255 sealings inside a huge building (INVERNIZZI 1968, 69-73) that had been almost completely destroyed by a vast fire. The sealings were found close to niches that, as was shown by the remains of burnt wood and nails around the sealings, held wooden shelves for filing the documents (MESSINA 2006, 417-430).

<sup>2</sup> Apart from the figured impressions, many stamps are found on the sealings with Greek inscriptions giving dates corresponding to the Seleucid era, which provide a sound basis for attributing the whole set to the height of the Hellenistic period. These stamps belonged mainly to a department which levied a tax on salt trading, the *alikè onè* (*Seleucia impronte di sigillo*, I, 3-20), and the dates range from 56 to

158 SE (256-153 BC); however, some figured impressions can be dated, based on comparisons with coins, back to the reign of Antiochus I (281-261 BC), like, e.g., those of an official seal with the portrait of Seleucus I deified (MESSINA 2006). The fire that destroyed the building must have taken place in the last quarter of the II century BC and, considering the presence of a portrait of Demetrius II attributed to his second reign (129-126 BC), certainly after 129 BC (INVERNIZZI 1998, 110; MESSINA 2003; *Seleucia impronte di sigillo*, I, 38, 44-45).

<sup>3</sup> The recent catalogue of the seal impressions found in the Archives-Building of Seleucia on the Tigris concerns iconography (*Seleucia impronte di sigillo*, I-III), while further studies will regard other related subjects (BOLLATI 2003, MESSINA 2005).

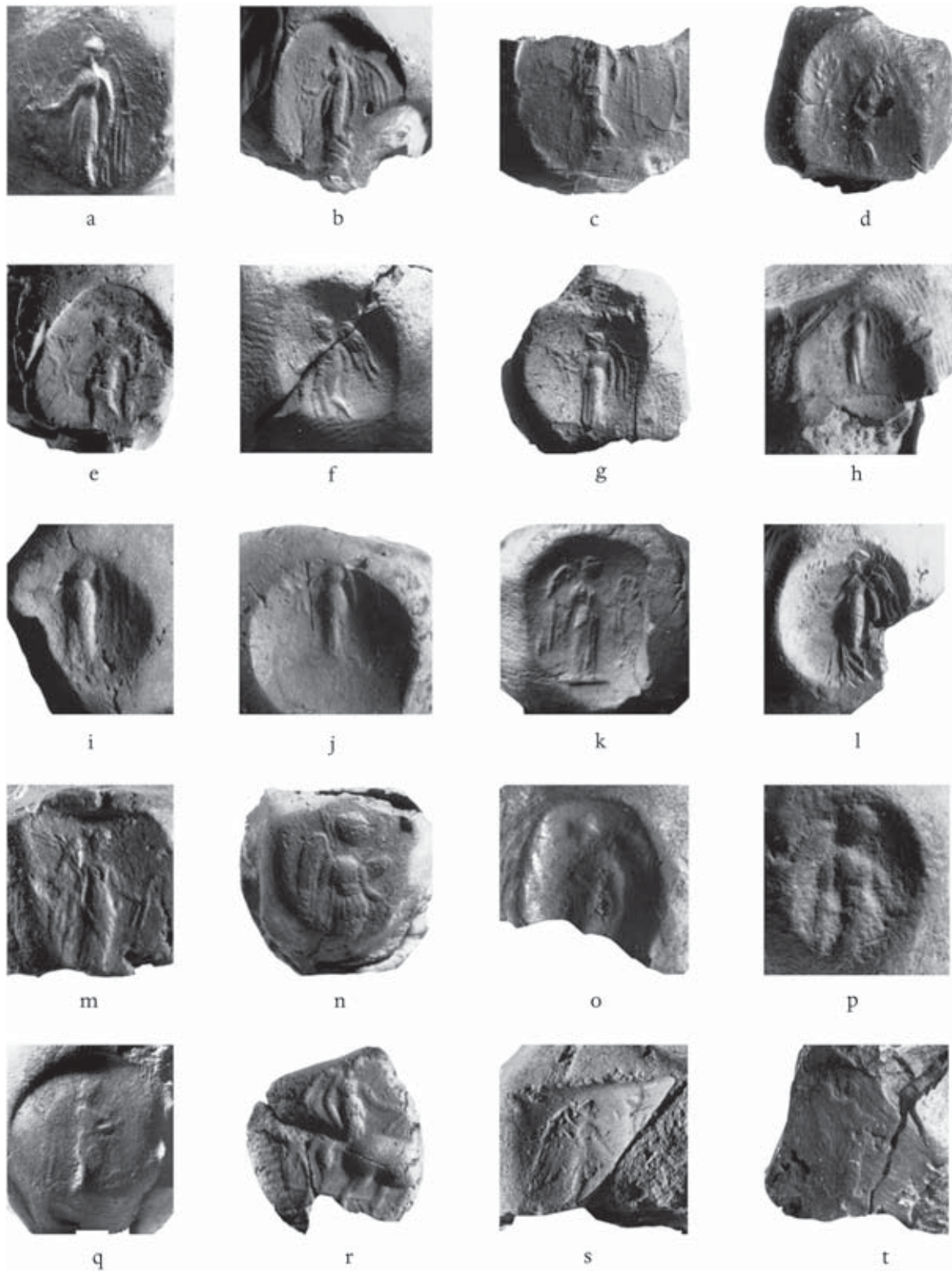


FIG. 1. Sample of seal impressions representing Nike from the Archives-building of Seleucia on the Tigris.

appearance is quite homogeneous.<sup>4</sup> Only the depictions on the gems or the seal impressions show some slight variations on the theme used everywhere on the coins showing a Nike with garland and palm branch, at the moment of coronation.

On the sealings discovered in the archives of Seleucia, there are 49 impressions deriving from 36 seals showing a full-length figure of the deity, while heads or busts are not present; this propensity to portray the full figure, generally in three-quarter view and only rarely in profile, is in line with common practice on the coins. Moreover, the kinship existing between most of the seal impressions and the coin designs is confirmed by comparisons and the general way the subject is depicted; only 4 examples out of 36 do not follow this trend.<sup>5</sup>

The designs on the sealings from Seleucia present for the greater part the coronation theme (20 examples out of 36), with slight iconographic variations (FIG. 1).<sup>6</sup> In most cases, the deity is portrayed in the act of bestowing the garland or carrying a live plant (usually a palm branch); the figure, wearing the peplos or the chiton and sometimes the apoptygma, is usually standing and, when shown in three-quarter view, slightly bends the front leg while extending the rear arm which bears the symbol.<sup>7</sup> The outstretched hand may hold the garland or the palm branch, while in some cases both symbols are held in the two hands. Two examples<sup>8</sup> differ from this type of portrayal, in terms of iconography and execution, since the subject is shown in profile and, in at least one case, is devoid of symbols.

In an iconographic context full of nuances, the symbols of victory may appear in different combinations and figure may look to different sides, but the affinities with the coins are evident in the pose of the figure. Here we refer in particular to the three-quarter view with the front leg slightly bent, the rear leg rigid, the front arm hanging loosely along the flank and the rear arm extended to bear a symbol (a minor variation may show both legs rigid).<sup>9</sup> This pose is repeated without significant changes in the coinage of many Hellenistic rulers, continuing for the duration of their reigns, the prototype being found in the coins minted by Alexander, in particular the drachmas.<sup>10</sup> The motif was extensively used in Seleucid times, on coins and even on official seals: Nikai in three-quarter view with victory symbols appear on coins struck in eastern and western mints in the Empire of almost all the Seleucid sovereigns (FIG. 2), e.g., Seleucus I,<sup>11</sup> Antiochus I,<sup>12</sup> Antiochus II,<sup>13</sup> Antiochus III,<sup>14</sup> Demetrius I,<sup>15</sup> Alexander Balas,<sup>16</sup> Demetrius II (first reign),<sup>17</sup> Antiochus VII;<sup>18</sup> as regards the seals, apart from the impressions from Seleucia, a splendid example is offered by a seal of the chreophulax – a crown official – well documented by some impressions on sealings discovered at Uruk (FIG. 3).<sup>19</sup> One might perhaps liken this seal to an example from Seleucia (FIG. 1:c),<sup>20</sup> which, considering also its dimensions, might have found official use.<sup>21</sup> However, there is a substantial variation in the design details of the

<sup>4</sup> For a quick reflection of the Nikai as coin types, see for instance BELLINGER, BERLINCOURT 1962.

<sup>5</sup> *Seleucia impronte di sigillo*, II, Nk 20, Nk 24, Nk 25, Nk 27, Nk 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Seleucia impronte di sigillo*, II, Nk 1: S9-342, mm > 15 x > 12 (= FIG. 1:a); Nk 2: S9-351, mm > 15 x > 12 (= FIG. 1:b); Nk 3: S9-481, mm > 13 x > 16 (= FIG. 1:c); Nk 4: S6-1111, mm > 13 > 11 (= FIG. 1:d); Nk 6: S9-378, mm > 15 x > 14 (= FIG. 1:e); Nk 7: S9-346, mm > 15 x > 15 (= FIG. 1:f); Nk 11: S6-2490, mm > 11 x > 08 (= FIG. 1:g); Nk 12: S-9263, mm > 10 x > 11 (= FIG. 1:h); Nk 13: S-3258, mm > 12 x > 13 (= FIG. 1:i); Nk 14: S6-1681, mm > 10 x > 10 (= FIG. 1:j); Nk 15: S6-4391, mm > 12 x > 11 (= FIG. 1:k); Nk 16: S9-393, mm > 11 x > 11 (= FIG. 1:l); Nk 18: S-9255, mm > 11 x > 10 (= FIG. 1:m); Nk 19: S9-265, mm > 17 x > 17 (= FIG. 1:n); Nk 21: S6-2303, mm > 09 x > 10 (= FIG. 1:o); Nk 23: S6-902, mm > 11 x > 09 (= FIG. 1:p); Nk 25: S9-346, mm > 17 x > 18 (= FIG. 1:q); Nk 27: S7-2423, mm > 11 x > 09 (= FIG. 1:r); Nk 28: S-9970, mm > 08 x > 11 (= FIG. 1:s); Nk 32: S7-953, mm > 14 x > 12 (= FIG. 1:t).

<sup>7</sup> *Seleucia impronte di sigillo*, II, Nk 1-10, Nk 16-17.

<sup>8</sup> *Seleucia impronte di sigillo*, II, Nk 25, Nk 32.

<sup>9</sup> *Seleucia impronte di sigillo*, II, Nk 11-15.

<sup>10</sup> See for example BELLINGER 1963, no. 3; LIMC, Nike, no. 594.

<sup>11</sup> Mint Carrhae (CSE, nos 887-888); mint Seleucia on the Tigris (CSE, no. 939); uncertain mint of the Western Region of the Empire (CSE, no. 663).

<sup>12</sup> Mint Susa (CSE, nos. 1040-1041).

<sup>13</sup> Mint Tarsus (CSE, no. 455).

<sup>14</sup> Mint Seleucia on the Tigris (ESM, no. 237).

<sup>15</sup> See for example the coins from the mint at Susa (LE RIDER 1965, no. 73:1, pl. VI).

<sup>16</sup> For example, coinage from the mint at Antioch (CSE, nos. 201-203).

<sup>17</sup> For example, coinage from the mint at Antioch (CSE, nos. 229-231).

<sup>18</sup> Mint Tarsus (CSE, nos. 476-478).

<sup>19</sup> The Greek inscription «ΚΡΕΟΦΥΛΑΚΙΚΟΣ ΟΡΧΩΝ» beside the design proves the official nature of the seal, which can be dated back to the reign of Antiochus III, 223-187 BC (ROSTOVITZEFF 1932, no. 35, pl. VII:3).

<sup>20</sup> *Seleucia impronte di sigillo*, II, Nk 3.

<sup>21</sup> The official nature of the seal whose impressions were found in the archives of Seleucia cannot be definitely



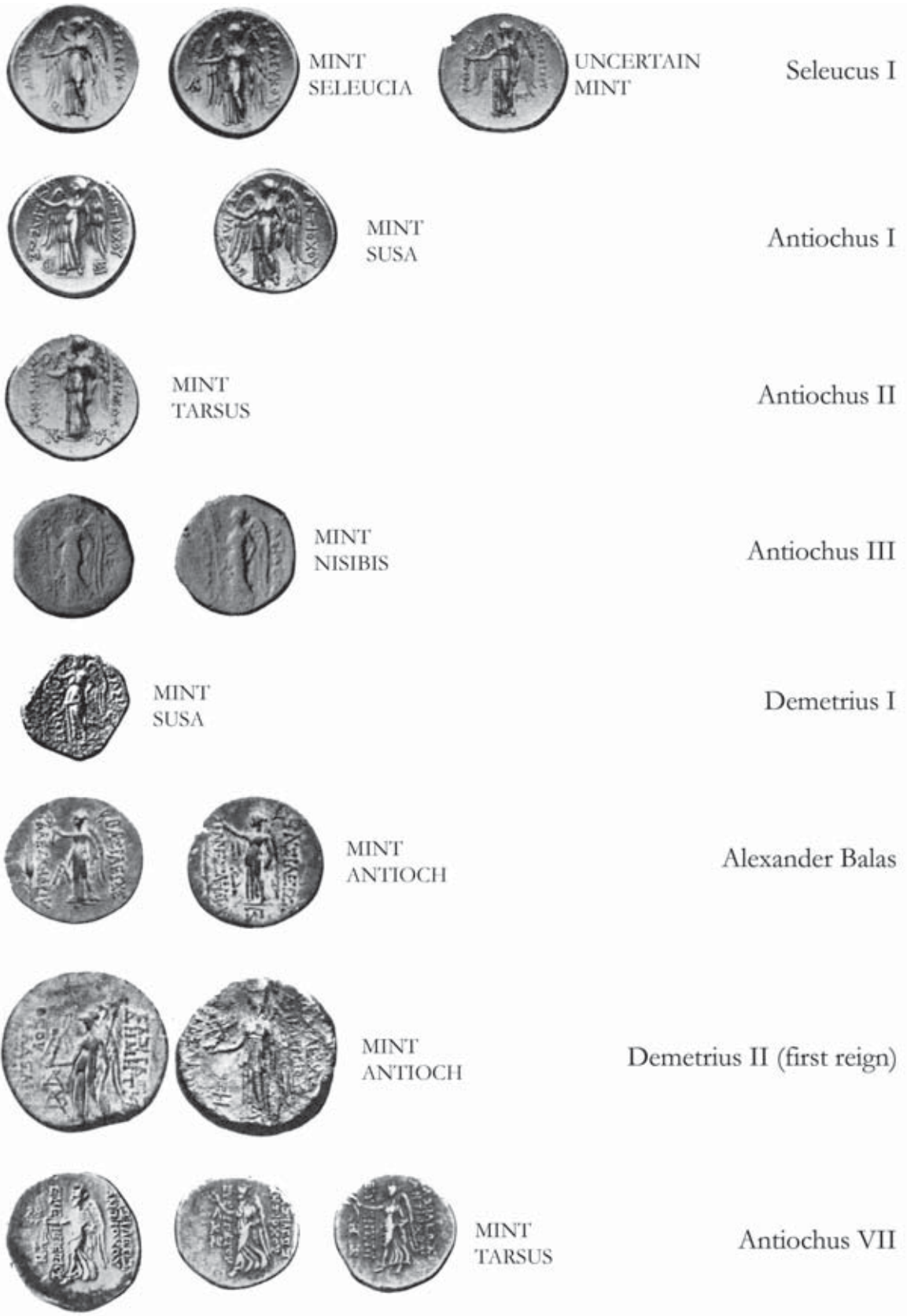


FIG. 2. Sample of obverse coins representing Nike from various mints of the Seleucid Empire.

two seals, since on the impressions from Uruk, by the side of the divinity an eagle (one of the symbols of Seleucid kingship)<sup>22</sup> is depicted, while this is certainly absent on the example from Seleucia.<sup>23</sup> Some differences are discernible in the rendering of anatomic details, but judging from the type of portrayal we may conclude that the preliminary design was probably the same. On the coins, the left arm is generally flexed so that the elbow bends to an acute angle, while on the seal impressions it generally rests on the flank. In this specific case, the execution of the draping of the figure on the seals from Uruk resembles some portrayals on coins,<sup>24</sup> since the folds of the apoptygma unfurl along the rearmost straight leg; on the sealing from Seleucia, the garment seems in contrast to adhere closely to the body. Finally, the wing in the foreground is depicted in the same way, with a thicker curved line delineating the upper edge and thinner, undulating and parallel lines underneath. The workmanship is of good quality, but on the sealings it seems more meticulous in some details, particularly on that from Uruk, since the wing and the folds of the garment are rendered better. Other slight differences between the designs on the coins and those on the seal are visible in the depiction of the wings, sometimes both spread wide, at other times the rearmost hidden by the torso.

It seems however that in the context of the Seleucid Empire a common pattern can be found, endowing the portrayals of Nikai with symbols of victory; irrespective of the support used – coins or seals – and starting from common prototypes, the engravers would have made only slight variations in their production, according to the specific circumstances.<sup>25</sup> Considering the frequent reproduction of this type of subject on coins, which were used as the main means of circulating news of the victory celebrations of the rulers, it seems appropriate to refer to the sketches made for the mints, which were used only later for the seals; indeed, it is perhaps not so far-fetched to imagine that these same coins could have provided the inspiration. Besides, the comparisons are in some cases very precise.

Thanks to a comparison with a coin of Seleucus IV minted at Nisibis (FIG. 4), we can attribute with good probability to the workshops of this centre a seal whose impression was found in the Archives-building of Seleucia on the Tigris (FIG. 1:a), testifying to the commercial routes or else to the circulation of sketches among the workshops of various townships.<sup>26</sup> One seal portraying a Nike in front of a trophy merits special comment.<sup>27</sup> This same motif is repeated on coins of Seleucus I, Antiochus I and Seleucus II;<sup>28</sup> however, the seal from Seleucia bears no similarity either to the static poses of the figures on the coins of Seleucus I or Seleucus II, or to the movement which enlivens the figure on the coins of Antiochus I, confirming the existence of a certain liberty of interpretation.

We have to look further East, towards Bactria or Gandhāra, to find substantial differences in design and execution, although the general theme of the coronation stays unchanged. One seal



FIG. 3. Seal impression of the chreophylax from Uruk.

proved, since no trace remains of an inscription beside the design, as was the case with the impressions of the seal from Uruk.

<sup>22</sup> Think for instance of the eagle used as a coin reverse type by Antiochus IV or by Antiochus VIII from the mint of Antioch (CSE, nos. 117-123, 323-326).

<sup>23</sup> According to ROSTOVITZEFF 1932, 35-36, this association is quite exceptional.

<sup>24</sup> See for instance some coins of Antiochus II from Tarsus (CSE, no. 455) and others of Antiochus III from Seleucia (ESM, no. 237).

<sup>25</sup> The iconographic motif of Nike offering a garland became widespread outside the Seleucid mints and shortly af-

terwards, as shown for example by some coins of King At-tàmbelos I (47-28 BC) from the mint of Spasinou Charax (LE RIDER 1965, no. 423:1, Pl. xxxvi); the representation of the deity is similar to those found on Seleucid coins and seals, except for the royal symbol (a monogram in place of the eagle); the workmanship is significantly less skilful and slightly less naturalistic. On the other hand, in a coin of Kamnaskires (147-140 BC) from Susa, chronologically closer to the Seleucid findings, a more naturalistic rendering is apparent (LE RIDER, 1965, no. 91:2, Pl. ix).

<sup>26</sup> *Seleucia impronte di sigillo*, II, Nk 1.

<sup>27</sup> *Seleucia impronte di sigillo*, II, Nk 28.

<sup>28</sup> See for example ESM, nos 300-302; BELLINGER, BERLIN-COURT 1962, 27, 34-35; WSM, 19.





(= Fig. 1:a)

FIG. 4. Seal impression from Seleucia on the tigris compared with a coin minted at Nisibis.

ship seems lower than that of the Seleucid examples, but care has been taken with the details. In a further design variation, as on a seal impression from Taxila<sup>32</sup> and on a Bactrian coin of Antimachus II (160-155 BC),<sup>33</sup> the subject is portrayed in three-quarters view in the act of stepping forward.

The link established between coins and seals thanks to the findings from Seleucia raises some questions as to the possibility that works on different supports can be attributed to the same craft-work centres, also regarding the appearance on seals of a type of illustration which on the coins certainly had an official character. In the first case, considering the close analogies between some of the examples referred to, it is fascinating to imagine workshops which copied on the seals the designs they had made as prototypes for the mass production of coins; besides, in the Seleucid context the versatility of Apollonios<sup>34</sup> is well documented, a famous engraver in the time of Antiochus III whose signature appears on some splendid gems with the portrait of the sovereign<sup>35</sup> but also, in short form, on some coins minted at Nisibis.<sup>36</sup> In the second case it is however interesting to note how some official types, namely designs which announced the celebration of the victorious sovereign on his coins, could be utilized on a different support base both for seals certainly intended for official use such as that of the chreophylax whose impression was found at Uruk, as well as for seals not used by officials but rather by professional witnesses or private persons. Among the 49 impressions included in our collection, in fact, at least 4 occur in association with the stamps of the salt tax department<sup>37</sup> and therefore they must have been left in the clay by seals belonging to witnesses involved in the binding of commercial documents. Moreover, the greater part of the impressions depicting Nike were small and had a concave surface, which was normal for the seals of private persons. That seems to show that official motifs could have been used in unofficial contexts and employed as one of the many themes then in fashion in the local workshops.

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<sup>29</sup> CALLIERI 1996, no. 7.

<sup>30</sup> BOPEARACHCHI 1991, no. 29:196, pl. 33.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, no. 29:15, pl. 37.

<sup>32</sup> CALLIERI 1996, no. 10.

<sup>33</sup> BOPEARACHCHI 1991, no. 1:1, pl. 14.

<sup>34</sup> For a quick glance at the figure of Apollonios, see GIULIANO 1989, 22, and above all VOLLENWEIDER 1980, 146-153.

<sup>35</sup> Consider for example the famous intaglio kept in the coin collections of the National Museum of Athens with the

idealized portrait of Antiochus III (VOLLENWEIDER 1980, pl. 40:2).

<sup>36</sup> These are coins, distinguished by the monogram «ΑΠΙΟ», with the youthful portrait of Antiochus III (WSM, no. 864).

<sup>37</sup> *Seleucia impronte di sigillo*, II, Nk 2, Nk 12, Nk 16, Nk 18. These seals were associated respectively with seals of 77 SE (236/235 BC), of 114 SE (199/198 BC), of 74 SE (239/238 BC) and of 108 SE (205/204 BC).

impression from Kula Dheri<sup>29</sup> and two Bactrian coins – one of Menander I (155-130 BC),<sup>30</sup> the other of Straton I (125-110 BC)<sup>31</sup> – illustrate for instance variations in the posture of the figure and the symbols. In fact, here the subject is shown in profile, presumably advancing rightwards, and bears a garland in her outstretched right hand, while in the left a palm branch may be held. The quality of workman-

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