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A multi-level approach to the study of the seal impressions

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A Multi-level Approach to the Study of the Seal Impressions

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Abstract

Recent discovery of clay-sealings and clay-tablets' hoards in ancient sites from the Mediterranean countries to the Indian Subcontinent enriched the acquired knowledge on seal impressions. Excavations brought to light new statistic and extrinsic data: the need of a complex analysis of the seal impressions is the direct consequence of the increased information and a new approach has been defined during specific studies. The current trend is to discriminate between intrinsic and extrinsic data by defining the different levels of information. The aim of this paper is to point by selected examples to the results of some recent works and to focus on the new multi-level approach to the study of seal impressions.

Keywords

Seal Impressions, Clay-sealings, Clay-tablets, Ancient Archives, Record-keeping

The discovery during the last decades of clay-sealings and clay-tablets in ancient sites from the Mediterranean countries to the Indian Subcontinent has given a new impulse to the study of their seal impressions. While a clay-tablet is a complete document, normally a clay-sealing is all that remains of a lost document—a written parchment or papyrus tied with strings, of which the seal impressions represent the only information. Thus far, scholars have focused their attention on museum collections, and many studies are still of fundamental importance for the evaluation of the matter (e.g. Rostovtzeff 1932). Although of great value, these contributions did especially take in consideration the iconography and the style of the figured seal impressions, which still remain a major field of research today. However, newly discovered hoards of sealings and tablets have pointed out further aspects of no less worth consideration, such as the manufacture of the seals, the sealing prac-

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tices and other relevant subjects. Indeed, a hoard brought to light in excavations is often what remains of a unique archive, also when it is not found *in situ*, and contains information on the original context of the sealed documents, while the provenance of tablets or sealings in collections can be rather heterogeneous. For instance, hoards of sealings were found in Delos (Boussac 1992; Stampolides 1992) and in Nişantepe-Hattusa (Herbordt 2005), collapsed in debris, while in Carthago (Berges/Ehrhardt/Laidlaw/Rakob 1997), sealings coming from a unique archive were deposited in the foundations of a later building: in spite of their provenance from non-relevant layers, these findings provide partial information about administration procedures. In Seleucia on the Tigris (Invernizzi 2003; Bollati/Messina/Mollo 2004), a hoard of more than 25,000 sealings, found *in situ*, on the floor of the largest archive-building unearthed so far, provides sound information on the archive-functioning, on the administration procedures and on the sealing practices.

Excavations progressively brought to light statistic and extrinsic data enriching the acquired knowledge: the need of a complex analysis of the seal impressions is the direct consequence of the increased information and a new approach has been defined during specific studies. The current trend is to discriminate between intrinsic and extrinsic data by defining the different levels of information. The aim of this paper is to point by selected examples to the results of some recent works and to focus on the new multi-level approach to the study of seal impressions.

At the first level, intrinsic information for figured seal impressions is provided by the iconography and the style of the represented subjects. Such a study could define the chronology of a seal and at the same time collect information on religion, royal propaganda, preference for patterns, and choice of symbols of the administration: the seal impressions from Seleucia on the Tigris (Bollati/Messina/Mollo 2004) and from the Indian Subcontinent (Callieri 1997) show how Greek deities were assimilated in Hellenised Asia or syncretised with local gods; royal portraits on the sealings from Seleucia or Kallipolis (Pantos 1985) display the royal propaganda of the Seleucids and the Ptolemies; seal impressions on clay-tablets from Uruk (Wallenfels 1994) attest to the choice of different motifs in restricted circles (groups or families); sealings from Delos (Boussac 1992; Stampolides 1992), Seleucia, Uruk (Lindström 2003), and Carthago show the different symbols of the relevant administrations.

On the second level, incidental information could be provided by captions—on the edges of clay-tablets—and seal inscriptions, acronyms

or marks, indicating dates, personal or family names, craftsmen marks, professional titles and departments of the administration (the latter often on stamp-seals).

While intrinsic and incidental information concern hoards, sporadic finds or heterogeneous collections of sealings and tablets, at the third level, information is provided only by hoards. Statistical analyses shed light on the administration procedures, on the sealing practices, and on the role of the seal-owners: the hoard of sealings from the archive-building of Seleucia (Boussac/Invernizzi 1996; Invernizzi 2003; Bollati/Messina/Mollo 2004) and the hoard of tablets and sealings from the sanctuary of the Bit Reš at Uruk (Wallenfels 1994; Pedersén 1998; Lindström 2003) show that private contracts could be sealed in the presence of professional witnesses, while taxed transactions were registered under the supervision of an officer (the chreophylax). Many hoards point out that copies of the same document could be preserved in private archives (Delos, Kallipolis), in temple archives (Chartago, Uruk), or in large public archives (Seleucia).

At the fourth level, extrinsic information is derived from comparison with other edited findings. Systematic comparison can reveal external influences on iconography and style, and show the role of different traditions in the creation of a multicultural artistic expression. In Uruk and Seleucia, Greek subjects were executed in a local Mesopotamian style, while in Carthago seal impressions show a strong Egyptian influence on Greek motifs. Comparison often points out the connection between motifs on seals and other artistic media (e.g. numismatic, sculpture, coroplastic art), stressing the reception, the elaboration, the reinterpretation of major artistic prototypes and also defining the circulation of motifs on trade routes. At Delos and Seleucia many figures on seals are reproductions of statues, while at Kallipolis and Seleucia a number of royal portraits are derived from coin types; trade relations between major centres, like Seleucia and Susa, are attested by the recurrence of the same subjects both on seal impressions and on coins. Comparison between contextual findings could also reveal connections between other archives. Seal impressions from Seleucia and Uruk show that some documents were sealed by the same seals in archives of both cities, and that officers could travel from one city to another with the aim of endorsing different documents (Messina 2005).

At the fifth level, technical information is provided by the analysis of the size, the surface and the decay of seal impressions, which reveal the original seal types (metal finger-rings, engravings on convex gems, stamp-seals), and by the study of the seals manufacture. In large hoards,

such a study could provide information on the trends of the local workshops (for instance at Delos, Seleucia, and Uruk there is evidence of a mass-production of seals). The back side of a clay-sealing, too, must be observed. Impressions of strings on the back of the sealings often show the way a perishable document was tied up.

Therefore, multi-level analysis of seal impressions allows to acquire the most complete information on ancient archives and record-keeping in the ancient world, and is more effective if the selected samples are collected in hoards brought to light in excavations. It could be resumed as follows:

1. *Intrinsic Information*
   — Iconography and style: information on religion, royal propaganda, elite and mass trends; choice of motifs in restricted circles (groups, families); choice of symbols in administration.
2. *Incidental Information*
   — Captions and seal inscriptions, acronyms or marks: chronology (dates); prosopography (personal or family names, craftsmen marks, occupational designations); information about officers or departments of administration and professional titles.
3. *Statistic Information*
   — Sealing practices: administration procedures; role of seal-owners (professionals, semi-professionals or private citizens) in administration procedures (officers, contractors, witnesses and other relevant parties);
   — Archival: type of archive (private archive, temple archive, public archive); archive functioning.
4. *Extrinsic Information*
   — Outer influences on iconography and style: role of different traditions; creation of multicultural expression;
   — Media connections (glyptics, numismatics, sculpture, coroplastic art): reception, elaboration, reinterpretation of artistic prototypes; circulation of motifs on trade routes;
   — Motifs' propagation: production and diffusion of the relevant artistic language;
   — Comparison with contextual findings: possible outer archives connections.
5. *Technical Information*
   — Size, surface, decay of the seal impression: seal types (metal finger-rings, engravings on convex gems, stamp-seals);
   — Seal manufacture: workshops' trends; mass-production;

– Back side of the clay-sealings (impressions of strings): tying up of the document.

The following table resumes the effective value of multi-level analysis on different context:

	intrinsic		incidental		statistic		extrinsic				technical
	Iconography	style	Caption	seal inscription	sealing practices	archival	outer influences	media connexions	motifs' propagation	Comparison	
Sporadic findings	+	+	*	°	-	-	+	x	?	?	+
Collections	+	+	*	°	-	-	+	x	?	?	+
Hoards in collections	+	+	*	°	?	x	+	+	+	+	+
Hoards in non-relevant layers	+	+	*	°	+	x	+	+	+	+	+
Hoards *in situ*	+	+	*	°	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

+ : complete or partial information;
* : complete or partial information only on clay tablets;
x : only partial information;
° : possible information;
? : information uncertain;
- : no information.

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