



JAA 2023

An Investigation of Sassanian Stamps in the National Museum of Iran

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Article Information

Doi: [10.30495/JAA.2023.1993086.1012](https://doi.org/10.30495/JAA.2023.1993086.1012)

Received Date: 04/08/2023

Accepted Date: 10/08/2023

Available Online: 01/09/2023

Abstract: Among the archaeological documents, seals and seal impressions are of special importance because the symbols and designs represent much of a country's customs, practices, customs, beliefs, and aspects of its history. It shows rituals, religion, philosophy, art, and administrative and social management over the centuries. This motif has its roots in the ancient civilization of Iran and is sometimes influenced by the neighboring nations. These portable data have caused the spread of culture and art to other lands for the sake of use in business exchanges, administrative letters, and political relations. The introduction of seals and the study of carved inscriptions and motifs can help us know some of the unknown aspects of ancient Iranian culture and civilization and introduce us to the intellectual world of this period. The main aim of this article is related to the documentation of stamp seals of the Museum of Ancient Iran and the interpretation of the symbols engraved on them.

Keywords: *Sassanian Period, Seal Stamps, Motifs, Symbolic.*

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Introduction

The Sasanians created one of the most powerful empires in ancient Iran from the 3rd to mid-7th centuries A.D., in which they took control from the Euphrates to the Indus and had direct influence from Egypt to China via the Silk Road and maritime trade routes (Fig. 1).

Seals and coins are the richest cultural artifacts left over from this period which are commonly found from West to Central Asia, and even beyond, from Europe to Southeast Asia. So far, many seals are published by museums worldwide, the most comprehensive collections are in Leiden, Paris, London, Berlin, St. Petersburg, and New York. Most seals were bought on the antiquities market in the 19th century CE, and only a small minority were recovered in archaeological excavations (Ritter 2009: 154). The importance of Sasanian seals is not only for their quantity and distribution but also for their character: this class of artifacts is significantly standardized in shape, material, imagery, style, and cutting techniques, and seals were used by individuals across a broad social spectrum and the possession of seals was not limited to distinct administrative groups. Indeed, the use of seals expanded progressively and became more formalized with the growth of the Sassanian bureaucracy and economy (Brunner 1978: 9). The review of detail on these artifacts shows that they have been vastly used by a broad social spectrum starting from the high-ranked royalty and aristocracy and ending with the low-ranked farmers and beggars during the Sassanian period (224-651 A.D.). Similar images appeared on seals of all known shapes and materials during this period, but the stylistic differences were considerable. Roughly cut stamps are intended primarily for low-purchasing users, while elaborately cut seals are intended for an affluent group of buyers (Sinisi, 2008: 370). Almost of the Sassanian seals have a hemispherical and ellipsoid shape, and are made predominantly of microcrystalline varieties of quartz (Brunner 1978: 47). Seal is used for valuing and formalizing administrative-financial transactions and decrees, or for decoration and ornaments as pendants for talismans.

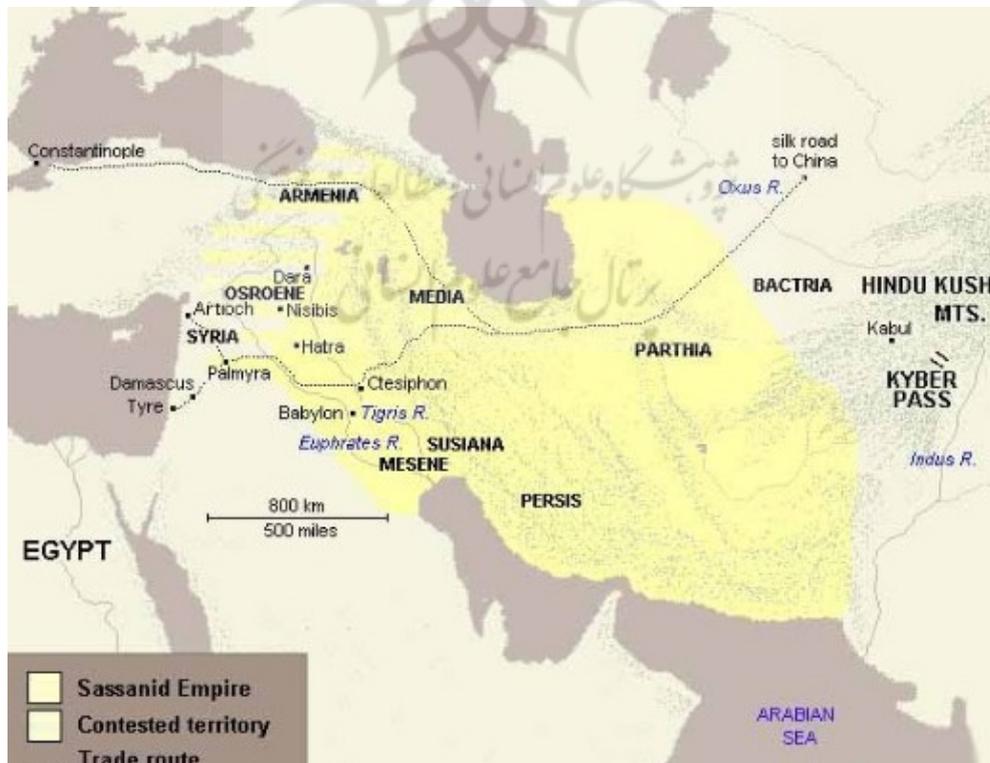


Fig. 1: The Iran Map in the Sassanian Period

Sigillography is the scholarly discipline that studies the wax, lead, clay, and other seals used to authenticate archival documents. It investigates not only aspects of the artistic design and production of seals (both matrices and impressions) but also considers the legal, administrative, and social contexts in which they were used. Thus, this is regarded as one of the auxiliary sciences of history and archaeology that is used as a valid document to study ancient history (Sandri, 1955: 141). Each period has its special style according to economic power, political stability, and carving developments. In Persian literature, stamps are considered as fingerprints, and according to Islamic narrations they had been used as 'Khtam' (finger rings). Using rings has a very long history in ancient Iran. However, the sense of having a ring changed in the minds, as a tool to consolidate personality in the shape of stamps and signatures; and to express personal feelings or symbolize to show pride in richness and dignity. During the Sassanian period, signet rings and stamps were used not only by Sassanian kings and grandees but also by the public, religious leaders, government agents, and tradesmen. They carved their shapes on precious stones such as jade, ruby, carnelian, agate, lazily, crystal, and garnet. This research aims to investigate the art of stamp making during the Sassanian Period based on a descriptive and comparative method.

Materials and Methods

This is documentary-field research that was done in a descriptive-analytical method with an iconography approach. Therefore 35 seals have been examined in the National Museum. Our main limitation was that cultural material from the National Museum of Iran was inaccessible. Furthermore, in some cases, available pictures in the archives of the museum were not transparent, so describing and interpreting details and motifs were impossible.

Discussion

By examining thirty-five seals in the National Museum of Iran, they can be divided into 5 groups based on their subject which include: 1- Human motifs include portraits of kings, naked and semi-naked dancing women, horse riders, humans, animals, or humans individually. 2- Animal motifs include images of scorpions, eagles, rams, wolves, and oxen. 3- Bird motifs include poultry such as ducks, storks, or herons. 4- Herbal motifs include tulips, wheat, and a mixture of wheat and palm date branches. 5- Geometrical motifs include a series of circular concavity – the circle is a symbol of the world, whole, symmetry, and perfection; hence it is a holy shape (Cooper, 1999: 370). The use of similar symbolic motifs in all artistic dimensions such as plaster, metal processing mintage, production of textiles, etc. is considerable. Here, not only are the index ring stamps described, but also similar motifs on other artistic works are presented.

Human Motifs

The first sample – a ring stamp with a red signet ring, on which is the portrait of a man – was discovered in Persepolis and is about 0.8×1.1 cm (Fig. 2). The most current human symbols were male. In these ring stamps, the portrait of men is observed more than any other human symbol. Similar to this motif is observed in excavations from manor houses in Haji Abad, Fars, relating to the fourth century AD; for instance, the portrait of Shapour II is about 50 cm high and 38 cm wide (Fig. 3) (The National Museum of Iran, 2008: 31). The second sample – a ring stamp with a signet ring, on which is the portrait of a female dancing bard – was about 1.4×1.2 cm (Fig. 4). Displaying naked people had not been part of Iranian art and is only observed in Sassanian artistic works; hence it had possibly been for the influence of foreign culture and art (Ghirshman, 1971: 75). Motifs of dancers, holding something in hand, had been current during Sassanian Pe-

riod, which is observed on some oval or bulbaceous trophies and vases of this period as well as on some pieces of mosaic tiles (Figs. 5 and 6). Contemplations have been on these dancers to see if they are the symbol of Anahita, the goddess of water, or they are a ritual image of Dionysus, the god of drinking, or if they are related to worldly affairs (Jansoz et al., 2020: 90).



Fig. 2: Ring stamps with red signet and the portrait of a human at the National Museum



Fig. 4: Ring stamps with red agate signet, which shows a bard dancing woman at the National Museum of Iran



Fig. 3: Plastering portrait of Shapour at the National Museum of Iran



Fig. 5: Bishabour mosaic tile, with a dancing motif (Ghirshman, 1971: 58-60)



Fig. 6: A cup with a dancing motif (Jansoz et al., 2020: 102)

Animal Motifs

The first sample – a ring stamp with a signet ring, on which the animal motifs and shapes like the head of a ram made of gold and amethyst – has a diameter of about 1.6 cm (Fig. 7). Ram according to religious text is a symbol Bahram god, which is the symbol war (Hatam, 1995: 29). Samples of this motif are observed in the arts of stucco and weaving (Figs. 8 and 9). The second sample – an oval stamp with a metal ring, on which the motif of a cow made of red agate – is about 1.2 × 1.1 cm (Fig. 10). The cow is the animal symbol of the goddess Anahita. The selection of this animal as a symbol of Anahita is probably because the cow is similar to the moon, rain, and cleanness; hence cleanness and purity are the characteristics of Anahita (Razi, 1967: 468). This motif can be seen on other artistic relics such as discovered stamps (Fig. 11). The third sample a circular stamp with a ring, on which the shape of a wolf milking a human baby and a poultry sitting on its neck – is made out of metal and ruby using a Roman style and its diameter is about 1 cm (Fig. 12). In ethnic beliefs and mythology, the wolf is the symbol of darkness, acumen, agility, support, greed, oppression, aggression, fear, looting, poverty, hunger, obstinacy, destruction, and killing (Jayer 1999; Ekhtesasi and Khanmoradi, 2022). The motif of this fierce animal is also observed in other Sassanid works such as stamps (Fig. 13). The fourth sample is a bronze ring, on which the motif of a scorpion – is made in an integrated whole and the effects of carrion are seen on them. This was discovered by a governor in Naveh (Amarloo) in 1966, and its diameter is about 1 cm (Fig. 14). This motif on stamps is a symbol of death, destructive forces, darkness, disaster, and damage and perhaps using this motif to prevent disasters from happening (Pakrad, 2000: 184). Scorpion is the symbol of death, destruction power, and disaster (Cooper, 1999: 224). The picture of this creature is also observed on motifs from the Sassanian Period (Fig. 15).



Fig. 7: A ring stamp with a red signet ring, on which is drawn an animal motif like the head of a ram (Baseri, 2004: 74)



Fig. 8: The stucco with the ram motifs from Hesar Tepe (National Museum of Iran, 2008: 26).



Fig. 9: Silk cloth with a ram motif (Ghirshman 1962: 228, Fig. 273)



Fig. 10: Oval stamp with a metal ring, on which is drawn a cow motif at the National Museum of Iran



Fig. 11: Stamps with the cow motifs (Agostini and Shaked 2013)

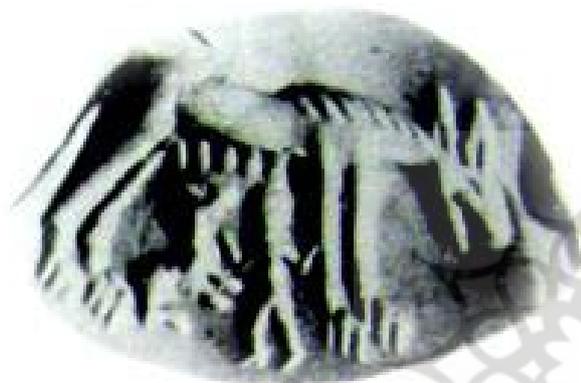


Fig. 13: Stamp with a wolf motif (Ekhtesasi and Khanmoradi, 2022)

Fig. 15: Stamp with scorpion motif (Ekhtesasi and Khanmoradi, 2022, 45)



Fig. 12: Ring stamp with the motif of a wolf milking a baby at the National Museum of Iran

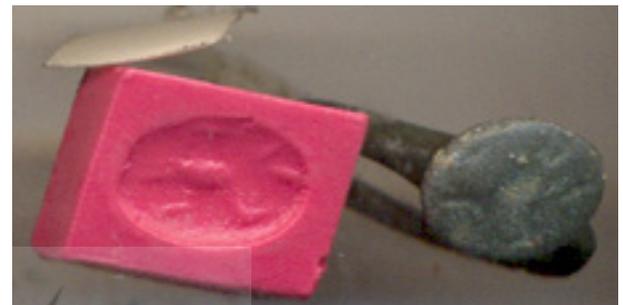


Fig. 14: Bronze ring with a scorpion motif at the National Museum of Iran



Bird Motifs

The first sample – the semi-spherical ring has a motif of ducks and is made of fawn agate (Fig. 16). The motif of the bird is a symbol of excellence, ghosts, death, ascending to heaven, communicating gods, or going up the ladder of awareness, thoughts, and contemplation (Jung, 2005: 235). Birds according to Avesta texts are symbols of Anahita and Mehr (Sodaei, 2022). Other concepts related to birds are wish, freedom, sky, cloud, wind, inspiration, messaging, immortality, fertility, sun, spirit, life, and growth (Ghirshman, 1992: 108). A similar motif is observed on the mahout's clothes showing ducks flying together (Fig. 17). The second sample – is a silver ring with a white agate signet ring, on which is observed the motif of a long-legged bird such as a stork, a heron, or a flamingo (Fig. 18). The motif of this long-legged bird is also observed on Sassanian silver dishes (Fig. 19).



Fig. 16: Bronze semi-spherical stamp with a duck motif at the National Museum of Iran



Fig. 18: Silver ring with an agate signet ring, on which is drawn a long-legged poultry at the National Museum of Iran Archives

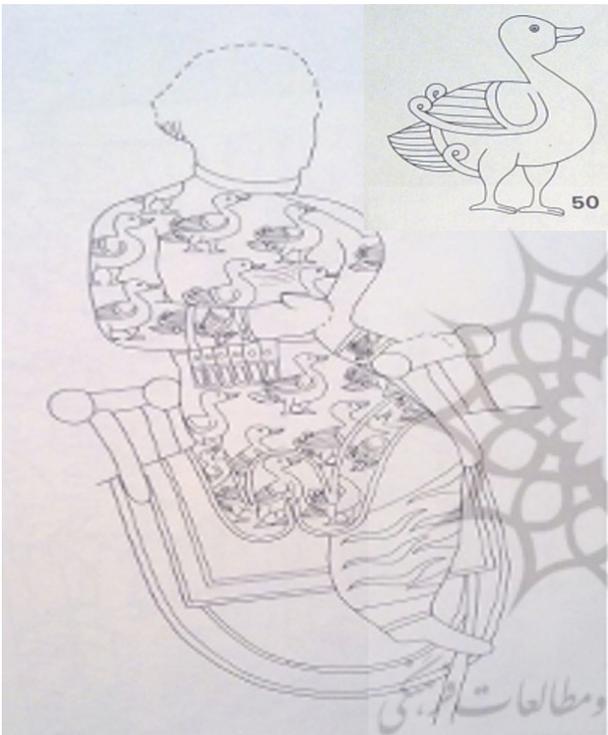


Fig. 17: A duck motif on a mahout's clothes (Fukai, 1984: fig. 60)



Fig. 19: A cup with long-legged bird motifs (Porada, 2007: 318)

Plant Motifs

The first sample – an agate ring with tulip or pomegranate motifs is 2.3 × 2.7 cm (Fig. 20). The flower motifs are observed as either a single flower or a bunch of flowers on stamps. Flower motifs are mostly seen as either pomegranate (fruit on a stem) (Gubel, 2005: 208) or tulip. In Sassanian art, pomegranate is seen either in the shape of a flower or in the shape of a fruitful tree. Pomegranate, which is mostly seen in a triple bunch on Sassanian stamps, can be the symbol of fertility (Brunner, 1978: 119). On a boatman's clothes in the royal hunting scene, whose hands evoke clapping, is observed an herbal motif similar to pomegranate (Fig. 21).

Geometrical Motifs

The first sample – is a bronze ring with a rhombic signet ring, on which is observed four circular dimples. This had been discovered in Siah Dareh (Amarloo) in 1966 (Fig. 22). Conveying messages and concepts through images has been used by humans since long ago. Undoubtedly, by



Fig. 20: Agate ring with tulip and pomegranate motifs at the National Museum of Iran

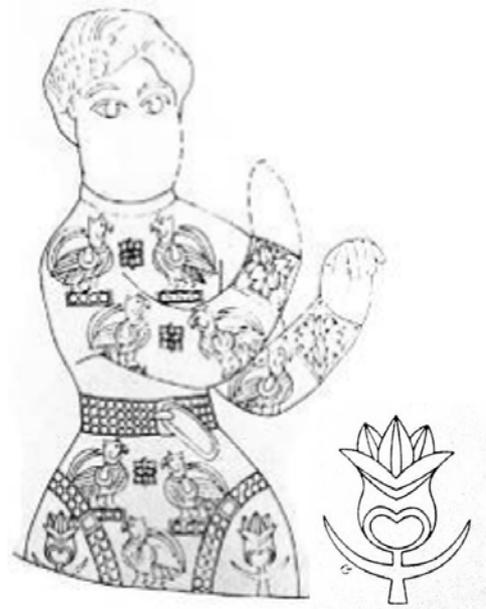


Fig. 21: A flower similar to a tulip or pomegranate on clothes (Fukai, 1984: fig. 37)



Fig. 22: Bronze ring with a rhombic signet ring and four circular points at the National Museum of Iran

examining the works of art of societies, it is possible to understand the worldview and ideology of the ruler of that society (Jansoz et al., 2020). It can be said by examining thirty-five examples of seals in the National Museum of Iran, that Sassanian art is a mixture of Persian art, which is several thousand years old, and some characteristics of Roman and Greek art. Signet and stamp rings were used not only by kings and majesties but also by the public, religious leaders, government agents, and tradesmen. Ring stamps were gradually used by rulers and government officials to formalize letters to their peers in other countries or official instructions and internal formal letters. In these cases, rings were not mere metal rings, but motifs containing the governor's names, titles, desires, and slogans were added to them to be used as governments' official stamps. These ring stamps are mostly made of valuable stones and their diameter is between 4 and 5 mm (Schippmann, 2005: 152). During the Sassanid Period, the official religion was Zoroastrian, and various subjects, relating to this religion, were depicted. Birds in the Zoroastrian ritual are the symbol of goodness and their depiction had been for good luck and happiness (Orbeli, 1983: 121). According to Zoroastrian texts, the bird is a symbol of God Bahram (Sodaei, 2022: 94). And the image of the woman can be taken from the goddess Anahita or Dionysus (Jansoz et al.,

2021). Also, plants have been respected by Iranians and they have had a sacred and legendary position (Montazeri et al., 2022).

In the fourth paragraph of Boundehshen, it is stated that each of the Emshaspans must protect a material object and the plant is the responsibility of the Emerdad (Boundehshen, 2001). Thus, the presence of plants on Sassanian seals can indicate the religious beliefs of this period. Animal motifs had extensively been used in standard Sassanian stamps. These motifs generally show detailed parts of animals, but they have been depicted simply and abstractly. Animals such as horses, cows, and lions are extensively observed on the stamps of this period, which is undoubtedly an indication of the importance of these animals during the Sassanian Period (Talaie, 2013: 162-163). Other animals are observed on Sassanian stamps, which are classified as animal motifs such as goats, deer, bears, monkeys, and camels; bird motifs such as rooks, eagles, and herons; and other motifs such as scorpions. Available motifs on ring stamps mostly had a secret meaning and each represented a symbol. It is undeniable that all artistic dimensions of this period such as plastering, metal processing, minting, textile production, etc. have something in common concerning using these symbolic motifs.

Results

Ring seals are similar to a book full of historical, cultural, religious, and mythological information that can survey their motifs through symbolism. Therefore, studying the images and symbols on them opens a window to ancient periods for researchers. By examining the thirty-five ring seals of the National Museum of the Sassanian era, it can be said that their motifs were used based on religious beliefs. The role of women, plants, and animals are mythological and religious motifs that have been seen on seals, textiles, and stuccoes of this period, and they can be symbols of Anahita, God Bahram, and other Zoroastrian gods and motifs are observed with the portrait of kings, rulers, governors, and officials, on the margins of which are carved the name of the depicted portrait in Pahlavi which was probably used to seal orders or documents.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they agreed to participate in the present paper and there is no competing interests.

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