


## A Cylindrical Seal from Susa IVA


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### Abstract

In archaeological finds, seals are generally considered as one of the most important data bearing important economic, political and even artistic information of relevant time periods. Moreover, the iconography of seals plays an informative role to explore the main characteristics of seals or sealing in order to better understand the social, economic or even the administrative contexts of the societies to which they belonged to. Different styles in the different space and times are known in terms of pictography that can help researchers understand the characteristics of a time period better in the absence of sufficient information. The ancient city of Susa with a rich collection of seals related to different historical-cultural periods is one of the most important ancient sites in Iran which have been used as clues to decipher or interpret that can guide researchers in the stylistics and iconology of seals from its neighboring areas. The cylindrical seal No. 1841 has been registered in the catalogue of the National Museum of Iran with an “unknown” location. The similarity of the image engraved on this seal to those found on seals obtained from Susa was the reason the author came up with this article in order to introduce the seal and specify iconography and stylistics and finally its date and origin with a comparative study. The present study tries to answer the research questions: “What style and time period can be considered for the iconography of the cylindrical seal in the National Museum?” and “Is it possible to prove that it belongs to the city of Susa according to the iconography of the image of the relevant seal?” Studies that have been conducted with the comparative method and with the approach of the image analysis, the IVA style of Susa is considered for it leading to the conclusion that this seal probably belonged to Susa itself.

**Keywords:** Cylindrical Seal; Susa; Iconography; Susa IVA.

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## Introduction

The ancient site of Susa whose name was first engraved on a tablet known as *Stele of the Vultures* lithograph in 2450 BC from the ruler *Eannatum* of Lagash (Amiet, 1988: 82) is a 400-hectares site consisting of several hills (Apadana, Royal City/ Ville Royal, Acropole, and Town of Industrialists/ Ville Artisans). This ancient city has a history of settlement of about 5000 years, a long period from the late fifth millennium BC to the late third and second millennium BC, until the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD (Potts & Roustaei 2006: 1; Perrot 1969, 551). The phase A/I of Susa can be considered as the time of formation of site (Le Berton, 1957: 97) which can be identified in Levels 27 to 23 of Acropolis I Susa (Malek Shahmirzadi, 2003: 200). During the Susa I period, projects to build and expand the seal making to identify and secure assets testify to the fact that Susa like Sumerian cities was the focal point of administrative and social progresses ostensibly linked to the process of forming the “first governments” (Potts, 1994: 57; also see: Dittmann, 1986: 332-333). An office worker was known with a seal (Schmandt-Besserat, 1996: 137) and illustration on it was a part of the administrative process. The image of the seal traced on an office device could be meaningful in the administrative context and an image could reveal different types of information related to the economic operations of the society (Pittman,

1997: 134). Nevertheless, it has become clear that with level Acropole 20-cylinder sealing are present besides stamp seals (Dittmann, 1986: 333); the advanced style of sealing of cylindrical ones of period Susa II which Amiet called the first stage of urbanization in Susa shows the diversity of workers' activities in agriculture and industry (Porada, 1993: 483). Holly Pittman (Pittman, 1990) points out that the fully descriptive sense of activities at the end of level 17, at the time when the shape of the tablets changed with written signs applicable as counting system probably took over the national function that had been filled earlier by glyptic designs (Pittman, 1990; also see: Shendge, 1983: 123-124). Pittman has considered four styles -except flat seals for cylindrical ones of the Susa III or early Elamite era -including classical style, glazed soapstone style, wheel-made and carved style (Pittman, 1997: 139). The trace of the classical style seals is the most common type found from Susa (Pittman, 1997: 142). The distinguishing feature of classical Elamite style iconography is the display of animal activity as human. One of the most important and prominent features of the Proto-Elamite engraving art is the depiction and drawing of animals in the context of a landscape (Pittman, 2001: 233). Human features are rare and iconography focuses on heroes with animal aspects and mixed figures such as Griffin.

Another special feature of the Proto-Elamite is the image of wild animals such as lions or cows in human form acting like humans (Helwing, 2004: 160). At the end of the period Susa III, which coincides with the Early Dynasties in Mesopotamia, the traces of seals were again firmly placed on the background line in a lively manner (Porada, 1993: 486). During the Early Dynastic period (2900-2350 BC) contest scenes showing mythical heroes protecting animals from attack by predators, and banquet scenes were popular (Collon, 1990: 43-44). The banquet scene is similar to the scenes of the seal related to late Nippur I dynasty in dimensions and type of image and scene arrangement and type of clothing. For other visual fields of the early dynasties (2800-2350 BC) adapted in Iran, decorative fringes, including fighting animals, humans, hybrids, and chariots can be named, although they are performed differently. During the Early Dynasties II and III, several simple styles of seal cutting were formed in Iran, examples of which, can be seen in several single finds and also in a large collection of seals found from Chogha-Maran (Porada, 1993: 486; also see: Khayani and Niknami, 2020). No seals are found in layers 12-7 Ville Royal which covers the period Susa IV, but in any case, in the Luberton table which is presented from seals without exact origin, the superiority of Mesopotamian

seals style during the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium is pointed out that the Mesopotamian styles of Early Dynasties were reflected in their engraving and sculpting. Evidence of iconography, stylistics and typology related to artistic aspects of Susa especially engraving show a close connection with contemporary Mesopotamian art in the period of the Early Dynasties II and III (Ascalone, 2008: 363) specifically in emergence and stabilization of images of gods and adapting them from popular themes and characters such as the scene of a battle with naked heroes and buffaloes; local traditions that show people performing rituals and activities (reminiscent of the seals of Susa II) can also be identified. But even these are related to the general trend of themes and the sealing art of Mesopotamia (Alvarez-Mon, 2020: 209) in the period of the influence of ancient Mesopotamian dynasties on Susa based on the images of existing examples, attention to the baseline is seen as the basis for human action, shape of the animals on the seals have been distorted in an unnatural way and it has become difficult to visually pull them out of the scene which were probably performed during a critical period and at the time of the decline of the Proto-Elamite/Susa III period (Porada, 1993: 485). An example of such seals which has been reconstructed from a number of traces of Susa seals and can be



Fig. 1. Seal & Sealing No: 1841

traced back to late Mesopotamian dynasties, include the role of goddess sitting on the back of a cat-like animal surrounded by a young male crew. The seal scene in the top row begins with a hunter man with his two dogs apparently. All these motifs seem to embody specifically Elamite, non-Mesopotamian concepts. The combination of the Mesopotamian frieze motif with these Iranian ones produced a style, for which, no parallels are known (Porada, 1993: 486; Amiet, 1966: 210; Harper *et al.* 1992: 6; Alvarez-Mon, 2020: 203).

### Ichnographic Analysis of Seal Characterization

Seal No. 1841 in the repository of the National Museum of Iran with a height of 23mm, a diameter of 12mm and a weight of 7:60g, is made of baked clay/ terracotta. This seal which was designed very simply shows the role of two people in the center. One of the figures is designed in such a way that it is as if she/he is sitting on a stool and the second person takes to her/him an animal that resembles a goat due to the shape

of its horns. Sitting behind a person who has opened her/his arms on both sides, there is an image of a crescent-shaped head with a body with two appendages on both sides and a tail-like end; perhaps it is possible to imagine a scorpion according to the designs of similar seals. Of course, the recent design of the plant can also be associated with it. This seal has been identified at the National Museum of Iran as a seal obtained from an unknown location (Fig. 1). An example of this seal can be seen in MDP 43 in the collection of seals from Susa provided by Amiet (Amiet, 1972: Pl 192). He placed these seals in the subset of cylindrical seals and various seals / *Cylindres et Cachets divers* (Amiet, 1972: 288). Here, we will examine the examples of the seal of Susa and match it with the placeless seal of the National Museum. The three seals of this collection are most similar to the one we are considering:

Seal No. 2273 of Susa with a diameter of 12mm and a height of 21mm is the most similar to the seal of the National Museum in terms of illustration. This seal also shows two humans



Fig. 2. Sealing No: 2273 (Amiet, 1972: Pl. 192)



Fig. 3. Sealing No: 2266 (Amiet, 1972: Pl. 192)

and an animal in the same simple linear way where the goat-like design is placed in the center of the image and between the two figures which are depicted with open and upward hands. An image of a scorpion or plant somewhat similar to the one in the seal of the National Museum can also be seen in this image which is placed between two human icons. Also in this seal, a sphere-like trace is placed between the body on the right and the goat-like (Fig. 2). Amiet describes the image between two human figures as a scorpion and the statues as a shepherd (Amiet, 1972: 290).

Seal No. 2266 with a diameter of 11mm and a height of 21mm from the Susa complex can be compared to the seal of the National Museum in terms of iconology. In the engravings of this seal, we are faced with two statues sit-

ting and standing, but in the image of this seal two animals can be seen: a larger one with almost symmetrical horns turned inwards, ears under the horns and an unidentified face whose identity is unknown to us, can be seen sitting on a stool behind the person, and an animal with a much smaller body with horns can be seen behind the stool of the sitting person. A snake is also seen at the bottom of the image of the two animals and close to the smaller animal. Unlike the seal of the National Museum where the sitting figure has open arms, here a hand of the sitting person is engraved as if he/she hold her/his hand on the waist. A plant-like image is seen between the two figures. Of course, for this role, due to the similarities, a very light image of a scorpion can be imagined (Fig. 3). Describing this





Fig. 4. Sealing No: 2268 (Amiet, 1972: Pl. 192)

seal, Amiet states that one raises both arms (Amiet 1972: 290).

Seal No. 2268, which has a diameter of 13mm and a height of 21mm, has a slightly different engraved image. Three figures can be seen here. Two people are sitting on a stool with their hands bent at the elbows, as if they had hit one in the back, and between them, two animals are depicted, possibly goat-like due to their horns; the standing figure is seen with one hand up and one hand forward. An image that can be both reminiscent of a shrub-like plant or an image of a scorpion due to the role of the scorpion in this sample of seals can be seen standing behind the person (Fig. 4). Roach considers (specifically flower or leaf) for this image (Roach 2008: 390). In describing this seal, Amiet did not point to a standing person or an animal (Amiet, 1972: 290).

In general, similarities such as the use of human figures, whether sitting or standing, the use of goat-like animal, and the role of a creature that can be reminiscent of a scorpion or a plant can be seen in all cases. The designs of all the images have a linear style and are depicted very simply

and without details, but there are also differences between them including: from elements of other role such as a sphere or an animal such as a snake or the presence of different people (Seal No. 2268) have been used, in the statues of seals Nos. 1841 and 2273, people's hands are open to both sides, but in the same example, Nos. 2266 and 2268, people are sitting with one hand on their waists. In the seals found in Susa, four-legged people are also depicted which is not seen in the seal of the National Museum. Differences in the design of the scorpion or plant role can also be seen in the seals; can also be expressed in general.

In the images of an animal being offered to a person sitting on a stool, the validity of the images can be seen, which from this perspective shows "a connection with scenes similar to the styles of Susa II, Jemdet Nasr and the Classic Proto-Elamite" (Roach, 2008: 390).

Other less similar examples can be seen in the Susa collection (for example, seals Nos. 2269 and 2270; also see: Amiet, 1972: Pl 192) but the three mentioned above are most similar to

the seal of the National Museum visually. Both in terms of building materials which are all terracotta, and in terms of size, there are similarities between these seals and the one at the National Museum.

Roach has placed the seals in the Susa collection under its Susa III/IV Style collection (Roach, 2008: 390). This style, as its name implies, is a dual style from the Susa III and IV periods. And it is characterized by human and animal scenes that are not expertly or, possibly more accurately, not carefully executed. The cutting style and rendering technique are somewhat reminiscent of the classical Proto-Elamite style; though not as common as in classical Proto-Elamite style, internal sculpturing and musculature definition does still occur in the Susa III/IV style. The themes of this style are somewhat different from the classic Proto-Elamite in which they have depicted human figures. A new scene type category is also characteristic of the STF style, and is characterized by the figures placed in an, apparently confused, indefinable or haphazard associations with no discernible internal coherency (Roach, 2008: 388). Roach considers this scene to coincide with the period of the Early Dynasties I and II of southern Mesopotamia, that is, the end of Susa III, coinciding with EDI, and the beginning of Susa IV, coinciding with EDII, or pre-Sargonic in Ami-

et's term. Roach argues that the style of Susa III/IV proposed by him was recent developments of classic style of the Proto-Elamite which continued after this period and seems to have ceased within the period of Susa IV. He states that the style of Susa III/IV may have been interrupted before the actual style of Susa IV came into use. An event that is generally associated with the introduction of Akkadian engraving styles at the end of the Susa IV period / the beginning of the Akkadian period (Roach, 2008: 395-39). Amiet considers some examples of seals under the heading of "cylindrical seals and various seals/ *cylindres et cachets divers*" a clumsy imitation but valid from the ancient period, some in the second millennium BC, some reminiscent of Akkadian myths and even examples in the Neo Elam period (Amiet, 1972: 288); but in the sample descriptions of seals comparable to the seal of the National Museum, he has not specifically assigned them to a specific period.

In the chronology of Susa, the period after Susa III / is known as Proto-Elamite that is considered to be the period of Susa IV or Susa D (Alvarez-Mon, 2012: 744; Carter, 1980: 21; Carter, 1979: 453) the first stage of which is named Susa IVA (circa 2600-2350 BC) and has been assigned by data from the layers of 12-9 of Ville Royal and from 3-4 of Acropolis (Ascalone, 2006: 21; Carter, 1980: 25; Carter, 1979).

In terms of iconography, no real human figures are seen on the seals of Susa III while on its subsequent period of classic Proto-Elamite (cf. Roach, 2008; Amiet, 1972; Pittman, 1997), a combination of mythical and semi-human animals were displayed (Helwing, 2004: 160). In the Susa IV period, the issues raised on seals as well as methods of making seals of Mesopotamian style (Early III-II dynasties) replaced the Proto-Elamite methods of Susa IIIA (Ascalone, 2006: 22); now, considering that on the one hand, in the image of the seal of the National Museum and similar examples obtained from Susa, the figure of a human can be seen, and on the other hand, the cutting style and presentation technique are somewhat similar to the classic Proto-Elamite, thus it would be reasonable that to consider the National Museum seal to be compatible with IVA style rather than style as Susa III/IV or pre- Sargonic, which have been proposed by Roach and Amiet.

## Conclusion

A cylinder seal No. 1841 has been registered as an unknown in the repository of the National Museum of Iran. It represents image of two persons,

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a goat and a scorpion/plant-like figure. Comparing the general characteristics of this seal with the most well-known seals of Susa (including stamps Nos. 2273, 2266, 2268: MDP43 collection) revealed not only a similar pattern of motifs and iconographic representation of figures between them but their corpuses were also made from similar materials with the same size. The figure of human can be seen in the image of the seal of the National Museum and similar examples obtained from Susa which is not seen on the seals of the classic style of the Proto-Elamite (The characteristic of the classic style of the Proto-Elamite is the design of creatures performing human actions) but the cutting style and presentation technique in these seals is somewhat similar to the classic style of the Proto-Elamite. It is suggested, that the seal of the National Museum is more in line with the seals of Susa and the period after the Proto-Elamite (Susa IVA).

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