

A study on the Seleucid and Parthian seals of the Semnan Museum, Iran

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Abstract. *Seals and clay sealings are the most valuable evidence for studying the economic, political and cultural structures of the different past societies. Due to the lack of resources to explain the various characteristics of Seleucid and Parthian material culture, studying the seals of these periods can reveal not only the artistic sides of glyptic material but to clarify the roles played by sealings in the social and economic contexts of the Seleucid and Parthian societies. Seven seals which are currently being preserved in the Semnan Museum are described and studied in the present paper. These seals have been discovered through illegal excavations. Their patterns and styles are usually influenced by Greek art elements, including animal motifs, the Greek goddess Athena and human illustrations in the majority, which is probably because of the greater attention to human and humanist perspectives among the Greek artists. The present study aims at analysing the motifs of the seals, as well as making comparisons to identify similarities with other cases found in different sites such as Tel Kedesh (Israel), Nisa (Turkmenistan) and Dura-Europos (Syria) in order to suggest a more precise dating for the mentioned seals.*

Rezumat. *Sigiliile și pecețile sunt printre cele mai valoroase dovezi ale studierii structurilor economice, politice și culturale ale diferitelor societăți anterioare. Din cauza lipsei de informații în explicarea diferitelor caracteristici ale culturii materiale seleucidă și parthe, studierea sigiliilor din aceste perioade poate dezvălui nu numai fețele artistice ale materialului glipatic, ci și clarificarea rolurilor pe care le au pecețile în contextele sociale și economice ale societăților seleucidă și parthe. Șapte sigilii care sunt în prezent păstrate în Muzeul Semnan sunt descrise și studiate în lucrarea de față. Aceste sigilii au fost descoperite prin săpături ilegale. Modelele și stilurile lor sunt, de obicei, influențate de elementele de artă grecești, incluzând motive animaliere, sau reprezentarea zeiței Athena, precum și reprezentări umane. Prezentul studiu vizează analizarea motivelor sigiliilor, precum și realizarea unor comparații pentru a identifica asemănările cu alte cazuri găsite în diferite luri, precum Tel Kedesh (Israel), Nisa (Turkmenistan) și Dura-Europos (Siria). Comparația este necesară și pentru o datare mai precisă a sigiliilor menționate.*

Keywords: seal and sealings; Seleucids and Parthians; motif; Semnan Museum, Iran; Athena.

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1. Introduction

Due to the importance of seals and sealing in archaeological studies, the data obtained from these objects are extremely valuable. Studying and investigating different aspects of these precious objects can give us insights about various aspects of art, culture and economy among the residents of the Iranian plateau through the centuries. The use of seals was a documented grantee for authenticity, ownership and partnership in legal transactions or commodity preservations against the encroachments for seven thousand years³. Accordingly, due to the lack of resources and studies about the archaeology and art of Seleucid and Parthian period (330 BC–AD 224) in Iran in particular and in the Near East in general compared to other periods, studying seals can open new perspectives on glyptic art and industry of these periods. Although interest in studying seals is increasingly growing in Iran, the lack of discovered artefacts and ambiguity in recognition the style and features of seal related to Seleucid and Parthian period led to a scarcity of research references about these periods. However, the efforts of researchers such as Bivar,⁴ Wallenfels,⁵ Herbert⁶ cannot be neglected. The present study aims at analysing the mentioned seals, as well as making comparisons to identify similarities with other cases found in different sites such as Tel-Kedesh in Galilee area in Israel, Tele Nisa and Dura-Europos (during Roman occupation) and Uruk in Mesopotamia in order to propose a relatively precise dating for these seals.

2. Introducing Seleucid and Parthian seals in Semnan Museum

The city of Semnan is close to several major ancient sites of Parthians such as Qumis and Hissar which enriched its Museum with precious artefacts. Among them are hundreds of seals and bullae from different periods including the seven seals which are the main concern of the present study. As mentioned before, these seals have been discovered in the illegal excavations and thus their precise dating remains a difficult task. Therefore, due to the absence of laboratory methods in dating seals, the only possible way is comparing them with other similar samples in engraving style, imagery techniques and parallelism between their motifs.

Another useful method would be comparing the seal motifs with those on coins and other artefacts from Seleucid and Parthian period which can also be regarded as criteria for dating them and answering some ambiguities⁷. However, because of the limited stylistic research

³ COLLON 1987, *passim*.

⁴ BIVAR 1967, 515–525.

⁵ WALLENFELS 1990.

⁶ HERBERT 2005, 65–86.

⁷ GHASEMI 2014, 13.

extension about the seals of these periods, distinguishing between the seals of these two periods would be sometimes very hard. In fact, none of the experts in Seleucid and Parthian period is able to precisely differ from each other or can make an exact dating for a seal or a sealing with a questionable context. Another point is the overlap between the end of Seleucid period and the beginning of Parthian period, especially in west of Iran and Mesopotamia is which makes assigning the seals to a particular period more difficult. Nonetheless, comparing the Semnan Museum seals with similar seals and sealing and by precisely studying their motifs, their dating can be conducted.

The seals shapes, the engraving style, the motif subjects, their decorations and inscriptions are the major identifying features for Seleucid and Parthian seals⁸. There are six human motifs and one animal motif on the seven seals belonging to the Semnan Museum; all of them are made of brown and white agate except for one, which is made of a type of blue stone. All of the seals are circular and oval signet rings which with the hemisphere are the most common shape for remaining seals from Seleucid and Parthian periods. The deeper cutting in Seleucid and Parthian seals compare to the Achaemenid ones show their progress in engraving techniques which is quite obvious in the remaining sealings. Also the parallel lines on the seals because of the excessive use of wheels for cutting made them even more popular⁹. Utilizing jewelled or gem seals became more common during Seleucid and Parthian periods¹⁰. Hemispherical seals with elongated base were used during Seleucid period which were usually stamped on clay sealing and their motifs are clearly bossed¹¹. Bivar believes that contrary to the oval shape of Seleucid seal, the Parthian seals were circular¹²; to consider his opinion, it is best to study the seals of Hellenic archive from Uruk in Mesopotamia with many oval shapes. Seleucid sealings¹³, all of these mentioned sealings were stamped on clay tablets and beside the cuneiform writings. This criterion applies to our understudied seals, the Parthian seal no. 2 is circular while the rest of the seals which are probably Seleucid are oval in shape. In the following the mentioned seals will be described more precisely.

The engraved motif on the seal shows a person sitting on a chair or a throne with naked upper body and covered his lower torso with a robe. He is stretching out his right arm forward. And has a small animal in the hand which is not clear but it is quite similar to a lamb. There is also a small size bird which looks like an owl or an eagle in front of his left leg. The picture of the right is another similar sample from Dura-Europos city excavations which dates back to the second and third century AD and is similar to our seal¹⁴.

⁸ DEBEVOISE 1934, 13–15.

⁹ DEBEVOISE 1934, 15–16.

¹⁰ COLLON 1987, 119.

¹¹ DEBEVOISE 1934, 16.

¹² BIVAR 1967, 515–525.

¹³ WALLENFELS 1990, 35 sqq.

¹⁴ GUIRAUD 1992, 82.



Figure 1. No 1: Seal shape: oval; material: blue stone;¹⁵ motifs: human images; period: Seleucid

¹⁵ GUIRAUD1992, 82.



Figure 2. No 2: Seal shape: circular; material: brown agate¹⁶; motifs: animal images; period: Parthian; size: 12×13 mm



Figure 3. No 3: Seal shape: oval; material: brown agate; motifs: human¹⁷ images; period: Seleucid–Parthian; size: unknown.

¹⁶ FRUMKIN 1970, 240.

¹⁷ HERBERT 2005, 70.

A person standing with a spear in hand and starching out the right arm with something in hand is depicted in the motifs of this seal. Athena is shown standing and viewed from her back. Part of the seal is damaged and broken. Their outfits, especially their hats and also their standing figures are very similar, both of them are standing on a bossed horizontal ground lines. These seal motifs are very close to the similar samples from Seleucid period and sealings found in Kedesh site and probably belonged to the goddess Athena¹⁸. Numismatic data are also helpful for studying motifs related to Athena: for instance, bronze coins of Antiochus I minted at Seleucia on the Tigris depicting this deity standing, with her usual hat and on the reverse. There is a stater of Antiochus I¹⁹ represented on Figure 4.

On the reverse side of some of bronze coins of Antiochus I, Athena is standing lying over the left and leaning a spear or a shield on her leg²⁰ (see Figure 5). As Apollo who has been frequently depicted on the Seleucid coins, these two samples are actually very rare cases of showing Athena on the same coins.

The motif of this seal shows a person standing with a spear in hand and a long robe to the feet and wearing a hat similar to Athena. This goddess' body is in full face and her head and face are shown in silhouette. Athena, daughter of Zeus and Metis, was the god of war and armed with shield and spear. She is also the goddess of peace and scientific and industrial activities. Her symbols are shield, spear and helmet, and she has a calm, beautiful and dignified apparent²¹.



Figure 4. Antiochus I bronze coin showing a depiction of Athena²²

¹⁸ HERBERT 2005, 70.

¹⁹ HOUGHTON and LORBER 2002, 381.

²⁰ HOUGHTON and LORBER 2002, 588.

²¹ GRIMAL 1951, 125.

²² HOUGHTON and LORBER 2002, 588.



Figure 5. Antiochus II bronze coin showing a depiction of Athena²³



Figure 6. No 4: Seal shape: oval; material: brown agate; motifs: human²⁴ images; period: Seleucid; size: 14 mm

²³ HOUGHTON and LORBER 2002,588.

²⁴ ROSTOVITZ 2004, 978.

The depicted motifs on this sealing are very similar to the seal number 3. There is also a metal sculpture discovered in the Parthian site of Nisa, whose style of the figure, its tailed hat, the dress with flounces and her dignity is quite similar to Athena²⁵. The comparison between the statue and the seal reveals the similarities in their style and motifs, although unlike the seal, the statue of Athena does not carry a spear.

A standing person is depicted on the signet ring, the figure is leaning on one leg and the details of the body show a muscular build and he is holding an unclear object in his right hand (Figure 7). Another important point is that the figure's joints have been depicted faintly and a line or something like a spear divided the picture on two uneven parts. As you can see above, a closely similar seal has been discovered in Dura-Europos site which is probably related to second and third century AD and the Roman period (Figure 8)²⁶. Furthermore, beside the mentioned similar sample, there are numerous similar motifs in Greek and Roman art with human figures as the main theme in statues, coinage, seals and rock reliefs (like in Figure 9).

On this signet ring, a person with a hat is standing in a common Greek style (standing while leaning on one leg), and wearing a robe up to the knees. The person is holding an object like a shield in the right hand and holding a spear in the left hand. The details of the face is not clear so the gender is in doubt. Were this figure a woman, she would probably be a representation of the goddess Athena; otherwise the mere description of this image should be sufficient.



Figure 7. No 5: Seal shape: oval; material: agate; motifs: human images²⁷; period: Seleucid; size: 13×8 mm

²⁵ ROSTOVITZEFF 2004, 978.

²⁶ GUIRAUD 1992, 80.

²⁷ GUIRAUD 1992, 80.



Figure 8. No 6: Seal shape: oval; material: agate; motifs: human images; period: Seleucid; size: 17 mm



Figure 9. No 7: Seal shape: oval; material: brown agate; motifs: human²⁸ images; period: Seleucid; size: 15 m

²⁸ HERBERT 2005, 71.

On this seal, a human figure wearing a hat in the shape of a helmet and a long robe is seen. She is holding an object like a spear in her right hand and a small human-shaped figure in her left hand. This image is comparable with similar motifs of Athena, discovered in Kedesh site in Israel holding a spear and the goddess Nike²⁹. On the above figures, both figures are wearing a tailed hat, holding spears and standing on an engraved horizontal line while their outfit, standing style and body shapes are closely similar to each other.

3. Conclusion

The present paper aimed at describing and introducing seven seals, currently preserved at the Semnan Archaeological Museum and comparing their styles and motifs with similar samples in order to present a more precise dating. Of course this would not be possible without getting help from similar sample and complementary documents such as numismatic data. All of the seals are made of semiprecious and precious stones such as white agate and brown agate, except for one seal which is made of blue stone as Collon suggests the glyptic art during Seleucid and Parthian period is a promotion of a kind of lapidary.

All of the seals, probably related to Seleucid period, are oval in shape, except for the seal number 2 which is probably from Parthian period and is circular. One of the main reasons for affiliating the oval seals to Seleucid period is the comparison between the shape of seals and the similar samples from Uruk, realized by Bivar. Another reason is the goddess motifs similarity with the coin samples. The six seals which are related to Seleucid period are depicting a motif of Athena the Greek goddess and Hellenistic style motifs that clearly reveal the Greek influence. The seals from this collection are closely similar to the seals discovered in Tal-Kedesh in Israel and Dura-Europos.

The only Parthian seal of this collection contains animal motifs which are common in other samples discovered in sites such as Nisa, Qumis, Nippur and Susa. While Seleucid seals are mostly contain human motifs which can be due to the attention to human and humanist perspectives among the Greek artists. A glance at discovered seals in Seleucia of Tigris and Kedesh can prove this claim.

²⁹ HERBERT 2005, 70.

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