

## ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN GLYPTIC IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA, MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

BY PARVINE H. MERRILLEES (SIMA 129). PP.VIII + 103, PLS. 34, LINE DRAWINGS 89. PAUL STRÖMS FÖRLAG, JONSERED 2001. \$27.60. ISBN 91-7081-181-4 (PAPER).

This study by Merrillees of seals in the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, adds yet another publication to the growing body of catalogues of Mesopotamian glyptic in museum collections and complements her larger catalogue of seals in Australian collections (P.H. Merrillees, *Cylinder and Stamp Seals in Austrian Collections* [Melbourne 1990]). As noted in the chapter on its history, the National Gallery of Victoria glyptic collection is small, with 30 seals in all, 15 stamps and 15 cylinders, acquired in 1929. Fifteen were purchased from Bagot, a businessman setting up trade and transport companies in Mesopotamia, who collected the seals from various sources while he was in the region, from 1916 to 1925, and who befriended the archaeologists Woolley, Mackay, and Sayce. The other 15 seem to have been purchased by the museum around the same time from another source. An evaluator for the purchase remarked that “this collection is not outstanding” (10), an observation borne out upon perusal of the catalogue. Nevertheless, it is important for scholarship to have the pieces published.

Introducing the volume is a brief history of the National Gallery of Victoria, which, while not directly related to the seal collection and of more relevance to a history of the founding philosophies of museums, may be of interest to American readers for the similarities to the motivations of the founders of U.S. museums around the same time. Following the chapters on the histories of the NGV and its seal collection, the seals are presented in catalogue format.

The catalogue is ordered chronologically, with notations on seal shape, measurements,

material of the seal stone (additional information on material is provided in a mineralogy appendix that reports the results of X-ray diffraction and energy dispersive spectrometry), type of engraving, interpretation of the intaglio design, and comparanda for the designs, including both other seals and other artifacts. Drawings of the impressions (not to scale) accompany the catalogue entries, while one-to-one photographs are located at the back of the book. The cylinders are illustrated by photographs of both the seal and a rolled impression; the stamps, by photographs of the sealing face of the stamp and its impression. Because the three-dimensional cylinders are photographed in the same frame as their two-dimensional impressions, neither is optimally lit, reducing legibility. For the Sassanian stamps, no photographs of the seals are included, while there are two photographs of each impression, the smaller presumably one-to-one and the other an enlargement, although this is not made clear. In the chapter on historical context, Sassanian seal shapes are referenced “as can be seen” (57), but only the impressions and not the seals are shown in the photographs. There is also no photograph of the seal for catalogue number 19.

Within the catalogue, the seals have been grouped into six main categories: fifth–third millennium B.C. (Late Prehistoric period), containing six stamps compared to examples from Turkey, Syria, and northern Iraq; fourth–third millennium (Predynastic Egypt), containing three cylinders ascribed to Dynasty I; third millennium (Middle Bronze Age), containing one cylinder dated to the Late or Post-Akkadian period; second millennium (Middle and

Late Bronze Age), containing seven cylinders including Old Babylonian, Old Assyrian, and Levantine or Levantine/Mitannian; first millennium (Iron Age), containing two stamps (tabloid and faceted), perhaps Levantine and Syrian, three Neo-Assyrian/Babylonian cylinders, and one potentially forged cylinder described as faux-Achaemenid (no. 23); and third–seventh centuries A.D. (Sassanian period), containing seven stamps.

Some observations on a few of the catalogue entries follow (by cat. no.):

10. The description of this seal, showing a typical Akkadian “bull with winged gate” scene, says the seated goddess holds a rope attached to the wing of the gate. From the drawing, however, it appears that the rope is attached to the bull’s muzzle, as it is, for example, in a seal illustrated in Collon, *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum, Cylinder Seals II: Akkadian–Post-Akkadian–Ur III Periods* (London 1982), no. 183. It is unclear why the seal has been dated Late or Post-Akkadian, especially since the discussion notes that the scene “seems not to have survived the Akkadian period” (22).

14. This cylinder, showing two groups of figures, one with goddess and male worshiper and the other with bull-man and Egyptianizing figure flanking a sacred tree, is dated ca. 1750–1650 B.C., Syrian of the Late Old Babylonian period, with a notation that the latter group was possibly carved at a later date than the Old Babylonian former group (26–7). The discussion notes that Teissier dates the seal to the Late Bronze Age, 16th–12th centuries B.C., citing comparisons for the group of the bull-man and male figure with Nuzi, Middle Assyrian, and Kassite seals (27). The Mitannian elements are rather clear, including the presence of the winged disk, which does not appear in Mesopotamia before that period. It is not explained, then, why the earlier dating is retained for the seal, doubly perplexing given the fact that in the chapter on historical context, the seal is placed in the Mitannian period and in a subsequent paragraph it is remarked that the seal is recut (51).

27. Although some Neo-Babylonian comparisons are cited, the seal is placed in the Sassanian group based on its shape. The lack of a photograph of the actual seal makes the latter qualifier impossible to comment on, but the seal design (stylized tree? altar and star?) finds closer parallels among Neo-Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian than among Sassanian

seals (e.g., L. Jakob-Rost, *Die Stempelsiegel im Vorderasiatischen Museum* [Mainz 1991] nos. 425–34).

Discussions of the animal motifs on the Sassanian seals are general and made in passing. Because there is literature, in some cases rather extensive, on the iconography of these animals, the discussions could benefit from expansion or citation of the literature. The same holds true for the discussion of the rhomboid motif in catalogue number 20.

A chapter entitled “Historical Context” completes the text of the volume but may have more beneficially preceded the catalogue by providing background material for the reader uninitiated in Mesopotamian glyptic. But the text is not written strictly for the layperson, and despite its broad sweep, presupposes familiarity with the field. Some assertions made therein warrant documentation or explication. For example, in describing Early Dynastic animal and “monster” friezes, it is observed that:

Juxtapositioned with these seemingly natural phenomena were other important scenes which showed in ancient Mesopotamian terms a growing understanding of the world around and an attempt to formalize this comprehension. Possibly the temple and priesthood orientation of Mesopotamian city states (compared to the seemingly more secular situation farther west, as at Ebla) led to the creation of a pantheon of deities with their accompanying symbolic representatives. (47)

Besides leaving unexplained how animal and monster friezes are representations of natural phenomena, the comment concerning a more secular west demands qualification. Likewise, in recounting the change in the presentation scene from seated to standing deities, from the Ur III period on, it is written that gradually “the chief personages, divine and human, were shown in standing position, approaching or approached by other interceding deities and their suppliants with invoking prayers inscribed at the side of the scenes, intimating a closer relationship between the human and his god” (48). But why this change in posture should express a profound theological development of this nature is not analyzed nor is the declaration given further substantiation.

There are numerous small errors. For example, the illustration as the top of plate IV, referred to in the historical context chapter, is incorrectly cited as plate I. number 1 (no such illustration exists); the photographs of catalogue numbers 21 and 22 are reversed in

the plates; the Chronological Table following the text is based on Ehrich's 1965 *Chronologies in Old World Archaeology* (but see the 3rd ed. [1992]); and P.O. Harper's volume is incorrectly cited in the text and bibliography under "O" for Oliver Harper.

Small details and cavils aside, the importance of this volume to the documentation of Mesopotamian glyptic cannot be understated. With collections of seals dispersed around the globe, it is vital that they be made accessible in published formats, especially the smaller collections that are otherwise overlooked. Each new artifact that is brought to light adds

in some way to the broader understanding of the ancient Near East, and forces older assumptions to be revisited and modified. The volume under review provides such an opportunity and is welcomed by scholars in the field, especially those of glyptic, who can now augment their compendia and comparanda.

ERICA EHRENBERG

AMERICAN INSTITUTE FOR IRANIAN STUDIES  
118 RIVERSIDE DRIVE  
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10024  
AII5@NYC.RR.COM