

ORIENTAL INSTITUTE SEMINAR (OIS)

Sealing Theories and Practices in the Ancient Near East

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The 16th Oriental Institute Annual Seminar on Sealing Theories and Practices in the Ancient Near East was held on March 5–6, 2020, at the Oriental Institute. Through its many facets, sealing touches several aspects of ancient societies: political, administrative, sociological, cultural, and artistic. To understand this critical source of knowledge, a multi-disciplinary and multi-documentary approach is necessary. Thanks to the generous support of Arthur and Lee Herbst, this conference therefore brought together fifteen international scholars from different disciplines (history, art history, archaeology, epigraphy, etc.) and from different areas of study, covering the ancient Near East from Anatolia to China, and from ancient Mesopotamia to the first centuries of Islam. This spatial, temporal, and disciplinary breadth gave a deep picture of the sources and methods of analysis available in understanding the socio-administrative practices, systems of thought, and beliefs surrounding seals and sealings.

The purpose of the first session (“Examining Uses of Seal”), chaired by McGuire Gibson, was to examine the object used to seal: the seal itself. During this session, we could see that a single seal is not strictly attached to a single individual, contrary to the signature, to which the seal has often been compared. Thus, a single individual could use several seals (Oya Topçuoğlu, “One Seal, Two Seal, Red Seal, Blue Seal: Multiple Ownership in Mesopotamia in the Early Second Millennium”). The seal was also a precious object: for its artistic value it could be collected (Agnete Wisti Lassen, “Seal Collection and Reuse in the Ancient Near East”), and for its administrative value it could be copied (Theo van den Hout, “Preventing Fraud and Forgery of Seals in the Hittite Kingdom”). Finally, seals are objects whose forms

SEALING THEORIES AND PRACTICES

IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

THE 16TH ANNUAL UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO ORIENTAL INSTITUTE SEMINAR

MARCH 5-6 2020

FREE & OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

BREASTED HALL
315 EAST 56TH STREET

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have varied according to times and places (Brian Muhs, “A Diachronic Survey of Ancient Egyptian Sealing Practices from the Predynastic through the Graeco-Roman Periods” and Deniz Kaptan, “Sealing Practices in Anatolia under Achaemenid Rule”).

The second session (“Examining Administrative Archives”), chaired by Alain Bresson, focused on examining the traces left by the seal—

traces that are a valuable source for understanding the bureaucratic functioning of ancient societies (Torben Schreiber, “Only Lumps of Clay? Seal impressions and Their Contribution to the Reconstruction of Hellenistic and Roman Bureaucracy”). This session also made it possible to shed light on the well-known corpus at the Oriental Institute of the Persepolis tablets. This very rich corpus, composed of thousands of administrative tablets, a very large number of which bear at least one seal imprint, is an extremely valuable source for understanding how documents and seals respond to each other (Mark B. Garrison, “Seals and Document Types in the Persepolis Fortification Archive”). It is also an archive that allows a better understanding of sealing practices through the testimony it offers of the users behind the seals (Wouter Henkelmann, “Irdabama and Her Seals: the Roots of the Achaemenids and the Fortification Archive”), for example, or as a manifestation of sealing practices in *longue-durée* (Delphine Poinot, “Sealing with Animals in Iranian Glyptic, from the Achaemenid to the Sasanian Dynasty”).

Finally, the third and last session (“Examining beyond Administration”), chaired by Tasha Vorderstrasse, made it possible to show that the seals and the sealings are not only witnesses of the administrative life. Sealing practices can be applied to a variety of objects as part of religious (Béatrice Caseau, “Stamping Material as Seals in Roman and Byzantine Culture”) and magical practices (Karl Shaefer, “Administering Magic in Medieval Islam”). Sealing itself can be used as a metaphor (Paul Copp, “Seals in Chinese Religious Practice: Metaphor and Materiality”), which shows the importance of this practice for ancient societies.

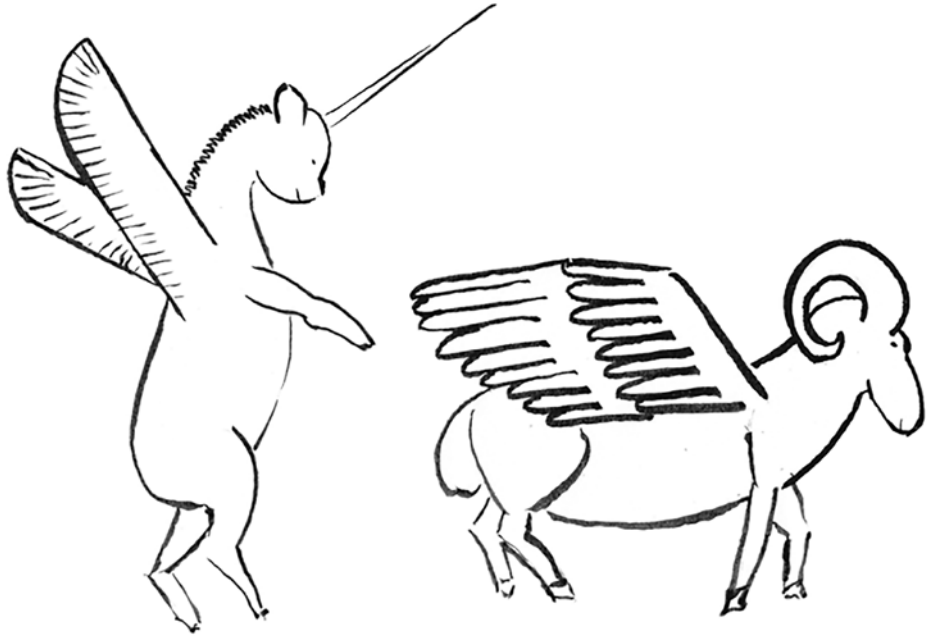
To allow these discussions to take shape, the conference participants were able to take a closer look at the Persepolis tablets, some of which are kept at the Oriental Institute. I would like to thank Matthew Stolper, John A. Wilson Professor Emeritus of Assyriology at the Oriental Institute and director of the Persepolis Fortification Archive Project, and Mark Garrison, Alice P. Brown Distinguished Professor of art and art history at Trinity University, for taking the time to present the work done within the PFA. In a second step, the participants were invited to take part in a workshop, open to the public (about a dozen people were present). I would like to thank Rhyne King (PhD candidate at the University of Chicago), Susanne Paulus (associate professor of Assyriology, Tablet Collection curator), and Tasha Vorderstrasse (university and continuing education program coordinator), who built and made this workshop possible. After a brief introduction on the use of seals, the participants were able to admire the superb seals’ showcase of the Oriental

Institute Museum and to look at objects bearing the seal mark, the tablets from the Oriental Institute's collection. Finally, participants were invited to create their own seals by engraving a candle with a bamboo stick and then to produce a sealing by rolling the seal on a clay tablet. The issues raised at the conference, and the discussions that followed, showed that seals and sealings are complex objects that go far beyond the administrative purpose and signature. Sealing practices are both an administrative and symbolic act at the heart of the practices of ancient societies. When examining the images of these seals and sealings, it is necessary not to examine them outside the object on which they appear.

The question of the seal, the sealing, and their multiple facets is necessary to apprehend the symbolic charge of these images. These multiple facets will be the subject of the publication of the conference's proceedings in the Oriental Institute Seminar series, which will hopefully provide researchers and students with access to a nuanced and rich (if not exhaustive) picture of what sealing practices in the ancient Near East are.

The success of this conference owes much to the members of the Oriental Institute. I would like to thank Christopher Woods, director of the Oriental Institute, who opened the conference and welcomed the participants with great generosity and warmth; Petra Goedegebuure, head of the postdoctoral fellowship committee, for her mentoring throughout the year; Kathryn Morgan, postdoctoral scholar, for her support and advice; Mariana Perlinac, assistant to the director; Polina Kasian, assistant director of development and events; Ali Mallett, digital marketing and member engagement manager; and Vick Cruz, manager of visitor services and security, for their invaluable logistical support; as well as Knut Boehmer, IT manager, who, among many other tasks, made it possible for some participants to be remotely with us; Charissa Johnson, managing editor, and Steve Townshend, editor, for their magnificent work on the visual communication tools—let them be thanked in advance for their work on the book that will come out of this conference; finally, thanks again to Steve Townshend, who documented this moment, and whose photographs illustrate this report. And a final thanks to Eric Poinot for the cartoons that illustrate the brochure.





ABOVE: Illustration by Eric Poinso

OPPOSITE: (left to right)

First row: Theo van den Hout, Delphine Poinso, Oya Topçuoğlu, Karl Schaefer, MacGuire Gibson

Second row: Rhyne King, Deniz Kaptan, Torben Schreiber

Third row: Christopher Woods, Petra Goedegebuure, Alain Bresson, Mark B. Garrison, Brian Muhs

All photos: Steven Townshend.

List of participants

***Respondents*

Alain Bresson** (Classics, University of Chicago)

Béatrice Caseau (Faculté des Lettres UFR d'Histoire, Sorbonne Université)

Paul Copp (East Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago)

Mark B. Garrison (Art and Art History, Trinity University)

McGuire Gibson** (Oriental Institute, University of Chicago)

Wouter Henkelman (Section des Sciences Historiques et Philologiques,
Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes)

Deniz Kaptan (Department of Anthropology, University of Nevada Reno)

Agnete Wisti Lassen (Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Yale University)

Brian Muhs (Oriental Institute, University of Chicago)

Theo van den Hout (Oriental Institute, University of Chicago)

Delphine Poinso (Oriental Institute, University of Chicago)

Karl R. Schaefer (Cowles Library, Drake University)

Torben Schreiber (Institute for Classical and Early Christian Archaeology, University of Münster)

Oya Topçuoğlu (Middle East and North African Studies, Northwestern University)

Tasha Vorderstrasse (Oriental Institute, University of Chicago)

