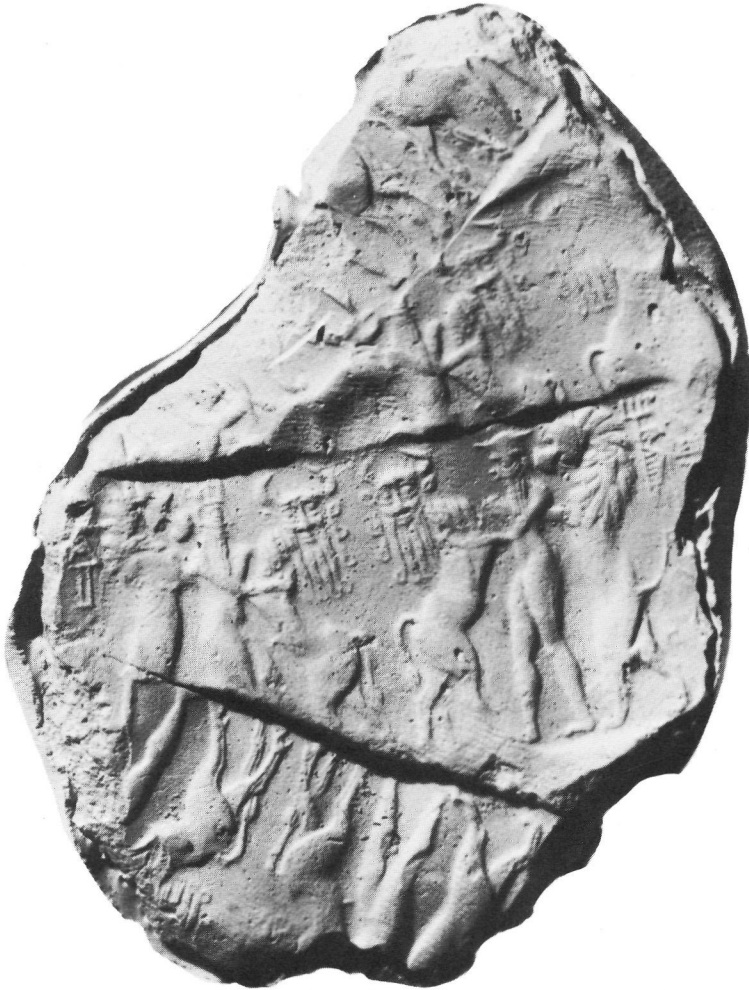


Seal Symposium

McGuire Gibson

From March 21 to 23 the Oriental Institute was host to a symposium on Seals and Sealing in the Ancient Near East. It concerned ancient stamp and cylinder seals. Seals, especially Mesopotamian cylinders, have been the subject of many books, articles, and dissertations, but they are usually studied in terms of what is shown on them and the relationships that can be derived from a consideration of style and design elements. This symposium had a different focus, namely the use of seals: how they were applied, by whom, and on what. It was hoped that such an approach could give indications about the legal, administrative, and bureaucratic context of seals.

The symposium was basically an Institute production, and most of the papers were given by our faculty and students. We did have some visitors, however. Professor Edith Porada of Columbia University came to discuss the class implications in the fact that seals in one



A typical ancient clay jar stopper with multiple sealings from Nippur.

place could vary in workmanship. Hans J. Nissen, formerly a member of our faculty, flew in from Berlin to give a paper on hierarchical social structure as expressed in early seal design. Mogens Trolle Larsen came from Copenhagen to present a lecture on sealing practice among the Old Assyrian merchants in Anatolian trade colonies hundreds of miles from Assur. William L. Rathje from the University of

Arizona showed that the type of seal and the material it was made of (lapis lazuli, carnelian, etc.) seem to suggest status differences.

Institute contributions included Johannes Renger's summation of the legal use of seals throughout Mesopotamian history. I. J. Gelb classified seals with inscriptions on them, and Miguel Civil discussed various terms in Sumerian and Akkadian dealing with the manufacture and use of seals. Judith Franke, Richard Zettler, Piotr Steinkeller, and Robert Whiting presented papers dealing with various aspects of sealing, especially official seals, royal seals, and the like, for the Akkadian through early Old Babylonian periods (from 2350 to about 1800 B.C.). For material to compare with Mesopotamian sealing practice, we had a paper on sealing in Hittite lands by Hans G. Güterbock and a presentation by Richard T. Hallock concerning sealing on a group of tablets from Persepolis. Through a careful study of the seals used on particular tablets, Mr. Hallock was able to lay out part of the landscape around Persepolis and show how it was administered. Bruce Williams and Janet Johnson gave us a view of Egyptian seals and sealings, making it clear that the legal aspects of Mesopotamian sealing were not shared in Egypt, where seals were used mostly to safeguard goods in storage and transport. My contribution was the organizing of the symposium, general comments at the beginning and end of the meeting, and an attempt to show how seals were used in sacred and secular areas of Nippur from the earliest periods through the Islamic.

Before, during, and after the symposium we had informal lectures and meetings with the various visiting contributors and with William Sumner, from Ohio State University, who has been carrying out excavations at the Iranian city of Anshan (Tell i-Maliyan). Denise Schmandt-Besserat of the University of Texas has done some work on the earliest kinds of accounting with sealed clay balls and contributed interesting additions to the discussion. The entire symposium was designed to be as informal as possible so that there would be relaxed discussion and a free flow of ideas. I think we achieved this atmosphere, and the lively exchanges were the better for it. Consultations with a publisher are underway, and we expect to have the results of the symposium in print within a year.