

Chogha Mish

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During the stress of a field season, it is usually impossible to study in detail every artifact discovered. Complete objects and significant fragments, to be sure, must be given individual registration numbers and described during the season, but this cannot be done for the many broken pieces that occur. For example, unbaked clay fragments whose shapes may or may not be intentional must often be set aside for later study. Sometimes evidence obtained in subsequent seasons shows that unprepossessing fragments have a far greater significance than was realized when they were first discovered. Various striking examples of this have turned up in the course of the preparation of the publication *Chogha Mish I: The First Five Seasons of Excavation*.

The initial exploration of the Protoliterate levels on the terrace

of Chogha Mish was done in the second season, 1963, by a long trench. In it traces of house walls and, at the north end, of pits were found. The latter were full of pottery, particularly bevelled-rim bowls, and other artifactual debris. When the area of excavation was enlarged to trace the full extent of the pits, they turned out to be extensive and their contents rewarding. After the excitement when the first impression of a cylinder seal on a lump of clay was discovered, a sharp watch was kept for every fragment of a sealing during the rest of the season. The youngest of the workmen turned out to be a talented lad whose sharp eyes distinguished even tiny fragments with seal impressions amid the large piles of clay lumps recovered by sifting (fig. 1).

Already in the second season it was possible to distinguish different

Fig. 1. Searching for fragments of seal impressions in the second season.



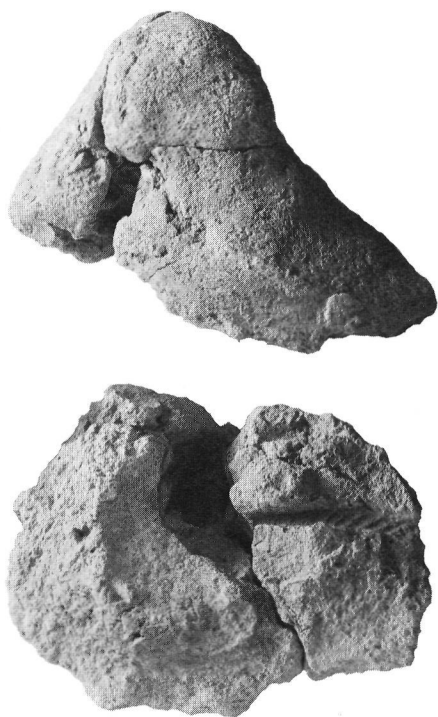


Fig. 2A. Interior of door sealing Ch.M. 2.793 showing imprints of string and smooth stick.

Fig. 2B. "Base" of door sealing Ch.M. 2.793 showing imprint of stretched string. (Photographs by Diana Olson Rasche)

types of sealings by means of their general shape and of imprints on the reverse. For example, relatively flat sealings with string or basketry imprints on the reverse must have been used to secure packages or baskets. Other sealings were placed on the necks of jars over the cloth and string which secured their mouths. Various sealings, all fragmentary and some very small, were characterized by an originally conical shape and by imprints of string and a smooth stick on the reverse. Though they appeared to be a specialized type of sealing, their function was uncertain. Since 1963 increasing attention has been devoted to the shapes

and interior imprints on sealings found at sites in various parts of the Near East. In particular, the conical stick type has been revealed as widely distributed, both chronologically and geographically. The stick sealings from Chogha Mish and contemporary levels at Susa were not the earliest examples and others continued throughout the second millennium B.C. Their function was definitively established by Enrica Fiandra when she studied those found at the Minoan palace of Phaistos near the southern coast of Crete and pertinent evidence from Egypt. The conical caps of clay were used to seal closed doors. The system was as follows. In addition to the door handle a second peg was placed horizontally in the door jamb or the mud brick wall adjoining the door; string was knotted around both projections and then one of them was covered with a conical mass of mud upon which a seal was imprinted. At Chogha Mish the cylinder seals were rolled radially and usually overlap in part, at least. It was impossible to open the door without destroying the mud sealing so that any tampering would be immediately evident. A similar procedure was used in the Museum of Iranian Antiquities in Tehran; the room in which excavated objects were laid out for division was at the end of the day secured by tying the door handle with string covered with sealing wax.

These advances in knowledge now make it possible to recognize the significance of some clay lumps whose character was not clear in the second season, but which were saved for later study. The

four fragments fit together to form an almost complete door sealing (fig. 2, A). On the reverse can be seen the smooth stick imprint at the narrow end of the conical sealing and the imprints of the string wrapped around the stick at the broader end (fig. 3). Most interesting of all is the flat end of the clay mass, the portion that was pressed against an uneven rough wall, over the string stretched between the wall and door pegs (fig. 2, B). It is remarkable for a door sealing to be sufficiently complete to preserve the imprint of the stretched strand of string. For some reason, however, a cylinder seal was never rolled over the conical mass of clay and in this the object is quite atypical. The joining fragments of a door sealing, also found in the second season, show the overlapping radial rollings typical for such objects (fig. 4). Also visible is the round hole at the narrower end through which the wooden stick once projected.

The significance of the door sealings goes beyond the mere understanding of their function. The use of a seal to secure a room is in itself a procedure of considerable sophistication and implies that the rooms in question contained contents of sufficient value or importance that access to them had to be tightly controlled. In her studies of the door sealings found in the Aegean and in the Near East, Fiandra has stressed that they testify to elaborate economic and social specialization and that their evidence can be complemented by that of written documents. Cuneiform administrative tablets indicate, for example, specific officials

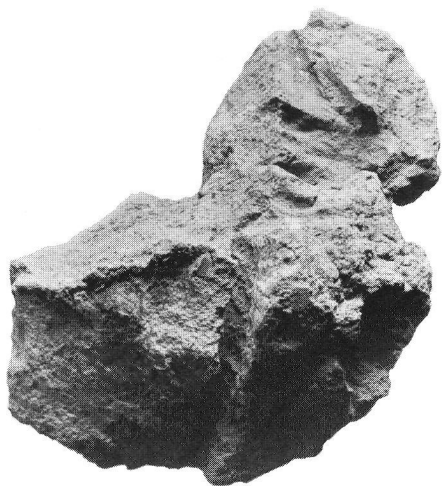


Fig. 3. Another view of interior of door sealing Ch.M. 2.793 showing imprint of coiled string over stick in greater detail. (Photograph by Diana Olson Rasche)

who were authorized to seal and unseal store room doors. In the early period of development exemplified at Chogha Mish the door sealings form 21% of the total number of seal-impressions found in Protoliterate levels during the first five seasons of excavation. About half of the door sealing fragments were found in pits dug in areas of private houses and the others were in other contexts in the same areas. This is

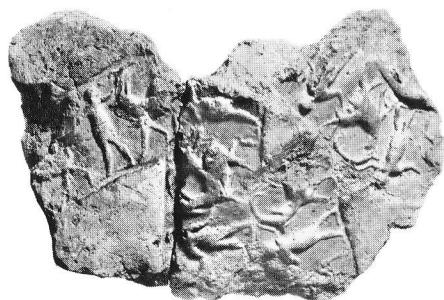


Fig. 4. Door sealing Ch.M. II-260 with radial cylinder seal impressions. (Photograph by Ursula Schneider)

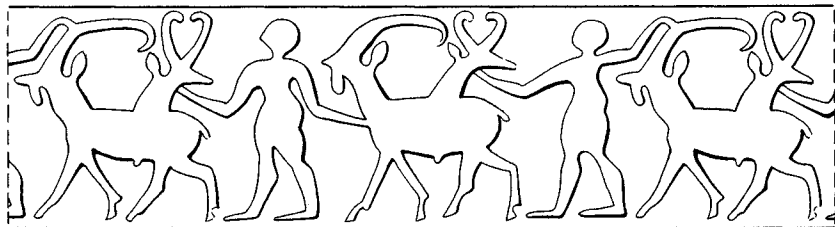


Fig. 5. Reconstruction of cylinder seal representation from impressions on fig. 3.
(Drawing by H. J. Kantor)

a circumstance of considerable interest, for the private houses in question, as preserved, have no particular architectural monumentality to suggest that they belonged to important officials. Thus it can be presumed that ordinary citizens were sufficiently well off to have the need of securing their store rooms.

Another factor to be considered is the character of the designs occurring on the door sealings. At Chogha Mish two general categories of cylinder seals are represented among the impressions: seals of extremely high quality in the finest style of the early Protoliterate period and others cut in a simpler style antecedent to that of the "Jemdet Nasr" seals typical for the later part of the Protoliterate period. Impressions in the finer style often occur on the clay balls containing clay tokens, the most elaborate of the economic or administrative records found in the Protoliterate levels at Chogha Mish. The question could be raised as to where the clay

ball documents were drawn up, at Chogha Mish or at some still larger center such as Susa. In the case of the door sealings it is obvious that the imprints on them were made at Chogha Mish itself. The circumstance that imprints of cylinder seals of the highest quality occur on door sealings (fig. 5) proves that such seals were in use at Chogha Mish itself. There is no necessity to assume that the economic and administrative documents in the form of clay balls were prepared at another site. In fact, to judge by its size, Chogha Mish was the main Protoliterate city in that part of the Susiana plain east of the Dez river, where there is no other Protoliterate site as large.

The clay fragments of fig. 2, which when they were found seemed of little relevance, can now be recognized as an important object testifying to the complexity of the economic life of the people living at Chogha Mish in the early Protoliterate period.