

# Three Cylinder Seals of Ancient Iran

HOLLY PITTMAN, MARY JANE SHERIDAN

BARBARA ADELE PORTER &

MARIE-CHRISTINE DE GRAEVE

Columbia University

The great works of ancient art in Near Eastern or European collections are known to most students from photographs. Cylinder seals, however, engraved in intaglio and intended to be rolled out on clay tablets, jar stoppers, or the like become known through their impressions in which the seal design appears in relief. The contact with the work of art is therefore immediate and the effect on the viewer a lasting one.

Owing to the generosity of Mossène Foroughi, it was possible to make impressions of his cylinder seal collection in Teheran, to deposit these impressions for study at the Pierpont Morgan Library, and to use them there in seminars on the art of seal engraving—glyptic art—of ancient Iran.

The following article was written by four of the participants in one of these seminars. —Edith Porada

## INTRODUCTION

The Proto-Elamite culture flourished in southwestern Iran during the time roughly equivalent to the Jemdet Nasr and Early Dynastic I periods in Mesopotamia (c. 3100 to 2900 B.C.).<sup>1</sup> The name derives from the culture's most characteristic artifact, tablets inscribed with numerical and pictographic signs discovered in the region that later became the home of the Elamites. In addition to having inscriptions, many of the tablets also carried impressions of cylinder and stamp seals. Many of these Proto-Elamite seals and sealings closely resemble contemporary ones found in the Diyala Region at the site of Khafaje. Others possess a distinctive style and an iconography limited to animal figures that are truly Iranian. Seals of this latter type are the subject of this short note.

The stylistic development of Proto-Elamite glyptic art has been reconstructed only in general outline because the main body of evidence, from the site of Susa in Khuzistan, is not closely stratified. Pierre Amiet, in his study of Iranian glyptic art,<sup>2</sup> proposed dividing the Proto-Elamite seals and sealings chronologically into two groups. He calls the earliest ancient Proto-Elamite.<sup>3</sup> This is a small group that includes seal impressions of naturalistically modelled animal figures on both large and small rectangular tablets bearing only one or no signs. These figures are often arranged in two or three superimposed rows with the smallest at the top.

Amiet calls the second group classic Proto-Elamite including in it the remaining seals and

---

1 The precise correlation of the Proto-Elamite with the Mesopotamian chronology has not yet been determined. For a review and analysis of the Proto-Elamite material from Susa see Louis Le Breton, "The Early Periods at Susa, Mesopotamian Relations," *Iraq* 19 (1957), 79–124, esp. 104–13. See also R. H. Dyson, Jr., "Problems in the Relative Chronology of Iran, 6000–2000 B.C." in Robert W. Ehrich, ed., *Chronologies in Old World Archaeology* (Chicago, 1965), 215–56.

2 Pierre Amiet, *La glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque* (Paris 1961), 107–10; idem, *Glyptique susienne des origines à l'époque des perse achéménides*, Mémoires de la délégation archéologique en Iran 43. Mission de Susiane (Paris, 1972), especially 109–69; idem, "Glyptique élamite, à propos de nouveaux documents," *Arts Asiatiques* 26 (1973), 3–64.

3 Amiet, *Glyptique susienne*, 129.

sealings of that type from Susa.<sup>4</sup> Although the style of engraving varies, most of the animal figures are represented abstractly, through relief of varying height and extensive linear detail. The gathering of this large and heterogeneous group under the heading "classic" is unsatisfactory, but it is unavoidable since stratigraphic context is lacking and Proto-Elamite inscriptions cannot yet be chronologically ordered. The only subgroups Amiet makes within the classic group are iconographic.

Since the mid-1960's, Proto-Elamite settlements have been investigated at numerous and wide-spread sites in Iran.<sup>5</sup> One of the most important of these is Tall-i Malyan, ancient Anshan, located in the Marv Dasht plain some 40 km. northwest of Shiraz.<sup>6</sup> There the Proto-Elamite levels have produced many sealed tablets and bullae as well as jar and door sealings. Those sealings will be analyzed by the author of this introduction in a dissertation in which the chronological and regional development of classic Proto-Elamite glyptic art will be considered.

Although fine regional and temporal distinctions cannot yet be made, we offer these seals from the Foroughi collection in order to illustrate the rich variety seen in classic Proto-Elamite seal carving. —H.P.

*Seal No. 1*

Light drab stone; 26.8 x 18.8 mm

This beautifully engraved cylinder seal in the Foroughi collection depicts a reclining bull being attacked by a lion. The bull lies on its side and turns its head back to look at the feline which has its paws firmly planted on the ground and is about to lunge forward to attack.

The theme, as well as the postures of the animals, on this seal is characteristic of the style of seals and impressions which Pierre Amiet terms classic Proto-Elamite. The theme of

4 Ibid., 130–69.

5 Among these sites are Godin Tepe (T.C. Young, Jr., *Excavations at Godin Tepe: First Progress Report*, Royal Ontario Museum Art and Archaeology Occasional Papers 17 [Toronto, 1969]; T. C. Young, Jr., and L. D. Levine, *The Godin Project: Second Progress Report*, Royal Ontario Museum Art and Archaeology Occasional Papers 26 [Toronto, 1974]; H. Weiss and T. C. Young, Jr., "The Merchants of Susa, Godin V and Plateau-Lowland Relations in the Late Fourth Millennium B.C." *Iran* 13 (1975), 1–17); Tepe Yāhya (C.C. Lamberg-Karlovsky, "The Proto-Elamite Settlement at Tepe Yahya," *Iran* 9 (1971), 87–96; idem., *Excavations at Tepe Yahya Iran, 1967-1969, Progress Report 1*. Joint Publication of the American Schools of Prehistoric Research, Peabody Museum, Harvard University Bulletin No. 27 and the Asia Institute of Pahlavi University, Shiraz, Iran, Monograph no. 1 (1970); C. C. Lamberg-Karlovsky and M. Tosi, "Shahr-i Sokhta and Tepe Yahya: Tracks on the Earliest History of the Iranian Plateau," *East and West* 23 (1973), 21–57); Tall-i Ghazir (J. R. Caldwell, "Tall-i Ghazir," *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie* [1968], 348–55; D. S. Whitcomb, *The Proto-Elamite Period at Tall-i Ghazir, Iran* [Master's Thesis, University of Georgia: Athens, Georgia, 1971]); new excavations at Susa (A. Le Brun, "Recherches stratigraphiques à l'époque de Suse [1969-1971]", *Cahiers de la délégation archéologique française en Iran* 1 (1971), 163–216; J. Perrot, "Travaux de la mission de Suse depuis 1969," *Proceedings of the 1st Annual Symposium of Archaeological Research in Iran* [Iran Bastam Museum, November 1972], 1–3); and Tall-i Malyan, see note 6.

6 John Hansman, "Elamites, Archaemenians and Anshan," *Iran* 10 (1972), 101–25; W. Sumner, "Excavations at Tall-i Malyan," *Iran* 12 (1974), 155–80; idem., "Excavations at Tall-i Malyan (Anshan) 1974," *Iran* 14 (1976), 103–15.

a powerful lion attacking a bull on the Foroughi seal appears frequently on seals of this period.<sup>1</sup> At times the animal combatants face one another, at other times the lion attacks from behind. This theme appears in the upper register of a sealing from Susa<sup>2</sup> which provides the closest parallel to the Foroughi seal. On this sealing a lion attacks a reclining bull.

On the Foroughi seal, the lively position of the bull's head, which is turned back, is also characteristic of many animals appearing in the glyptic art of classic Proto-Elamite style.<sup>3</sup> On one of these seals a bull turns back its head to nibble at a flower, on another seal a bull looks back in alarm at an attacker. Animals appearing in earlier glyptic art also turn back their heads but not until the classic Proto-Elamite period do animals recline while looking back.

The dynamic posture of a powerful lion is also typical of most felines in classic Proto-Elamite style.<sup>4</sup> The fierce felines stiffly position their paws, lean their hind quarters back and tautly curve their tails above or behind them as they tense up, jaws ready for attack.

On the Foroughi seal the soft rounded forms of the animals' bodies are produced by heavy modelling. Drilled dots indicate their eyeballs and the joints of their legs while furrowed grooves delineate the lines around their eyes, ears, noses and jaws. There are other classic Proto-Elamite style seals cut in this manner.<sup>5</sup> The heavy modelling of the animals may possibly derive from the heavily modelled figures of the earlier Proto-urban period.<sup>6</sup> —M. J. S.

#### *Seal No. 2*

Black bituminous stone; 32.6 x 18 mm

On this seal,<sup>1</sup> in contrast to the foregoing, there is only one animal figure represented, a caprid in human posture. The kneeling figure, with its forehooves clenched to its chest, fills the entire height of the seal. The head faces left in profile. The horns, curving backward, mark the upper edge of the seal. The powerful shoulders, depicted frontally, are indicated by lines strongly curving down from the neck to the elbows, where the arms bend. The hooves are held against the breast. Stomach muscles are rendered by an eight-shaped form. The substantial haunches, also in profile, are outlined by two curving lines. A short tail juts out.

---

#### footnotes no. 1

- 1 Amiet, *Glyptique susienne*, nos. 950, 956, 997, 999, 1000.
- 2 *Ibid.*, n. 999.
- 3 *Ibid.*, nos. 946, 950, 958, 999.
- 4 *Ibid.*, nos. 950, 990, 999; Amiet, *La glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque*, no. 507.
- 5 Amiet, *Glyptique susienne*, nos. 935, 946, 950, 972, 990.
- 6 *Ibid.*, nos. 521, 605.

#### footnotes no. 2

- 1 This non-perforated cylinder seal retains on its ends thin scratches, roughly cross-shaped, which may have been made in some connection with caps of a setting.

The caprid faces a group of vases that seem to be falling off a rectangular stand which lies beneath them. In this group, the large vessel on the right has a lozenge-shaped body to which the triangular neck and foot are added. The vase to the lower left is formed in a similar manner; the upper one consists of the joining of two triangular forms. The rectangular stand has two ladder-like bands. A seven-petalled rosette on a stem juts out from the left side of the stand. The stand is above the end of a long, narrow plinth, on which stands a rectangular structure (?) filled by a trefoil plant.<sup>2</sup> Above this structure is a scorpion flanked by posts each terminating in triangles.<sup>3</sup>

The style is linear with deeply incised lines. Curved lines appear especially in the rendering of the central kneeling caprid. The linear style known from seals and sealings discovered at Susa<sup>4</sup> belongs to Pierre Amiet's classic Proto-Elamite style.

Iconographically the seal also belongs to the classic Proto-Elamite. A number of excavated seals and sealings from Susa and Tall-i Malyan depict animals in human postures.<sup>5</sup> Kneeling caprids are usually represented with their arms outstretched involved in some activity. The posture of hands clenched to the breast, well known from the lioness figurine of the Martin Collection,<sup>7</sup> is more frequently assumed by felines and bovines, both standing and kneeling in representations in glyptic art.

In an attempt to understand the meaning of this seal, one may turn to a seal now in Berlin, bought on the market.<sup>9</sup> On it a kneeling caprid faces a central pair of bovine animals, who appear to be stacking mallets.<sup>10</sup> Above the pile of mallets are three vases in various positions. The two smaller ones have small triangular necks added to the body. The presence of these three vessels with animals in human postures link this seal to the Foroughi one under discussion. Another group of three vases associated with animals personified by their stance is represented on a cylinder seal bought in Isfahan by Ernst Herzfeld.<sup>11</sup> On this seal, a large lozenge-shaped vase with a neck formed by two triangles is being carried between upright bovine animals. Vases with triangular necks superimposed one above the other are depicted on a sealing from

2 This three-leafed plant has parallels on other seals of this period, such as Amiet, *La glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque*, nos. 515, 516, 517, and 530. For this reason and in spite of its misshapen form, probably due to space, I call it a trefoil plant.

3 Dr Porada pointed out similar posts with triangular tips which are depicted on a bowl of the Sua A period (Louvre Sb 3152), dated to the mid-fourth millennium B.C. (P. Amiet, *Elam*, [Auvers-sur-Oise, 1966], Fig. 15, p. 43).

4 Amiet, *Glyptique susienne*, nos. 1002, 1009.

5 Susa: *Ibid.*, nos. 1001–17; Tall-i Malyan: Sumner, *Iran* 12 (1974), 172, Fig. 12r.

6 Amiet, *Glyptique susienne*, no. 1002; *idem*, *Glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque*, No 569; see *Glyptique susienne*, 132, n. 4.

7 On loan to the Brooklyn Museum. Edith Porada, *The Art of Ancient Iran* (New York, 1965), Pl. 6.

8 *Glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque*, nos. 574, 577, 578, 580, 587.

9 Anton Moortgat, *Vorderasiatische Rollsiegel* (Berlin, 1940), no. 775 (VA 10347), Pl. 91. For a drawing, see Amiet, *Glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque*, no. 568.

10 Moortgat, *ibid.*, p. 153. Dr. Porada suggested that they may be counting sticks.

11 Ernst Herzfeld, *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 5 (1933), Pl. III middle, and drawing in Amiet, *Glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque*, n. 572.

Tall-i Malyan on which animals, including a bull, are placed in an adjacent enclosure.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the presence of the vessels indicates that these scenes have an association with milk, as suggested by Edith Porada. That the animals connected with the vessels are either bovines or caprids, the providers of milk, may support this theory. Pierre Amiet has linked these representations of animals involved in various enigmatic activities to scenes of human labors represented on seals and sealings from Susa of the Proto-Urban period.<sup>13</sup> —B. A. P.

*Seal No. 3*

Black bituminous stone; 38.8 x 20.4 mm

This seal shows the intrusion of a lion threatening cattle in an enclosure. The pen dominates the surface of the seal occupying the whole width and three fourths of the length. It is rectangular with a square entrance on the right, which is somewhat off-center. A border of wavy curls with an inner striation is depicted on all sides.

Three animals are in the enclosure: two bulls and a lion. The bull at the top right looks to the left and thus balances the figure of the lion below. The lion, which may be assumed to be the leading character of the whole scene, is surprisingly small. The outstretched head, the open mouth and the big eye, however, emphasize the feline's ferocity. In front of the bull and the lion, a second bull rises on its hindlegs and turns its head back in fear. In the entrance to the enclosure stands a calf looking backwards.

Outside the enclosure are two more bulls. The one on top looks to the left, while the one at the bottom looks backward toward the animal enclosure. The great size of the latter bull compared to the other animals is remarkable and emphasizes the superiority of the bull rather than an attempt at perspective which is unlikely in ancient near eastern art. In the field are three Maltese crosses: two outside and one inside the enclosure.

The seal is rendered in a linear manner typical of the classic Proto-Elamite style. Extensive details are indicated. Stress is placed on the muscles of the neck and hindlegs. Further details as the muzzles, the ears and the hoofs are finely drawn. A drill is only used once, on the neck of the large bull. In contrast to the elegantly curved border of the enclosure and the horns of the large bull, the animal bodies and especially the tails are rendered in a rather stiff and angular fashion.

The motif of the enclosure has parallels on two seal impressions from Susa and on one seal impression from Tall-i Malyan. One of the impressions from Susa<sup>1</sup> shows two enclosures with three animals inside and one in the entrance similar to our seal. The reason for the animals' flight is not apparent. Both enclosures, the rectangular one and the round one, have an opening to the left and a fluted border. On the outside of the rectangular pen, some circles are indicated which may suggest beams or branches set against the walls.

---

<sup>12</sup> Sumner, *Iran* 14 (1976), 108, Fig. 4c.

<sup>13</sup> *Glyptique susienne*, 132.

<sup>1</sup> Amiet, *Glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque*, no. 549.

The other impression from Susa<sup>2</sup> is fragmentary. It shows a bull (?) lying in an enclosure of which the horizontal part has a border of curls with an inner striation like the curls of this Foroughi seal. The vertical parts seem to consist of a border of vessels.

In the impression from Tall-i Malyan<sup>3</sup> at least two rectangular enclosures are divided by a vertical border which may contain superimposed vessels with triangular necks as discussed for Seal No. 2.

Another comparison for the curls, although without an inner striation, is shown on the upper border line of another seal impression from Susa<sup>4</sup> representing a row of bulls.

A more stylized rendering of curls drawn in horizontal bands occurs on a small fragment from Tall-i Malyan.<sup>5</sup> The curly border may represent bundles of reeds comparable to Walter Andrae's "Schilfbündel",<sup>6</sup> as suggested by Edith Porada.

The visual representation of a lion threatening animals in an enclosure is so far unique, but it is certain that lions sometimes entered villages. A text from Mari in North Syria, dated to the time of Zimri-Lim c. 1780 B.C., mentions an incident in which a lion had entered a granary and the village official decided to bring it to the palace by boat.<sup>7</sup> —M.-C. DeG.



SEAL NO. 1

2 Ibid., no. 551.

3 Sumner, *Iran* 14 (1976), 108, fig. 4c.

4 Louis Legrain, *Empreintes de cachets élamites*, MDP 16, (Paris, 1921), Pl. VI: 104.

5 Sumner, *Iran* 14 (1976), 108, Fig. 4k.

6 Walter Andrae, *Das Gotteshaus und die Urformen des Bauens in alten Orient*, 49.; E. Heinrich, *Bauwerke in der altsumerischen Bildkunst*, *Schriften der Max Freiherr von Oppenheim Stiftung*, (Wiesbaden, 1957) 2: 11f. Henri Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals*, (London, 1939), 15.

7 Jean, *ARM* II, no. 106.



SEAL NO. 2



SEAL NO. 3