

Antonio Museum of Art, 1999. There have been numerous exhibitions in many countries of Scythian objects. This catalog is one of the most recent; it contains not only superb illustrations of major objects of Scythian art but also important introductory essays on Scythia, Scythian art, Scythian tombs, and so on.

Gocha R. Tsetskhladze

SEAFARING

See Ships and Seafaring.

SEALS AND SEALING RINGS

Seals come in many shapes, but they are always small and carved in intaglio in order to make a negative imprint on cloth or a positive impression in relief in clay. The first seals in the Old World date to the Late Neolithic (c. 6000–3000 BCE) and come from a wide area spanning central Europe to the Levant. These stamps are made of clay or soft stone (serpentine and steatite) and are carved with geometric designs; because there is no evidence of administration in this area, especially in the first half of this period, it is thought that these stamps were used to imprint designs on cloth (they are thus called *pintaderas*).

With the advent of cities in the ancient Near East, administration became complex, writing was invented (mid- to late fourth millennium BCE), and seals were used to authenticate transactions and official correspondence. The stamping of clay sealings over box lids, jar mouths, door pegs, and the knots that tied packaged goods certified that the contents were undisturbed while the sealing remained unbroken. By the Early Bronze Age (early third millennium BCE) the use of seals had spread throughout the eastern Mediterranean, and each culture, it seems, developed distinctive shapes of seals: in Mesopotamia and the Levant the shape was a cylinder (carved around its length), in Egypt the scarab (shaped like the dung beetle), in Anatolia the humped stamp, and in the Aegean the lentoid and amygdaloid.

At first the materials of seals were soft (no more than 3 on the Mohs scale): steatite, serpentine, dentines (ivory and bone), and clay. Toward the middle of the second millennium, vitreous materials—glass and its low-fired cousin, faience—were invented, and harder stones were used, especially silicates like agate and cornelian, minerals like lapis lazuli and hematite, and quartzes like amethyst (4.5–5.5 on the Mohs scale). Whereas steatite and serpentine could be locally collected, the more exotic items like ivory (elephant and hippopotamus) and the harder stones were more difficult to obtain and, when not local, were imported over considerable distances. Lapis lazuli comes from Afghanistan, cornelian from eastern Mesopotamia, and amethyst from Egypt; where the distinctive rich brown agate came from remains a mystery—unless it was from southern Germany.

It seems that most people in antiquity had seals; the commoners had softstone seals with simple designs, while elite administrators had the hard-stone seals that could be carved only in palatial workshops that were provided with the exotic materials. When worn, therefore, seals became a kind of identity card: their shape announced the culture of the individual, their material and color announced status, and their designs—visible only when the seal was used to stamp something—signaled a person's function.

In the Iron Age (beginning c. 1000 BCE) the use of seals became progressively more democratized as society became more and more mercantile. Although cylinders in the Near East and scarabs in Egypt remained popular, rings with glass “stones” became widely used in the Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman worlds. They were still used to impress clay sealings and certify documents: a papyrus document was rolled or folded and bound by a thin, knotted thread; a lump of clay was placed over the knot and then impressed by a seal. From both the Bronze and the Iron Age, archives of these impressed clay sealings have survived, fired to ceramic hardness in destructions (or simply baked by the hot climate, as in Egypt). Hellenistic papyri from Egypt give eloquent testimony to the use of seals: we



Sealing Ring. Aegean lentoid, c. 1500–1450 BCE. COURTESY OF JOHN G. YOUNGER

often read, “I So-and-so attest to this transaction; my ringstone is engraved with a figure of Hermes, and I have a scar on my left leg”—the physical mark on the body binding the ringstone and the individual.

With the fall of the Roman and Byzantine empires, seals once again became the marker of the privileged person. The head of a monastery, the king of the realm, and his most important advisers would have seals, but few others would. And to mark their importance and lessen the threat of theft, seals became large, cumbersome, and heavy. Members of the nobility might continue to wear rings with ringstones or engraved bezels, but aside from authenticating personal correspondence they would have had little further use for them. By the end of the nineteenth century, seals and stamps (or “signets,” as they were then called) had dwindled in popularity, being necessary for some bureaucratic use and for elite personal correspondence. Their use today is limited to fancy invitations and some bureaucratic procedures.

[See also *Gems and Jewelry*.]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Boardman, John, and Robert L. Wilkins. *Greek Gems and Finger Rings: Early Bronze to Late Classical*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2001.
 Collon, Dominique. *First Impressions: Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East*. London: British Museum Press, 2006.
 Wilkerson, Richard. *Egyptian Scarabs*. Oxford: Shire, 2008.

John G. Younger

SEA PEOPLES

See Greece, *subentry* The Dark Age.

SEA POWER

See Military Structure and Organization, Greek; Military Structure and Organization, Roman.

SECOND SOPHISTIC

The slippery term “the Second Sophistic” is usually taken to denote the culture of rhetorical performance that flourished in the eastern parts of the early Roman Empire about 100–300 CE; or, by extension, to denote the classicizing revival of Greek literature and art that accompanied it; or sometimes to denote simply the period of Greek history itself. Coined perhaps by Flavius Philostratus (c. 170–c. 250 CE) in his *Lives of the Sophists* (481, 507), the term “Second Sophistic” seems at first sight to have ancient authority, unlike other Greek cultural periodizations such as “Archaic,” “Classical,” and “Hellenistic.” Yet what Philostratus means by “Second Sophistic” is different again: he refers not to a particular phase of Greek culture, but to a type of oratory wherein one declaims in the persona of a figure from history or myth—a genre that reaches back, so at least Philostratus claims, as far as Aeschines in the fourth century BCE.

Atticism. Modern scholarship has thus appropriated a term used incidentally by one ancient author—and an idiosyncratic author at that, albeit