

Seals

Function of Seals

- Sealing of goods to denote ownership
- Identify the mother country of the merchant
- Identify the origin of the traded commodity without opening the bundle of goods, thus facilitating storage, taxation, further shipment and other functions.
- Some seals may have been used by religious leaders for special ceremonies and others by landowners and traders

Dholavira

- First evidence of seals, writing and weights appeared in stage III
- Early seals were small and light, square in shape with a small boss at the back
- Seals bore figures or mythological scenes but no inscriptions
- Late Harappan seals were mostly rectangular bearing inscriptions only without any figures or scenes. (1900-1700 BC) (Stage VI)

By 2600 BC, specialised engravers made seals with writing on the reverse so that when stamped in clay, it formed a raised positive message. Artisans used seals or wooden moulds to produce numerous copies of inscriptions or narrative scenes on fired terracotta and glazed faience tablets.

Potters used seals to impress writing on pottery vessels, usually disposable drinking cups. Moulds for making large pottery vessels were incised on the exterior, possibly to identify the owner of the mould itself. Often, the script was incised on the interior in reverse so that the base of the jars would have raised symbols.

Materials

Steatite

Silver (2 examples)

Copper (2 examples)

Steatite seals

The soft soapstone was carved, polished, and then fired in a kiln to whiten and harden the surface. Only after the outside had been hardened could the seal be used to stamp wet clay.

Square Seals

These seals usually have a line of script along the top of the seal and a carved

animal in the central portion. Animals depicted include male domestic, wild and mythical beasts. A small feeding trough or an offering stand is often placed below the head of the animal.

Some seals contain more complex iconographic scenes that represent mythological or religious events.

The reverse of the seals has a small boss or carved knob with a perforation for holding a thick cord.

Rectangular Seals

These seals have holes drilled from the side across the middle of the seal. This type of seal only carried abstract writing with no central animal motif.

Stamp seals

These seals were used to stamp a personal and official insignia onto goods or documents. Powerful merchants and landowners probably used them. Seals with animal motifs would have carried messages understood by the different communities in the region. As a totemic symbol, the animals represented a specific clan or official. The animals represent at least ten clans. Of these, the unicorn appears to be most popular and may probably represent a widespread community.

Incised and Moulded Tablets

Miniature Tablets

These tablets are made from faience, moulded terracotta or incised steatite. They contain inscriptions though occasionally some may have an animal motif on one side and an inscription on the other.

Unlike the seals, these tablets are not used to make impressions and so the writing does not appear in reverse.

The writing on the tablets consists of a short inscription on one side and a numeral on the other. The numerals may represent some accounting system.

These tablets appear to have been exclusively used in the large cities as most of the specimens have come from Harappa and Mohenjodaro. They may have been used as tokens, made up in advance and distributed when goods were brought into the city as tribute or for sale.

Ritual use of the script is seen in the depiction of scenes involving powerful spirits and deities on moulded terracotta tablets and sometimes on carved steatite seals. Short inscriptions associated with these scenes may represent the name of deities, constellations or supernatural events. The script is also found carved on ivory and bone rods, possibly used in divining the future or perhaps part of a ritual game.

Copper Tablets

Rectangular copper tablets with incised writing and animal motifs are found mainly in Mohenjodaro.

The copper tablets have their own intrinsic value as they could be remelted and used to make other objects or tools. These tablets are approximately the same weight and size and could represent an attempt to create a standard currency or medium of exchange.

Pottery

Signs were moulded on to the base of a vessel or incised on the soft clay prior to firing.

Seal impressions on pointed base goblets were probably made when the vessel was on the wheel and the clay wet.

Inscriptions made after firing, known, as graffiti could have been scratched on the vessel at any time. They probably represent the owner's name, the vessel's contents or the destination.

Geometric Button Seals

These are glazed faience seals carrying geometric motifs. The most common motifs are the swastika and stepped cross. Circle and dot motifs are also found. None of these seals have any writing on them and could have been protective symbols or good luck charms.

Seal Impressions

Impressions of seals on clay tags and on circular tokens were probably issued to middlemen or transporters as certificates from a seal owner. Lumps of clay were directly attached to the knots or binding on a bundle of goods and sealed to verify the contents and protect against pilfering en route.

Motifs

Animal motifs on seals are probably totemic symbols representing a special clan or official. Animals include

- Unicorn-is the most common animal depicted
- Humped bull
- Elephant
- Rhinoceros
- Water buffalo
- Short-horned humpless bull
- Goat
- Antelope
- Crocodile
- Hare
- Tiger

- Sheep
- Gazelle

The animals are usually male and most animals are carved facing left.

Symbols of power

- **Zebu bull** symbolises the leader of the herd, virile and strong. It probably represents the most powerful clan in Mohenjodaro and Harappa. The script accompanying the animal could refer to royal titles.
- **Elephant** these seals are of medium size and are primarily found in Mohenjodaro and Harappa. These were probably attached to goods that were being traded. Minor administrative officers probably used these seals.
- **Male water buffalo** assumes a posture of defence as if protecting the herd and the females, representing fertility and protection. Minor administrative officers probably used these seals.
- **Tiger** these seals are primarily found in the larger cities. These seals were probably used by minor administrative officers
- **Unicorn** appears to be a very important symbol of the elite and traders. These seals are found at almost all sites in the Indus Valley and even Mesopotamia. The unicorn is depicted assuming various postures and were probably made by local artisans at all major sites. The aristocracy probably used these seals or merchants directly involved in governing the different settlements and assuming the economic and political power in the major cities.

Combination Animal Seals

Seals depicting several animals have also been discovered. One seal depicts a man seated in a yogic posture surrounded by the elephant, tiger, rhinoceros, water buffalo and two antelopes. They probably represent a ritual or else a treaty with other clans.

Multiple headed animal figures also occur on seals. Some of the combinations include

- The unicorn and the short-horned bull
- The unicorn, the short-horned bull and an antelope
- An elephant with the horns of a bull
- A creature with physical features of a bull, tiger, elephant and goat, human face and a cobra tail
- Two sided seal depicting a unicorn on one side and a combined-animal motif on the other.

These seals are found only at the largest sites.