Signatures meant more in Mesopotamia than they do now – what cylinder seals say about ancient and modern life

Serdar Yalçin, Assistant Professor of Art History, Macalester College

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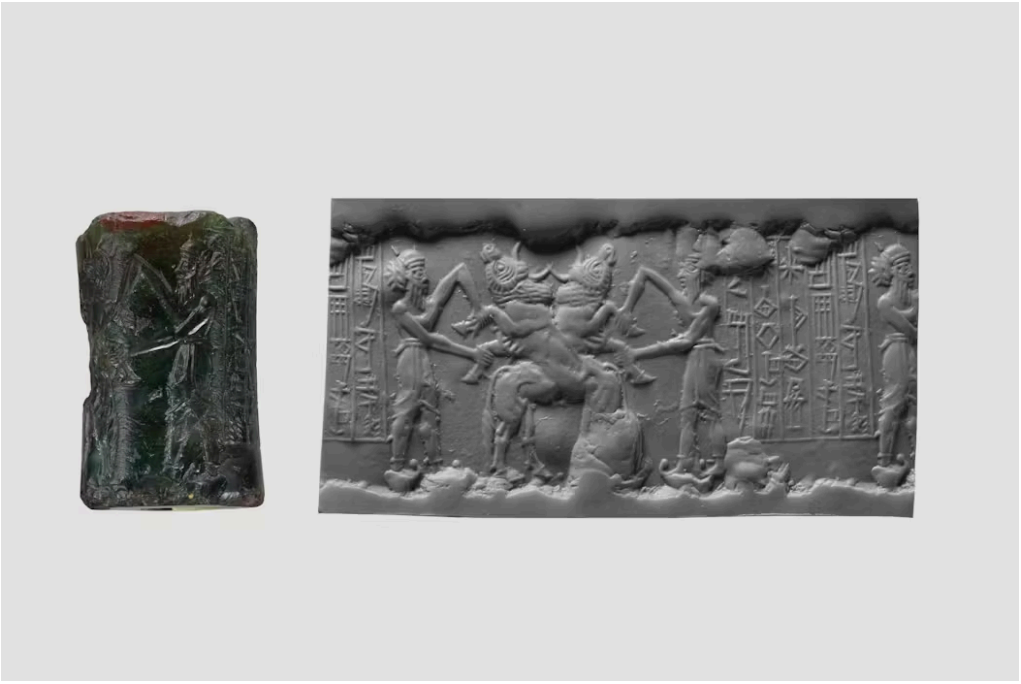

An Akkadian cylinder seal, circa 2350-2150 B.C.E., depicts a contest scene. The image on the right shows the impression the seal would make.

Gift of Nanette B. Kelekian, in memory of Charles Dikran and Beatrice Kelekian, 1999/Metropolitan Museum of Art

The earliest form of the signature came from ancient Iraq in the form of cylinder seals.

Mesopotamians, the ancient inhabitants of the land between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, are credited for many firsts in human history, including writing, urbanism and the state. Among these inventions, cylinder seals are perhaps the most distinctive but least known.

Babylonian seal made of chalcedony, circa 14th century B.C.E., inscribed with a hymn to the goddess Inanna. The seal was owned by a man named Tunamisah, son of Pari.

Gift of The Right Reverend Paul Moore Jr., 1985/Metropolitan Museum of Art

Seals as artifacts

Thousands of these tiny objects – often no bigger than 2 inches (5 centimeters) in height and 1 inch (2.5 cm) in diameter – are displayed in museums today. They testify to an artistic tradition in ancient Iraq and Syria that remained uninterrupted from the late fourth to first millennia B.C.E.

In essence, a cylinder seal was a small sculpture that served a crucial utilitarian purpose: signing documents. It was generally made of a precious or semiprecious stone such as lapis lazuli, agate or chalcedony. Images and texts were engraved into the stone with a technique called intaglio. Notably, these engravings would need to be made in reverse of how the markings would look when it was used.

When rolled on a moist clay tablet, these engravings left low-relief markings, signifying that the object's owner authorized the written document. In this respect, a cylinder seal's impression is the ancestor of modern handwritten and digital signatures.

Clay envelope and tablets from Kültepe-Kanesh (now Turkey), circa 20th-19th centuries BCE. The writer, Ashur-muttabbil, impressed – or signed – the envelope twice with a cylinder seal.

Bequest of Edith Aggiman, 1982/Metropolitan Museum of Art

Seals and identity

While cylinder seals were a creation of the Sumerians who inhabited southern Mesopotamia about 6,000 years ago, they rapidly spread to the rest of Western Asia and the eastern Mediterranean and became important items in everyday life.

Communities in this vast region – especially those in Mesopotamia, an area poor in raw materials – imported stones from distant lands to make their seals. Mesopotamians extracted diorite from Oman, lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, and carnelian and agate from the Indus Valley and other parts of South Asia.

Seals made of these exotic stones were extra valuable, so only the elite could afford them. Often affiliated with the state and temples, these people were typically royalty, high-level bureaucrats and priests. In contrast, people from lower classes used seals made of less valuable materials, such as limestone, clay or glass.

Mesopotamians and their contemporaries in Western Asia expressed their identities not just through the material of their seals but also through the texts and images engraved on them. The seal texts often introduced the owners with their names, genealogies, gender, professions and hometowns. Thanks to this information, researchers know that not just men but also wealthy women owned seals, albeit in much smaller proportions.

Religious identity, too, was communicated via long prayers addressed to personal gods or via images depicting gods and worshippers.

Assyrian cylinder seal from the late ninth to seventh centuries B.C.E., made of chalcedony and inscribed with a cultic scene. The image on the right shows the impression the seal would make.

Gift of Nanette B. Kelekian, in memory of Charles Dikran and Beatrice Kelekian, 1999/Metropolitan Museum of Art

Making seals

The scope of Mesopotamian imagery depicted on cylinder seals was broad. For thousands of years, seal-cutters – the artisans who exclusively specialized in making seals – carved scenes representing daily life and nature, religious rituals, warfare, architectural vistas and mythical stories involving gods, heroes and hybrid creatures such as winged horses and griffins.

Much of this rich imagery was a result of the owners' personal choices, often referencing their identities. In some exceptional cases, Mesopotamian kings or their aides monitored and approved the designs of the cylinder seals they gifted to high-level officials.

Many seals seem to have been already carved with the popular cultural motifs before they were sold to clients, although solid archaeological and archival evidence is still needed to confirm this. When a customer bought these premade objects, they may have asked for a new inscription or some adjustments to the imagery. Most known cylinder seals were likely carved anew for elite clients, especially for those from the highest echelons of the society such as royalty.

Akkadian cylinder seal made of serpentine, circa 2250-2150 B.C.E., depicting a bull-man wrestling a lion and a nude, bearded hero wrestling a water buffalo. The image on the right shows the impression the seal would make.

Bequest of W. Gedney Beatty, 1941/Metropolitan Museum of Art

Cylinder seals open a wide window not just into ancient Mesopotamian art and culture but also into the minds of individual Mesopotamians. Carved with personalized images and texts reflecting their views on life and society, seals were intimately connected to their owners. Losing one's seal was considered a very negative omen for its patron. In contrast, modern signatures are often depersonalized and generic.

Cylinder seals – along with city life, organized religion and bureaucracy – were a key component of ancient Mesopotamian civilization. These features, in different forms and proportions, continue to define modern life today.

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