

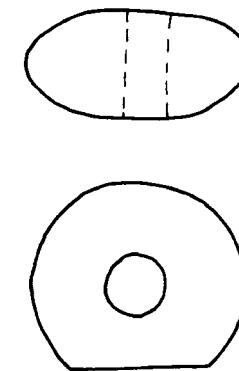


Sasanian Seals

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The stone seals included here are immediately identifiable as Sasanian by their shape as well as style. Although seals dating to Sasanian times (224–651 CE) may be oval or circular bezels, made to be set into a ring or into some other piece of adornment, most seals are typically horizontally-perforated stamps: conoids, ellipsoids – often with large lateral perforations so that they resemble rings – and domes.

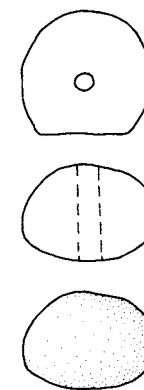
Stylistically, temporal and regional variations exist across the more than 400 years of Sasanian rule over an area stretching from the Syrian deserts to Afghanistan. Because of their size and use as personal items of both identity and adornment, seals are highly portable and it is not surprising to find seals such as these in the area of Herat; their presence testimony to the travel or trade that brought their owners to the particular spot where they were found. Seals also have an amuletic value, and some may have been transported and coveted for that particular use.



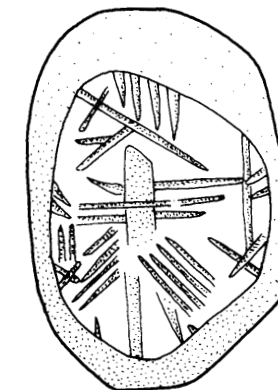
scale 1:1



Fig.1 Chalcedony seal (HNM 06.08.86t, cat. no. S1) showing human figure facing left. Drawing and image of front view



scale 1:1



scale 2:1



Fig. 2 Chalcedony seal (HNM 07.03.86e, cat. no. S2, see also title image) showing human figure facing left, possibly Gayōmard. Drawing and image

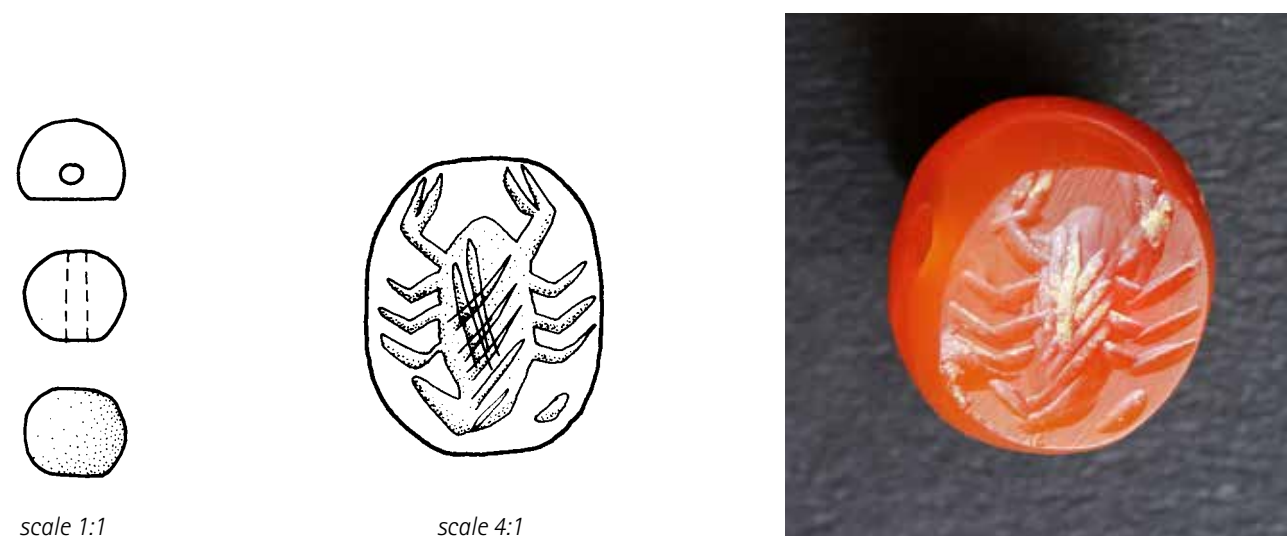


Fig. 3 Tiny carnelian stamp seal (HNM 07.03.86f, cat. no. S3) with scorpion shown upright.
Image and drawing

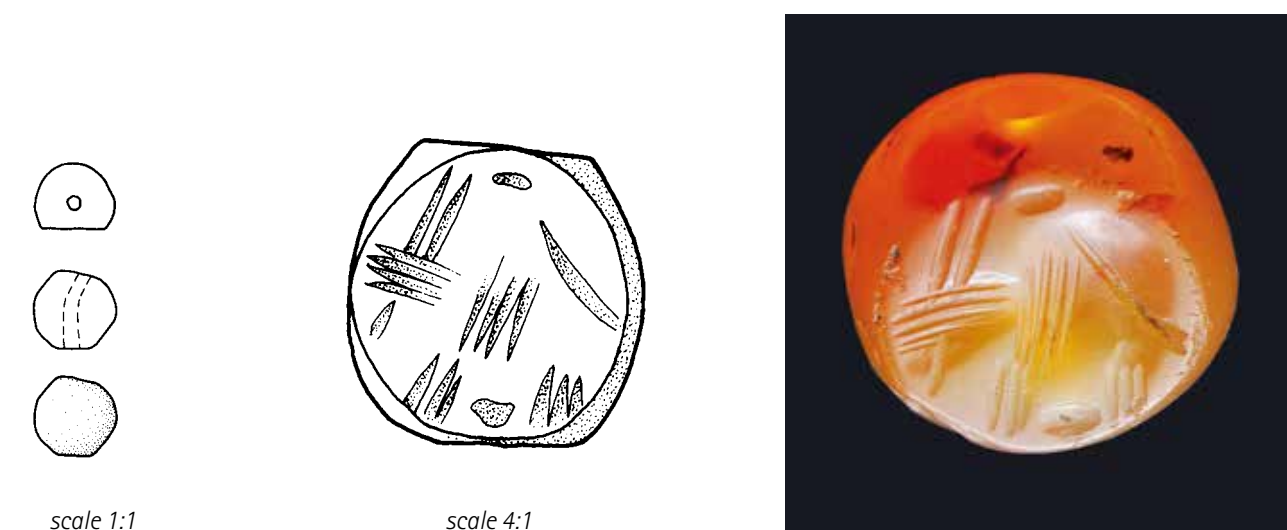


Fig. 4 Tiny carnelian stamp seal (HNM 07.03.86g, cat. no. S4) with hare facing left.
Image and drawing

The four seals here are characteristically perforated stamps, carved from typical stones – two of chalcedony, two of carnelian – and executed in a common style. Their images cursorily cut, they could have been made almost at anytime or any place within Sasanian territory or even beyond, where an individual who required a seal wished to have his cut in a Sasanian shape and style. The extensive use of the wheel to create a series of lines indicating a human torso, face, and limbs (Fig. 2 and title image, cat. no. S2 *Gayōmard*) or the body and extremities of a scorpion (Fig. 3, cat. no. S3) is sometimes called the 'stressed style' and is characteristic of ordinary and provincial seals.

Given their style, the four seals here are most likely late: i.e. not earlier than the 5th or even the 6th century, when seal usage seems to have expanded

and seal ownership became more widespread. Indeed, for all the hundreds of Sasanian seals and seal impressions on *bullae* known, relatively few are from good archaeological contexts, and those that are mostly date to the latter part of the period. Interestingly, a group of seals in the 'stressed style' have been found in Khorazm, in Central Asia, attesting to the provincial origin of the style. It is not surprising, therefore, that the four seals here come from the Herat area, where they could have been manufactured or brought from elsewhere.

Catalogue

Like all seals carved in intaglio, these four are meant to be 'read' in impression. To avoid confusion, however, they are described as they appear in the photographs and the drawings, which is directly from the stone. The dimensions of each seal are given as length x width (or instead diameter) x height.

Cat. No. S1

HNM 06.08.86t, see Fig. 1

Stone stamp seal

Milky chalcedony, ellipsoid with medium perforation¹

Size (cm): h. 1.2; w. 2.7; l. 2.45



Small white, polished stamp seal, round with flattened base.

Perforated sidewise; shiny surface. Motif redrawn with pen.

Male figure in a long robe, standing to the left, holding a stick or branch before him; behind him a series of vertical strokes that on similar but not so cursorily-carved seals seems to indicate vegetation. The object the man holds may be the barsom or sacred bundle of twigs used in Zoroastrian rituals. If so, he is a priest; a likely identification as the lower part of his face seems to be covered by the *padam*, the nose and mouth covering worn by Zoroastrian priests so as not to defile the sacred fire with their breath.

¹ Cf. Bivar 1969, BD 1–13. – Gyselen 1997, 10.B.14. – Ritter 2010, XVIII: B5003.

Cat. No. S2

HNM 07.03.86e, see Fig. 2 and title image

Rounded, slightly irregular stamp seal
Translucent chalcedony, ellipsoid with rounded back and small perforation, broken on edge left of the figure²; motif redrawn with blue pen.

Size (cm): h. 1.21; w. 1.76; l. 1.56

Stick-like, quasi-human figure, with frontal body and head turned to the left. He carries a stave with a star marking at the base in each of his outstretched arms (his right hand holding the staff is broken off the seal); his thighs are shaggy and he is ithyphallic. These features most likely identify him as the primal man, *Gayōmard*, "the source of the human race and the first person who will be raised from the dead at the renovation of the world" according to Zoroastrian texts.³ On most seal depictions he is shown in full-face with a dog at his feet. This last attribute may also identify him with the constellation Orion.

Cat. No. S3

HNM 07.03.86f, see Fig. 3

Rounded, small stone with flat base, like a round bead with cut edge

Carnelian, ellipsoid with small perforation⁴

Size (cm): h. 0.78; w. 0.75; l. 0.95



² Cf. Bivar 1969, BF 1–13. – Brunner 1978, nos. 76–77; 155–158; 162–163; and 75 for profile head. – Gyselen 1993, 10.D.23 and 24; Gyselen 1997, 10.D.3–5.

³ Brunner 1978, 70.

⁴ Cf. Brunner 1978, 113 and no. 86. – Gyselen 1993, 30.T.6–16; Gyselen 1997, 30.x.4–38.

Scorpion, its tail turned to the left on the sealing surface. Although in orthodox Zoroastrianism the scorpion is demon-created, it is also an auspicious symbol, implying good fortune and sometimes combined with such beneficent beings as *Gayōmard* and his dog.

Cat. No. S4

HNM 07.03.86g, see Fig. 4

Carnelian dome with small perforation⁵

Size (cm): h. 0.96; w. 1.03; l. 0.85



Hare facing left on the sealing surface; two short strokes in the field, one above, the other below the animal. Considered an auspicious animal; perhaps its swiftness made it a desirable image for one's seal.

⁵ See Brunner 1978, 103–104. – Cf. Borisov/Lukonin 1963, no. 783. – Henig 1994, no. 434.