

Parvine H. Merrillees, *Ancient Near Eastern Cylinder and Stamp Seals in Australian Collections, Buried History Monograph 4, Melbourne: Australian Institute of Archaeology, 2015, ISBN 978-0-980-37472-8 (paperback), 161pp +vi, many illus and bibliography, A\$75.*

Reviewed by Lamia al-Gailani-Werr

This is the second revised and improved edition of H. Merrillees catalogue of Australian seals called *Cylinder and Stamp Seals in Australian Collections* in 1990 and published as a Victoria College, Archaeology Research Unit Occasional Paper. The addition of *Ancient Near Eastern* to the title delineates the origin of the collection. There are improvements in layout, it is compressed and has better fonts, and paper quality. Most of the chapters have been kept in the same order, however, the bibliography, has over 67 new entries and is now consolidated at the end of the book. The Appendix of Gems and Abrasive is now Chapter 3 with a new heading, Materials Used for the Catalogue Glyptic. All these chapters have been expanded.

Merrillees has benefited from recent publications of new excavations and studies seals. These supplement her extensive discussion about the origin of the seals in the first chapter and the comments and parallels of each seal in Chapter 4: Seal Catalogue. The seals are arranged in chronological order starting from the Jamdat Nasr period (c.2950 BC) in Mesopotamia to the Sassanian period (c. 4th to 5th centuries AD). The entry for each of the 106 seals is divided into sections, provenance, size, material, description, date, and last parallels/discussion. This is an improvement upon the 1990 publication, where all the fields were in one paragraph and only the parallels were separate. The parallels have been expanded with extra examples and new interpretations often derived from recent publications. Each seal entry is accompanied by an approximately 1-to-1 colour photograph of both the actual seal and its impression and a slightly larger drawing of the impression. The photographs, some of which are produced in buff-pinkish colour, vary in quality. However, this is more than compensated for by Merrillees outstanding drawings. Normally seal drawings vary in style and quality according to whoever drew them. The drawings in this catalogue set a new standard. Every single detail is recorded, all the incisions and crevasses are drawn, such as the face of the king with mace on no.34. Merrillees has taken much time and patience to draw each seal; her drawings give the impression that she counted the number of incisions on the frills of the worshippers garments, for example nos. 31 and 106. The dots usually indicate missing or broken pieces of the seals so she added another feature to indicate a rough surface no.70.

The Parallels and Discussion section is where Merrillees excels herself by her extensive research of similar subjects and motifs. She has succeeded in portraying and presenting the simplest and the most commonly recur-

ring subjects and motifs as worthy of study. no. 31, for example, a very common Old Babylonian presentation scene where most seal specialists, including the writer of this review, would just describe: Presentation scene; ascending Sun God (Shamash), receiving a worshiper wearing a long frilled garment, followed by a female goddess possibly the goddess Lama. Merrillees adds to the detailed description by giving a history of the order of the depicted figures and their posture and commenting on the various interpretations noting, for example, if the god is placing his foot on a stool or the symbol of a mountain or a ziggurat. The discussions of some of the individual seals, such as the Assyrian seals nos. 52-56, are so thorough that they could well be published as stand-alone articles.

Merrillees also attempts to identify the original site or region of the seal, such as seal no. 69, where she proposes that the stamp seal came from Nimrud basing her suggestion on seals discovered during the British excavations of Nimrud in the last century. Her assumption is now supported by the finds from the Harem quarters in the North West Palace excavated by the Iraqi Department of Antiquities in 1988-1990, where four stamp and one cylinder seals were found (Nimrud Seals, in J.E. Curtis, et.al. *New Light on Nimrud*, London: British Institute for the Study of Iraq, 2008, 155-162, figs. 19 a-e).

Most of the seals were acquired from private collectors and have no known provenance, the exceptions are nine seals from the Amman Airport excavations in Jordan and two from Myrtou Pigadhes, Cyprus. The Provenance/Source of each seal mentions the donor's name and, when possible, the person from whom it was originally acquired. Nearly half of the seals in the catalogue are in the Australian Institute of Archaeology collection and the bulk of these (27 cylinder and 26 stamp seals) were acquired by W.J. Beasley from Edward Jawahery (an Arabic name meaning jeweler), an art dealer in Baghdad in 1935. Most of the seals are dated from the Jamdat Nasr to the Old Babylonian periods, suggesting their original provenance was probably from the thousands of ancient sites in southern Iraq. The date of the purchase of the Nicholson Museum seals coincides with correspondence in 1939 between the Director of the Nicholson Museum and Sati Husri Director of Antiquities in Iraq, concerning the exchange of antiquities between the two institutions. Three cylinder seals in the catalogue nos. 1, 21 and 28 could be from that exchange. The Iraq Museum also sent a life size replica of the lion of Babylon. Unfortunately, it arrived in Sydney broken and beyond repair.

This volume represents a useful source of information about seal production and materials, their art history and cultural significance that will be valuable for students and scholars. The writing style is straightforward so that the informed general reader would also find much of interest.

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