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Anatolian Crossroads: Achaemenid Seals from Sardis and Gordion

Elsbeth M. Dusinberre

Seals can provide a unique entry into understanding ancient societies: used by individuals or offices for ratification, identification and ornamentation, they functioned simultaneously as official insignia and indicators of personal taste. (1) The differences and similarities between the Achaemenid seals found at the satrapal capital of Sardis and the large but second-tier city of Gordion are therefore especially interesting. This paper considers the seals from Sardis and Gordion, exploring their shapes, sizes, materials, style, iconography and findspots. It situates them in their historical, political and geographic contexts to examine the Achaemenid Empire itself and the different ways in which Achaemenid hegemony affected different types of sites.

Seals and society in Achaemenid Anatolia: a study in contrasts

Most of the seals from Sardis are pyramidal stamp seals and rings and are of such high-prestige materials as gold and chalcidony. The great majority reflect imperial Achaemenid iconography and were produced

in one of the so-called “Greco-Persian” styles. They were excavated from tombs of elite Sardians. (2) The seals from Gordion, by contrast, come in a wide variety of shapes and materials, including a fairly large number in glass. A significant number were imported from places far to the east, west and south. They exhibit a tremendous variety in artistic style and imagery. Most of them were found reused in post-Achaemenid domestic and work contexts. (3)

The seals from Sardis demonstrate the cohesion of the Achaemenid elite and the overwhelming adoption of Achaemenid ideology at this satrapal capital. The lack of pre-Achaemenid seals from Sardis and the preponderance of high-status ones in the Achaemenid period reiterate the importance of the Achaemenid administration at this satrapal headquarters. The seals from the once-important city of Gordion depart radically from the pre-Achaemenid Phrygian corpus of seals at the site. They suggest a change in administrative practice during the Achaemenid period. They also demonstrate that Achaemenid ideology and practices penetrated to less administratively significant sites in the empire as



Fig. 31.1 Sardis, Gordion, Anatolia and surroundings. (After Dusinberre 2005)

well as to sites of such satrapal significance as Sardis.

Sardis

Sardis had been the capital of Lydia and retained its administrative importance under Achaemenid hegemony, becoming the satrapal seat of Sparda and a primary centre for Achaemenid government in western Anatolia. Its seals reflect its importance in the empire in some particularly interesting ways. At Sardis we repeatedly see an important phenomenon: official imperial iconography rendered in a local style, with local tastes and preferences perhaps reflected in the selection of imperial images. The large number of seals found—34

of them—is partly a reflection of the enormous number of tombs excavated at Sardis (well over 1,000). It is interesting, in light of such large numbers, that there have been to my knowledge no seals at all found at Sardis that predate the Achaemenid period. The Sardian seals were found in graves of the elite. (4) Interestingly, it is impossible to discern the ethnicity of a seal's user at Sardis—choice of image and artistic style are not indicators of Persian or Lydian or other background. Instead, seal users (the elite) show remarkable conformity of taste in seal imagery, demonstrating an artistic koine that linked the elite at Sardis across ethnic background to imperial authority. Thus users embedded themselves in an artistic framework that



Fig. 31.2 IAM 4523, from Sardis: lion and bull combat. (After Dusinberre 2003; © Istanbul Archaeological Museums)



Fig. 31.3 IAM 4522, 4581, 4523, 4520: pyramidal stamp, cylinder seal, “weight-shaped” seal, and ring with stone bezel. (After Dusinberre 2003; © Istanbul Archaeological Museums)

reinforced their own goals or sense of authority and power.

The seals excavated at Sardis demonstrate a variety of choices available in shapes and materials. (5) The most popular shape is the pyramidal stamp seal, of which there are 15. Of the nine rings with sealing faces, three are of pure gold, with gold bezels, and six have stones carved in intaglio, generally set on a swivel so the sealing surface could be turned towards or away from the finger. Three seals are roughly cylindrical squat stamps that are wider at the top than at the bottom—sealing—surface. Three are cylinder seals. The remaining two seals are suspended from a bracelet and a necklace. The most common material of which the pyramidal stamp seals are made is blue chalcedony, a particularly beautiful and translucent stone. The ring bezels, by contrast, are generally made of carnelian, when they are not of gold. (6)

All the seals excavated at Sardis have settings that show they were worn on the body in a visible spot, such as a necklace or a wrist chain, or perhaps pinned to a garment: they

were not kept out of sight in a pocket or purse. Many seals have particularly beautiful suspension devices, with elaborate attention paid to the qualities that enhance their value as adornments. The highly visible nature of the seals underscores their importance as indicators of individuality: not only the image carved on a seal but also its very form could convey messages about the person using it, and the fact of choice between different shapes and styles at Sardis is a crucial one.

The seals excavated at Sardis demonstrate that multiple artistic styles existed concurrently at this satrapal capital, but most of them are carved in one of the styles commonly called “Greco-Persian”. (7) The seals from Sardis carved in this style are almost all linked with imperial Achaemenid iconography and indeed often with iconography associated with high status. (8) They provide compelling support for the suggestion that this style should be seen not as any kind of ethnic indicator, but rather as a newly crafted style designed to indicate the elite status of the user in the Achaemenid hierarchy. (9)

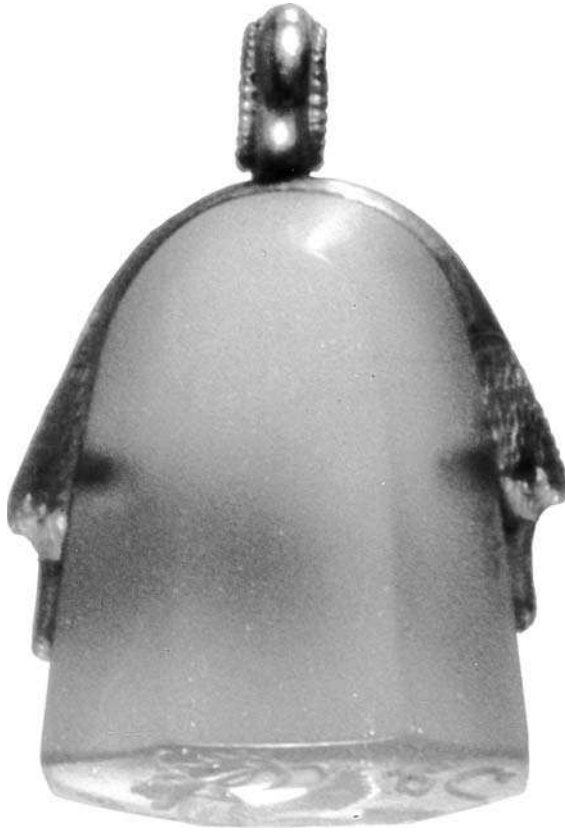


Fig. 31.4 IAM 4641. A suspension device in the shape of ducks' heads clasping a blue chalcedony pyramidal stamp seal. (After Dusinberre 2003; © Istanbul Archaeological Museums)

The seals from Sardis demonstrate the cohesion of the Achaemenid elite and the adoption of Achaemenid imperial ideology at this satrapal capital. At Sardis, we repeatedly see an important phenomenon: official iconography rendered in a specific style, with local tastes and preferences perhaps reflected in the selection of imperial images. (10) This provides support for the suggestion that we rename this style at last. I would like to suggest “Achaemenid hegemonic” as a name that is neither ethnically nor geographically situated but rather emphasizes the meaning of this style in its various and fluid socio-political contexts.

The iconography of the seals from Sardis carved in “Achaemenid hegemonic” style forms an internally consistent set of images. Favoured are lions: five seals show single lions, one shows a lion and a bull, one a heroic combat with a lion, one an archer scene with a lion, and one a heroic control scene with lions. (11) Two seals show winged lions in heraldic groupings. (12) This predilection for lions is found in sculpture from Sardis dating to the Achaemenid period, but it also reflects the large numbers of lions that appear on the Persepolis Fortification seals. That prototypical Achaemenid beast, the lion-griffin, is also popular, including in scenes that involve the Achaemenid hero-king figure: three seals show single lion-griffins, one shows a heroic combat scene with a lion-griffin, and one shows a heroic control scene with lion-griffins. (13) Other composite animals featured are bearded winged crowned sphinxes, a goat-sphinx, and a human-headed bird. (14) A bull and a boar complete the list of animals carved in this stylistic category. (15) As has been seen, scenes involving the Persian hero figure are present, with two heroic combats, two scenes of heroic control, and one archer scene. (16) The last remaining seal carved in “Achaemenid hegemonic” style shows the king enthroned. (17) These images thus overwhelmingly incorporate images favoured in Iran, and many of them display exceptionally powerful and high-status central images indeed. (18)

If, as I have argued elsewhere, the style should be seen as a newly composed and socially symbolic art of empire, it demonstrates at Sardis the network of artistic and socio-political connections that united the Persian, and Persianizing, elite. (19) This poly-ethnic group at Sardis clearly had different



Fig. 31.5 Seals from Sardis: modern impressions. (After Curtis 1925: pl. 11)

options to choose from when patrons had their seals made; the preponderance of this style, carved primarily on stamp seals made of glorious semi-precious stones, is significant. The observation takes on added significance when we consider the tremendous adherence within this style to iconography that links Sardis directly to the Achaemenid heartland and to Achaemenid imperial iconography. The seals of Sardis thus become a real citation of power, an affirmation of connections to the Achaemenid elite across the empire expressed in a style that can be linked to the new regime and its supporters. In addition, the great beauty of the seals themselves suggests they

were meant to be seen as well as used, that this was a message to be proclaimed aloud.

Gordion

Gordion saw very different circumstances during the time of Achaemenid hegemony, and its seals offer fascinating insights into what life in this large and thriving city might have been like. (20) Archaeological evidence at the site shows it had been conquered by the Lydians not long before the arrival of the Achaemenid armies; its role as capital of Phrygia had already ended. It is therefore particularly interesting to note that the city



Fig. 31.6 IAM 4579, 5134, 4591, 4525. Details of selected images in “Achaemenid hegemonic” style. (After Dusinberre 2003; © Istanbul Archaeological Museums)

prospered under Achaemenid rule, expanding to its greatest size during this time and seeing an increase in evidence for interaction with other peoples both within and outside the borders of the Achaemenid Empire. (21) Moreover, architectural remains demonstrate the construction of at least one large elaborate house with painted walls at this time and a building that was decorated with colourful mosaics. (22)

In the Achaemenid period, the use of seals at the site exploded. During the time of the Achaemenid empire, as many as 29 seals and impressions were recovered from excavated deposits at Gordion, a tremendous increase over earlier numbers. It is important to note that most of the Achaemenid period seals from Gordion were found in Hellenistic

period deposits—the number is probably too great to be accounted for by residual finds from casual loss and suggests that a number of Achaemenid tombs may perhaps have been found and looted during the Hellenistic period.

Unlike the earlier eras at Gordion, when the few seals made were crafted from local materials, during the Achaemenid period the stuff from which the seals were made is remarkably varied. Materials include glass, bone, ivory, agate, lapis lazuli, chalcedony, faience, rock crystal, meerschaum and more. They come from everywhere, from as far east as Afghanistan and as far south as Egypt, from the wildly banded agate found near Sardis, and from the heartland of the Achaemenid Empire itself. It seems thus that



Fig. 31.7 Gordion Seals 100, 246, 44, 187, and 153. (After Dusinberre 2005; © Gordion Archaeological Project)

the Achaemenid presence at Gordion led to greatly increased mobility of glyptic artefacts and possibly artists and patrons, so that the raw materials available for seals (not to mention the seals themselves) were suddenly vastly more varied than they had been.

Perhaps one material, glass, may serve as a case study for the importance surrounding this observation. Workshops across the empire produced not only seals of hard stone but also examples in glass. Those glass and glass paste seals from Gordion with Achaemenid

imagery are predominantly of traditional Mesopotamian shapes: a cylinder and pyramidal stamp seals, with one scaraboid thrown in. (23) Three further glass scaraboids have strongly Hellenizing imagery. Thus more than a fifth of the Achaemenid seals from Gordion are made of glass, and they show that the artists drew on overtly Achaemenid imagery and Near Eastern shapes and also on strongly Greek imagery and shapes. There is some overlap, so that Achaemenid imagery might show up on Hellenizing shapes. The

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glass is of different colours, including blue, green and clear. Whether they were purchasing seals hot off the glass press at Gordion itself, using imports from elsewhere or traveling to distant lands themselves to bring seals to Gordion with them, people at Gordion clearly had a wide range of options and possibility for personal selection in glyptic shape and image, even within this one material category.

The iconography that decorated the Achaemenid period seals was as varied as the materials available for use. Instead of the striations and nondescript imagery that

characterize some of the sealstones from the pre-Achaemenid period and many of those from the post-Achaemenid period, the seals dating to the Achaemenid period at Gordion have instantly recognizable and often highly idiosyncratic imagery. Some of the more glamorous imported sealstones include an Achaemenid-period Neo-Babylonian style worship scene on a chalcedony conical stamp seal, an Egyptian faience scarab and a spectacular red agate cylinder carved in “Achaemenid hegemonic” style with an Achaemenid worship scene. It is highly unusual for Anatolia, in that it is inscribed

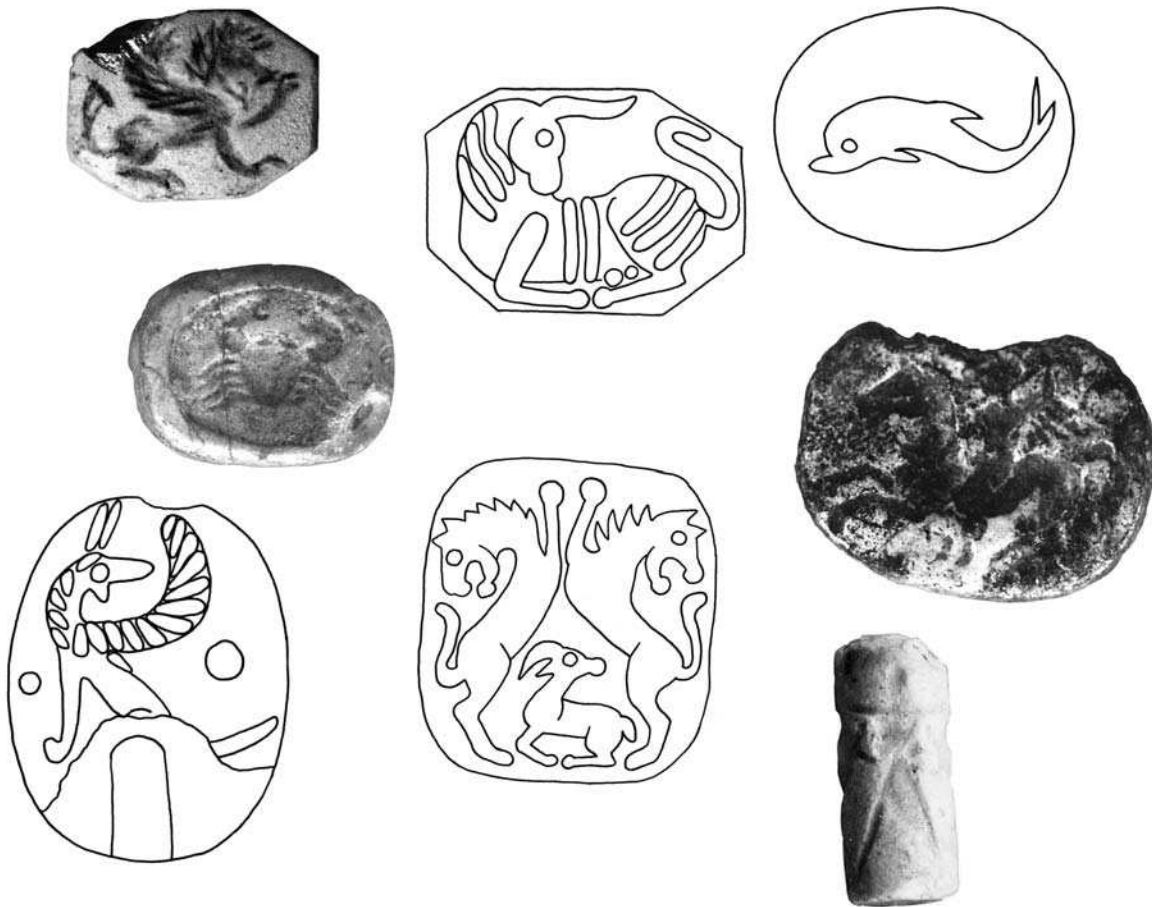


Fig. 31.8 Gordion Seals 56, 188, 44, 90, 112, 192, 205, 75. A selection of glass seals from Gordion. (After Dusinberre 2005; © Gordion Archaeological Project)

in Aramaic: “Seal of Bn’, son of Ztw, (something else)”. (24)

These seals have precise parallels elsewhere in the Achaemenid Empire and situate Gordion solidly in the middle of glyptic practice throughout the empire. This statement gains additional strength from a series of other seals found at Gordion, including a lapis lazuli scaraboid with pacing lion, and various pyramidal stamp seals represent composite monsters such as griffins. They give an idea of an Achaemenid administration at Gordion, a taste for Achaemenid imagery. The cylinder seal in “Achaemenid hegemonic” style, Seal 100, with its strongly Achaemenid imagery

and Aramaic inscription, may even demonstrate the presence of ethnic Persians at the site, who brought not only their government and its tools with them but also language, religion and aesthetics.

Two sealings that date to the Achaemenid period may add to our sense of the artistic variety in Achaemenid glyptic at Gordion. One clay tab is an isolated impression left by a cylinder seal with an Achaemenid goat hunt on it, Achaemenid in imagery, shape and style. (25) A further little sealing is an impression left by a bezel ring, preserving a surprisingly sensuous image of a nude female. It is Greek in concept, execution and form. (26) The

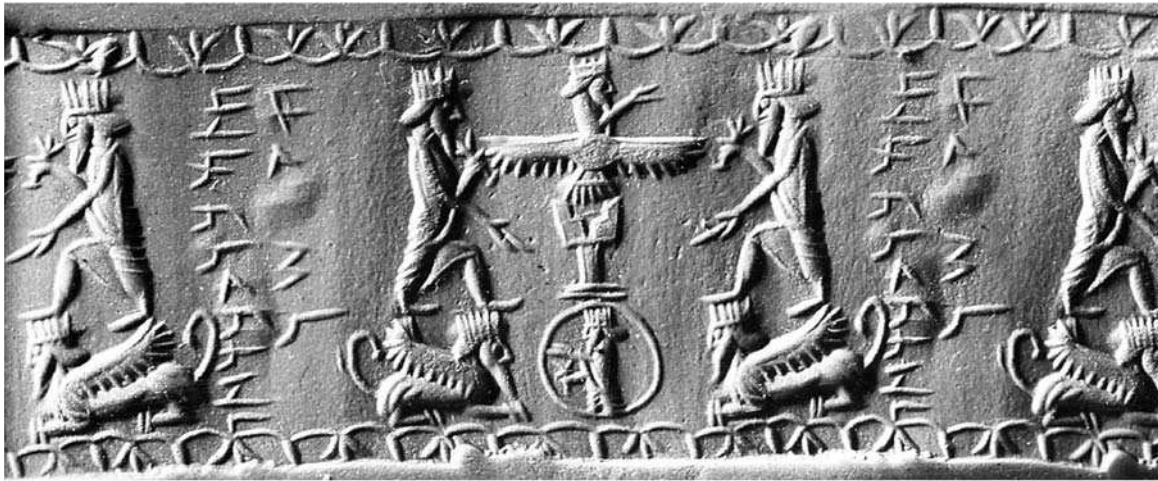


Fig. 31.9 Gordion Seals 100, 73, 246. “Achaemenid hegemonic” cylinder, Neo-Babylonian style worship scene, and Egyptian scarab. (After Dusinberre 2005; © Gordion Archaeological Project)



Fig. 31.10 Gordion Seals 156 and 272. (After Dusinberre 2005; © Gordion Archaeological Project)

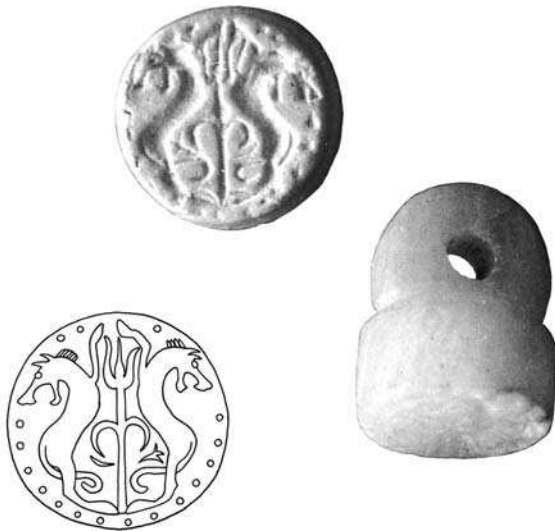


Fig. 31.11 Gordion Seal 187. (After Dusinberre 2005; © Gordion Archaeological Project)

Achaemenid period seals and sealings from Gordion thus attest to the tremendous variety of glyptic imagery and materials imported from elsewhere in and beyond the empire.

Even the seals that seem to have been made at Gordion or that show Phrygian artistic influence are more varied in the Achaemenid period and show more outside

influence than they had before this time. So, for example, Seal 187 is a variation on a standard Phrygian shape, but with heraldic lions as a central vegetal element in a very strongly Achaemenidizing manner. (27)

One large grey cylinder is a real tour de force, with Phrygianizing animals participating in a standard Achaemenid chariot hunt scene, complete with a woven basket on the chariot and with a winged disk hovering overhead. (28) Its style links it to Phrygian production, but its imagery is wholly Achaemenid. It is clear that the variety of iconography and form characterizing the seals imported during the Achaemenid period influenced local carvers even as it had its impact on patrons of glyptic art.

A last little stamp is a particularly vibrant and unusual seal from Achaemenid Gordion, of a style not seen elsewhere that may be local. (29) It is a scaraboid of a jet-black stone carved with a scene showing a chariot drawn by two horses, in which stands the king under a parasol with a charioteer and an attendant behind him. The rearmost figure holds a spear. Although Achaemenid glyptic abounds with chariots, the images



Fig. 31.12 Gordion Seal 199. (After Dusinberre 2005; © Gordion Archaeological Project)



Fig. 31.13 Gordion Seal 150. (After Dusinberre 2005; © Gordion Archaeological Project)

are almost all hunt scenes carved on cylinder seals. The Gordion seal thus shows the chariot rendered on a different form, a stamp seal, and with different imagery than was common in the heartland. Some aspects of its style link it to Phrygian precedents. It may represent new local developments, incorporating local traditions of sealing practice and artistic style.

Concluding remarks

The Achaemenid period thus saw some real differences in the seals that have been excavated at the two sites. Satrapal Sardis, seat of

Achaemenid administration, was the home of 34 seals made of elegant semi-precious stones, often with elaborate silver or gold mountings. A majority of these seals was carved in “Achaemenid hegemonic” style, drawing directly on images from the Persian heartland that were full of imperial ideological resonance. Gordion, a large site of secondary importance but with impressive new buildings constructed during the Achaemenid period, has produced 29 seals and sealings. They demonstrate a wider range of materials, styles and imagery than do the seals from Sardis—like the Sardian seals, these ones draw enthusiastically on the imagery of the Achaemenid heartland, but seal users at Gordion also selected seals sporting Greek, Egyptian and other images.

The seals demonstrate the close connections that bound together the Achaemenid elite at its ruling centres. They also demonstrate the overwhelmingly strong impact of Achaemenid hegemony on second-tier cities in the empire. The numbers and variety of seals at Gordion show its inhabitants took to seal using with verve, and they seem to have

incorporated many aspects of Achaemenid administrative practice into their lives. The numbers and types of seals at Sardis show that its ruling elite were using seals not just to effect the practices of Achaemenid administration, but also to signal, to proclaim, their membership in that elite. Thus the seals of the two sites point to and underscore some of the differences between their roles in the empire. But the seals also demonstrate the extent to which Achaemenid practices and ideologically charged iconography penetrated to multiple levels of society and multiple types of local social organization throughout the empire.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the British Museum, the Iran Heritage Foundation, and the University of Colorado for making the conference at which this paper was delivered, and my participation in it, possible. Some of the ideas discussed here are also included in Dusinberre 2009.
2. For the seals from Sardis, see Dusinberre 1997; 2003: 158–171, 264–283.
3. For the seals from Gordion, see Dusinberre 2005: 12–14, 24–26, 30, 49–69.
4. For the Sardian tombs of the Achaemenid period, see Dusinberre 2003: 128–57 and 239–63; for the tombs in general see McLauchlin 1985.
5. Pyramidal stamp seals: IAM 4521, 4522, 4525, 4527, 4528, 4578, 4579, 4580, 4589, 4591, 4592, 4641, 4642, 5133, 5134; weight-shaped seals: 4523, 4524, 4590; cylinder seals: 4532, 4581, 4643; rings with gold bezels: 4548 (bezel undecorated), 4585, 4636, 4637; rings with stone bezels: 4519, 4520, 4632, 4633 (sealing surface of scarab undecorated), 4634, 4635, 4639; bracelet: 4518; necklace: 4640.
6. Stone identifications drawn from Curtis 1925.
7. As Gates emphasizes (2002: 119), the fact that many of the “Greco-Persian” seals are unprovenanced has previously crippled much intelligent discussion of the style. Even of those “Greco-Persian” seals used by Moorey in his discussion of ritual and worship on Achaemenid seals (1979), only that from Gordion has an excavated context. A similar situation describes the few inscribed “Greco-Persian” seals, of which most are inscribed in Lydian (Boardman 1970*b*). In order to understand the significance and impact of the style, it is essential to develop a discussion based on those seals with proven context. We are fortunate indeed that a seal from Gordion (Seal 100: see Dusinberre 2005; 2009), and the seals from Sardis, allow us to weave this discussion into the ongoing discourse being developed by such scholars as D. Kaptan, working with the Daskyleion sealings, and J. E. Gates, working with the Persepolis sealings (see Kaptan 2002; Gates 2002).
8. For the status of at least one seal user at Sardis, see the arguments in Dusinberre 1997.
9. Dusinberre 1997: 109–15; 2003: 158–71, 264–83.
10. For the Sardian tombs of the Achaemenid period, see Dusinberre 2003: 128–157, 239–263; for the tombs in general see McLauchlin 1985.
11. IAM 4636, 4585, 4634, 4639, 4580, 4523, 4589, 4591, 4578.
12. IAM 4525, 4579.
13. IAM 4528, 4642, 5134, 4527, 4581.
14. IAM 4581, 4579, 4641, 4521.
15. IAM 4520 and 4632.
16. IAM 4589, 4527, 4581, 4578, 4591.
17. IAM 4524.
18. See Dusinberre 1997.
19. See esp. Dusinberre 1997.
20. See a discussion and overview in Dusinberre 2005, with references.
21. Voigt & Young 1999.
22. See Dusinberre 2009, with references.
23. The glass seals illustrated here are a selection of those excavated at Gordion. Seal 56 is Dusinberre 2005: cat. no. 49, Seal 188 is cat. no. 52, Seal 44 is cat. no. 48, Seal 90 is cat. no. 46, Seal 112 is cat. no. 51, Seal 192 is cat. no. 53, Seal 205 is cat. no. 35, and Seal 75 is cat. no. 50. See Dusinberre 2005 for comparanda.
24. Dusinberre 2005: cat. nos 38 (Neo-Babylonian style), 36 (scarab), 33 (cylinder). Comparanda for Seal 73 include: Porada 1948: nos 795a, 797, 798, 804–808; von der Osten 1934: nos 470–97; Nunn 2000: no. 260; Moorey 1980: no. 470; Ornan 1993: fig. 39, Avigad 1997: no. 826; Root 1998: 257–261; 2003*a*; Ehrenberg 1999: nos 34–56; nos 43, 53; Ehrenberg 2001: 188–189; Bregstein 1993: nos 215–257; Legrain 1925: nos 965–68; Legrain 1951: nos 656–663; Kaptan 2002: DS1. Comparanda for Seal 246 include: Teeter & Wilfong 2003: no. 136; Hayes 1959: 87; Keel 1997: 606; Walters 1926: no. 157; Teeter 2002: fig. 12.6; Blinkenberg 1931: nos 1457–1458; Petrie 1886: pl. 37, no. 11; 1888: pl. 8, no. 30. For Seal 100, see Dusinberre 2009.

25. Dusinberre 2005: cat. no. 55. Comparanda include Root 1991; 2003*a*: 9; Bregstein 1993: nos 145–169; Nunn 2000: no. 270. See the discussion in Dusinberre 2005.
26. Dusinberre 2005: cat. no. 56. Comparanda include Konuk & Arslan 2000: nos 195–258; Moorey 1980: 85; Legrain 1925: pl. 36ff.; Woolley 1962: nos 701ff.; Boardman 1970*b*: 322; Richter 1920: no. 36; Spier 1992: 34, no. 52; Boardman 2001: nos 710, 711, 861; Osborne 1912: 317, 340; Richter 1968: no. 237. See the discussion in Dusinberre 2005.
27. Dusinberre 2005: cat. no. 40. Comparanda include examples from Boehmer 1977; 1978; Bregstein 1993: no. 318–320; Legrain 1925: nos 846–847; Garrison & Root in prep: PFS 90. See the discussion in Dusinberre 2005.
28. Dusinberre 2005: cat. no. 34. Comparanda include Garrison 2000: figs 29–30; Herbordt 1992: 98–122; Boardman & Moorey 1986: esp. figs 12, 19, 22; Buchanan 1966: no. 686. See the discussion in Dusinberre 2005.
29. Dusinberre 2005: cat. no. 39. Comparanda include Garrison 1991: 7–10, 20; Garrison & Root 2001: 83–85 and *passim*; Buchanan & Moorey 1988: no. 521; Kaptan 2002: DS 67, DS 68 and DS 85; Bregstein 1993: no. 195; Briant 2002*a*: 607–608. See the discussion in Dusinberre 2005.

