



ABSTRACT SUBMISSION

The Ur Trial Pieces Revisited: Learning to Carve Seals in the Old Babylonian Period

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Abstract

Professional seal carvers were highly skilled (and likely highly trained) in their craft. They contended with the variant material properties of different types of stone, working at a minute scale, visualizing and producing iconography across a convex surface, and carving these designs intaglio to render them legible on an impressed surface. Several studies have been published offering analyses of the tools, techniques, and sequence of steps involved in the carving of cylinder seals, but the material and cognitive processes through which seal carvers learned and honed their lapidary and image-making skills in the early stages of their careers (or training) has been little explored. This paper reexamines a set of objects from the early 20th century excavations at Ur (using high-resolution images produced by a SEM) in an attempt to identify a seal carver's course of study. Applying theories of materiality and material engagement, this paper considers how aspiring seal carvers navigated the steep learning curve intrinsic to their craft.

Keywords

Cylinder Seals, Materiality, Ur, Old Babylonian, Craft Specialization

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