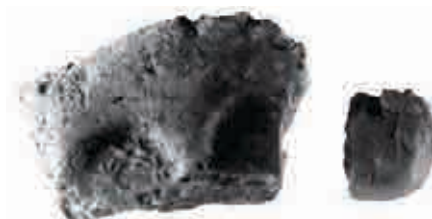


Clay stamps, late  
4th - first half of 3rd  
millennia BC



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# THE ANCIENT STAMP OF AZERBAIJAN



Clay bulla imprints of stamps on clay blocks,  
3rd-2nd millennia BC



Clay bulla imprints of stamps on clay  
blocks, 3rd-2nd millennia BC

DURING ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS, AND SOMETIMES  
RANDOM DIGGING WORK, ANCIENT STAMPS ARE DISCOVERED  
AMONG OTHER FINDS.

**T**hey are of great historical value for the study of issues such as property differentiation, class society and the state, and economic, trade and cultural relations between ancient societies. These ancient monuments are studied by a special historical subject - sphragistics (from the Greek word Σφραγίς - stamp). Along with this, stamps represent a work of art. Ancient stamps were made from colored stones (agate, chalcedony, crystal, garnet, etc.), metal (gold, silver, bronze), glass, ceramics, etc. They had various forms characteristic of certain periods and regions. Images depicting various

scenes are carved on the working surfaces of these objects, sometimes with the highest skill. Separate copies of stamps made of hard materials and decorated with artistic carvings on miniature surfaces are considered with good reason to be masterpieces of world art. They are all regarded as monuments of glyptics (from the Greek word γλυπτικός - sculptured, cut) - the art of carving on solid materials, often on miniature decorative, semi-precious and precious stones. **Monuments of glyptics are divided into two groups - intaglios and cameos.** Intaglios carry engraved and cameos - convex images. Often, all carved

stones are called by one term - gems. Only intaglios were used as stamps, and they depicted mirror images or texts. Cameos served only as adornments.

Religious images were usually carved on stamps: gods, goddesses, altars, and symbolized images of animals and plants. **In ancient times, stamps carried out three main functions, serving as jewelry and amulets in addition to their primary purpose.** For this reason, they can be used to study a wide range of historical issues. Ancient stamps were used more in the fourth millennium BC in Mesopotamia and

Egypt, when property differentiation was under way and the first states emerged here. In other countries, socio-economic conditions for the use of stamps emerged later.

In ancient times, stamps were very widely used. Anyone who owned property had their own stamp. Stamps were used to endorse documents and seal the doors of warehouses, homes, and various goods and products. They were used to put imprints on a soft surface (clay, wax, etc.) like we seal doors, packets and parcels now. During excavations, such imprints are sometimes found in lumps of clay with traces of scrolls, rope, textiles, baskets, etc. Such finds are called bullas. Imprints of stamps are found in clay jars applied before firing. Usually, these are stamps of masters and manufacturers, in some cases - owners or customers of the product.

**In Azerbaijan, the largest number of stamps and one bulla with 12 different imprints of stamps were found during archaeological excavations in 1946-1953 in Mingachevir.<sup>1</sup> They cover the period from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC to the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD** and are represented by local and imported stamps. About 100 bullas of the third century and the first half of the first century BC have been found in Gabala. This is a period when stamps were extensively used, which indicates that the fall of primitive society had ended, class society and the state had emerged and cities had taken shape. During this period, trade relations with other nations evolved and expanded.



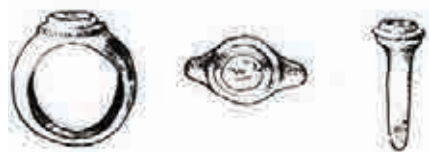
*Imprints of gem stamps, 1st century BC - 2nd century AD*

At this time, trade acquired a global character and involved all the known countries of the then world, including the Southeastern Caucasus, where the Albanian state

formed at the end of the fourth century BC with its capital in the city of Gabala until the middle of the fifth century BC.

Through the territory of Albania

1 I. Babayev. Some questions of the study of monuments of glyptics in Azerbaijan. Reports of the Academy of Sciences of the Azerbaijan SSR. Baku, 1964, № 6, p. 77-79; G. Aslanov, I. Babayev. General characteristics of the monuments of glyptics found during excavations in Mingachevir. Proceedings of the Academy of Sciences of the Azerbaijan SSR, the series of social sciences. Baku, 1965, p. 94-101; I. Babayev, On three multidimensional glass stamps found in Mingachevir - Archaeological studies in Azerbaijan. Baku, 1965, p. 123-133; his own. Monuments of Azerbaijani glyptics of antiquity and the early Middle Ages (essays on the history of glyptics in ancient Azerbaijan). Author's abstract of the candidate's thesis. Baku, 1965, etc.



Ring with a gem, 1st-2nd centuries AD



Ring with carved stone, 3rd century AD



Bronze ring stamp, 5-4th centuries BC



Color stone stamp, 4-5th centuries AD

passed separate brisk branches of the Great Silk Road, which existed from the end of the second century BC to the 16<sup>th</sup> century AD.

Along with written records, Albania's (Caucasian Albania's) broad trade relations are also proved by numerous archaeological finds, including ancient imported stamps.

However, in Azerbaijan, stamps were also found during excavations

of earlier monuments. **The oldest of them belong to the era of the late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age – the 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> millennia BC.** Thus, two clay stamps were found during excavations of the Chalcolithic settlement of Boyuk Kasik in Agstafa District. They are hemispherical in shape with an incised image of a goat on the flat working surface.<sup>2</sup>

The use of stamps at such an early period in the South Caucasus is of great interest. Now, in light of the latest archaeological research, it has been established with a high degree of probability that in the Ubeyd and Uruk periods (4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> millennia BC), some tribes migrated from Mesopotamia to the Caucasus. This view, first expressed by the Azerbaijani archaeologist Ideal Narimanov on the basis of excavations of the Leylatapa monument in Agdam District in 1984,<sup>3</sup> was later supported by new archaeological data.<sup>4</sup> Researchers link this migration mainly to the expansion of metal production and the search for sources of copper ore.

Thus, **the earliest stamps identified on the territory of Azerbaijan are likely to have belonged to migrants from Mesopotamia, which was developed from a socio-economic point of view.**

During archaeological excavations, and sometimes random digging work, metal, stone and ink cylindrical stamps imported from the Middle East were found in the territory of northern Azerbaijan. They belong to the Middle Bronze Age

and mostly, to the late Bronze and early Iron Age, i.e. the first few centuries of the first millennium BC.<sup>5</sup> These stamps are provided with a longitudinal hole for wearing on a cord. Imprints of these stamps were produced by rolling. At that time, property differentiation was already noticeable in Azerbaijan. Most of the abovementioned stamps were found in rich burials probably belonging to tribal chiefs, who could use the stamps as items of decoration. However, it is possible that socioeconomic conditions had formed by that time under which individual members of society could use these stamps for their intended purpose. **Starting from the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, stamps were very widely used in northern Azerbaijan. At this time, the disintegration of primitive society had already ended here and all conditions were right for the emergence of class society and the state,** while trade and cultural relations with other regions expanded. In the 7<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, stamps were brought to Azerbaijan mainly from Assyria, Iran and other countries of the east.<sup>6</sup>

Stamps of this period discovered in Mingachevir cover mainly the period from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC to the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. Some of them, belonging to the 6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, are represented mainly by bronze stamp-rings made by casting. On the oval flat surface of the rings, images of different animals, and in some cases, a man and various fantastic

- 2 Najaf Museyibli. The Chalcolithic settlement of Boyuk Kasik. Baku, 2007, p. 124-125
- 3 I. Narimanov. Ubeyd tribes of Mesopotamia in Azerbaijan. All-Soviet archaeological conference «Achievements of Soviet archeology in the 11th five-year period». Abstracts of reports. Baku, 1985, p. 271-272.
- 4 R. M. Munchayev. Uruk Culture (Mesopotamia) and the Caucasus - The latest archaeological and ethnographic research in the Caucasus. Proceedings of the international scientific conference. Makhachkala, 2007, p. 8-9; N. A. Museyibli, Leylatapa culture of the late Chalcolithic and its influence on the early bronze culture of Azerbaijan. Ibid, p. 65-67.
- 5 G. F. Jafarov. Azerbaijan's relations with countries of the Near East in the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age (based on archaeological materials of Azerbaijan). Baku, 1984, p. 34-40.
- 6 Babayev, Some questions ... p. 78.



creatures are engraved. Similar images are found on so-called Greco-Persian gems. Judging by the images on the rings, they were made under the cultural influence of Iran. Many of these products are made by local craftsmen, but imported stamps were used as well.

Gems with ancient stories are often found in Azerbaijan. Many of them are made from semiprecious stones and inserted into metal rings. A large number of bullas are found in the Hellenistic layers of the ancient city of Gabala - the capital of Caucasian Albania. These valuable finds indicate the extensive use of stamps in Caucasian Albania in the Hellenistic period. Some imprints were made on highly artistic gems with typical stories and were imported from the Hellenistic world. Such expensive stamp-gems could belong to noblemen, representatives of the local nobility and wealthy merchants. Imprint-gems - stamps depicting Heracles resting there - are found on several bullas. These gems also depict gods and goddesses of the ancient pantheon and symbolic images of plants and animals. On the imprints of local stamps, we see images of people, animals and birds.

Stamps and imprints on the bullas, like other imported products, especially numerous silver coins and ornaments testify to **Caucasian Albania's close contacts not only with neighboring, but with all the countries of the Hellenic world – the Seleucid, Parthian, Greco-Bactrian kingdoms, Egypt and other countries on the Mediterranean basin.** After the Roman campaign led by Lucullus and Pompey in 69-65 BC, Albania came under the influ-

ence of Rome. From that time, Albania received Roman goods of the republican and imperial periods, items of toreutics, coins, jewelry, gems, etc. The Roman gems are mainly small, flat or flat-convex carved stones and glass items embedded on the top of bronze, silver and iron ring frames. Most of them depict gods and goddesses of the ancient pantheon - God of the Sun Helios with a radiate wreath on his head, God of War Ares-Mars with a helmet on his head and a spear and a shield in his hands, God-



*Imprints of bronze ring imprints, 5-4th centuries BC*

esses of Beauty and Love Aphrodite and Venus, God of Love Eros, and Goddess of Fortune Tyche-Fortuna with a cornucopia. There is also an image of a handshake - a symbol of concord on a wedding ring, poppy and ears - symbols of abundance, an altar with a flame, etc.

Among the finds in Azerbaijan, there is a gem which depicts the

head of Alexander of Macedon with the horns of Egyptian God Amun. Such images were common in the Hellenistic period, are found on coins such as those of the King of Thrace Lysimachus (306-281 BC). The Roman author, Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, recorded that Octavian Augustus used a stamp with an image of Alexander of Macedon for some time and a stamp with his own image.<sup>7</sup>

On antique gems, gods are usually depicted in statutory positions. This indicates that they depicted antique statues standing in well-known sanctuaries.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries, stamps of Caucasian Albania, both in shape and by the plots, resemble stamps of Sassanid Iran under the influence of which the country was. Stamps of this period are represented by local and imported ones and are made of colored stones, glass and metal. They depict people, cult stories, fantastic creatures, animals, birds, altars with flames, scorpions, plants, various signs and monograms. In general, stories on Sassanid stamps do not stand out for their diversity, which was noted by the major expert on these products, V. G. Lukonin.<sup>8</sup> **Most of these stories are associated with the religion of Zoroastrianism, and researchers rightfully regard them as true illustrations to Avesta - the holy book of Zoroastrians.**<sup>9</sup> Some of these stamps were made locally, as evidenced by the semi-manufactured articles discovered during excavations.

With the spread of Islam, stamps with such plots were no longer used, giving way to stamps with Arabic script, the name of the owner, and religious expressions. ❖

7 Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus. Biography of the twelve Caesars. Divine Augustus. Ch. 50. Moscow, 1964, p. 55.

8 A. Y. Borisov, V. G. Lukonin, Sassanid gems. Leningrad, 1963, p. 31.

9 Ibid, p. 34-45.