

EMBODIMENT AND VISUAL REPRODUCTION IN THE NEOLITHIC: THE CASE OF STAMPED SYMBOLS

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Abstract

This paper explores the cultural and conceptual dimensions of ceramic (and stone) stamps found at Neolithic and Copper Age sites in Western Asia and Southern Europe, dating to between the eighth and third millennia BC. Based upon a recent study of their archaeological deposition contexts, their surviving forms and regional variations in their style, they are discussed here in terms of their biographies, their reciprocal relations with people, and their embeddedness in cultural processes. More specifically, they are interpreted with reference to a pair of key cultural processes that characterise the material culture of Neolithic Eurasia: embodiment and visual reproduction.

Key words

Stamps
Stamp seals
Pintaderas
Embodiment
Visual reproduction

Introduction

This paper is concerned with exploring the cultural and conceptual dimensions of one of the most visually striking categories of portable artefact found at Neolithic and Copper Age sites in Western Asia and Southern Europe, variously described as stamps, stamp-seals or ‘pintaderas’. Previous studies of these objects have tended to focus on the typological classification and stylistic comparison of their decorative motifs, at the same time as speculating on their functional and social significance (*e.g. Buchanan 1967; Collon 1990; Cornaggia-Castiglioni 1956; Cornaggia-Castiglioni & Caviglioli 1978; Dzhanfeyzova 2003; Makkay 1984; 2005; Türkcan 2007*). It has been suggested, for example, that they were used as stamps to print or impress culturally significant patterns onto a range of materials (*e.g. cloth, skin, bread and clay*). It has also been claimed that their repeated application to certain kinds of people and property could have been used either in socio-economic transactions, to mark identity and ownership, or in ritual performances, to signify and enhance spiritual potency. I have recently published a revised account of these objects (*Skeates 2007*), in which I explored these artefacts’ various biographies, their reciprocal relations with people, and their embeddedness in cultural processes, with particular reference to their archaeological deposition contexts, their surviving forms, and regional variations in their style (*c.f. Prijatelj 2007*). Here, I want to summarise some of my conclusions, at the same time as developing some of my interpretations with reference to the themes of embodiment and visual reproduction.

Frequency, distribution and resemblances

Stamps made of baked clay were widespread, but generally infrequent, material elements of Neolithic and Copper Age cultures in parts of Eurasia, which originated in the Near East and spread westwards via communicative human groups to South-East Europe, Greece, Italy and Corsica, between the eighth and third millennia BC. Both resemblances and differences are exhibited by these objects across this large span of space and time. For example, clear similarities have been noted between the material, shapes and decorative techniques of the stamp seals of Nea Nikomedeia in Greek Macedonia and earlier examples from Çatalhöyük in Central Turkey (*Rodden 1965*). On the other hand, rows of impressed points are an exclusively North Italian decorative element, which predominate in the Liguria region in North-West Italy.

Materials and production

Some of these stamps were made of stone. These included relatively highly valued, rare, durable and coloured stones, which were skilfully and laboriously carved, drilled and polished, particularly in Mesopotamia from the sixth millennium BC, but also occasionally as far away as Greece.

More commonly, however, they are made of unexceptional clays, which their makers probably obtained from relatively accessible local sources, and then worked, perhaps alongside the production of other commonplace and more unusual clay-based products such as daub, pottery vessels, clay tokens and ceramic figurines. Small numbers were quickly modelled by hand, a few quite roughly, and then smoothed.

When dried to leather-hard, they were neatly engraved using a range of simple and familiar cutting tools and techniques, perhaps sometimes following the lines of preliminary markings. They were then converted into a solid state through firing, probably in simple hearths, ovens or bonfires, possibly together with other artefacts, with only loosely controlled oxidising and reducing conditions, which gave them variable, matt and earthy, surface colours. The general impression is, then, that these baked clay examples were made by people in a relatively unspecialised ‘domestic mode of production’, using readily available resources, with only limited investment in materials, time and skills.

Form

It is above all the forms of the stamps’ bodies that set them apart as a distinctive category of artefact (**Figure 1**). The key component is the flat or curving face, which serves as the well-proportioned platform for the visually striking engravings that cover it more-or-less completely. (Very occasionally, examples occur with two faces situated at opposite ends of a handle.) The primary importance of the face may seem self-evident, but is emphasised both by the evolution of cylinder seals which increased the surface area that could be engraved, and by the fact that on neither artefact type was the appearance of the engraved surface ever compromised by perforation. The second most important component of the artefact is the handle positioned centrally on the opposite side of the face(s), which is generally plain, with the exception of some ‘figurine seals’ from sites in Macedonia whose handles are incised with a human face (*Naumov, this volume*). In a minority of examples, the handle was perforated prior to firing.

Function

These features, combined with the relatively small size and light weight of the objects, indicate that they were primarily designed to be hand-held portable artefacts. More specifically, historic and ethnographic parallels and experimental reconstructions lend weight to the traditional archaeological assertion that these objects were primarily tools used by people as stamps used to print and impress decorative motifs.

They may have been made to last, given the fact that only small numbers appear to have been produced at most Neolithic sites, and in relatively durable materials, and the fact that some were intended by their makers to be suspended. Indeed, some appear to have been suspended from peoples’ necks and wrists, to judge from their positioning in relation to a few articulated bodies in inhumation burials. From a strictly practical point-of-view, this would have helped people retain, carry around and look after these special artefacts, without having to hold them constantly in their hands, as they engaged in various activities. But I do not think that this explains fully why these examples were attached to the human body, and I shall say more about this below.

More specifically, the clay stamps may have been retained and repeatedly re-used by, and on, the same and different people and objects, even over generations. This

process could have led to their becoming worn, clogged-up and damaged, either until their use was no longer required or until they were completely broken (either accidentally or intentionally). But the fact that they were never repaired, unlike some fineware pots, also indicates that they were replaceable, even disposable.

They could then have been discarded or more formally deposited in or around the variety of places where they were used. According to the limited available details regarding their archaeological deposition contexts in Western Asia and Southern Europe, they ended up on the floors of houses, kitchens, workshops, storerooms and religious buildings, in settlement pits and refuse areas, in cave deposits, and in inhumation graves, during the course of an overlapping range of economic, social and ritual practices. They then undoubtedly sustained further post-depositional damage and wear, right up to the present day.

It is less clear what kinds of things would originally have been marked by the stamps, although it is safe to assume that stamping practices would have varied over space and time. Two alternative techniques can be distinguished.

On the one hand, stamps can be used to print coloured images (either monochrome or multi-coloured) onto materials such as human skin, leather, textiles and paper. This is done by coating or filling the image raised in relief or sunk in hollows with a sticky or dry pigment, and then transferring this in reverse to a dry or lightly oiled recipient surface by direct pressure. In Neolithic Romania, Macedonia and Italy, hints of this practice may be provided by the traces of pigments identified on the faces and in the grooves and holes of a few stamps.

On the other hand, stamps can also be used to impress their solid patterns in soft materials, such as clay, dough, butter and wax. In the Near East, they were certainly used in this way, to mark clay sealings, from as early as the sixth millennium BC.

Either way, the use of stamps results in the surface of other things becoming loaded with symbolic messages and cultural meanings, in varying degrees of permanence. The key significance of these tools, in other words, is not so much the archaeologically surviving artefacts but the symbols that they helped people to generate.

Symbols

On the stamps, relatively explicit, albeit stylised, figurative representations of animal, human and supernatural forms, as well as objects and scenes, were confined to the Near East and Anatolia, where they became increasingly standardised from the sixth millennium BC. With the exception of these, the engraved faces of the clay stamps exhibit a wide but culturally and technically constrained set of abstract patterns, based upon subtle permutations of repeated elements. These range from simple groups of lines and points to more visually and cognitively challenging geometric and curvilinear shapes, and combinations, including spirals, meanders and interlocking designs. These were carefully organised within, and framed by, the outline of the stamp's face, which was predominantly rectilinear, but also took other regular shapes and even figurative forms.

Embodiment

Abstract decorative designs such as these characteristically form bold, clear-cut shapes, and structured, repetitive and balanced patterns. A good example is provided by a broken specimen from the settlement site of Cala degli Inglesi in South-East Italy (*Zorzi 1949-50.228*). This has a rectangular outline with a curved end, which frames a simple and regular incised motif of a zigzag band containing circles (**Figure 1.2**). Occasionally, however, one encounters other designs that are more visually unstable and confusing, and that can disturb the normal optical and cognitive functioning of the viewer. Two relevant examples, also from South-East Italy, are a pair of specimens from the ritual cave site of Grotta dei Cervi (*Lo Porto 1976.638*). Both have a simple rectilinear outline, but a complex maze-like pattern of interlocking rows of meander motifs (**Figure 1.13-14**). More specifically, such examples can deliver a powerful graphic impact, particularly where rhythmic patterns, figure-ground tensions and slight asymmetries cause optical dynamism and ambiguity. In this way, they have the power to attract, captivate, even dazzle, the eye of the beholder.

Furthermore, in anthropologically-documented cases, noted, for example, by the late Alfred Gell, comparable visually powerful art-forms have sometimes been perceived in traditional societies as not only having a dazzling ‘anaesthetic’ effect on the senses, but also as being embodied by efficacious human-like social agency and even supernatural potency (*Gell 1992*). In other words, the visual disturbances caused by the decorative designs are sometimes interpreted as evidence of a magical superhuman power emanating from the object, and as evidence of the magical prowess of the craftsperson and owner. It is no coincidence, then, that they can be strategically exploited by various people, particularly when displayed during the course of social ceremonies or ritual performances.

I think this way of seeing might also be relevant to the prehistoric stamps and their patterns. In other words, I would like to suggest that they too may have been valued as pleasing and potent ancestral symbols that animated the Neolithic material world with human-like social agency and sacred power.

Meanings, reproduction and attachments

Abstract images depend upon agreed social conventions to encode and express meanings about the world or human life. These may be clear and overt, but they can, equally, be open, malleable and ambiguous. I do not, therefore, want to guess at any specific meanings that may or may not have been ascribed to these images by different people, in different places and times. Instead, I want to think a bit more about the reproduction and attachments of these images.

What sets stamps apart from other hand-held artistic tools, such as brushes, gouges and sharp points (which were also used in the Neolithic to produce similar images on a range of media), is their ability to reproduce – simply, quickly and manually – a large number of almost identical copies of an original graphic image, without significantly compromising the potency or ‘aura’ of the original (*Benjamin 1968*).

This process of reproduction was also extended over long distances of time and space in the Neolithic, by the manufacture of new stamps with patterned designs that recalled and reproduced the style of other stamps, and well as, in some cases, also transforming this style.

Furthermore, the stamps and their motifs also echo (but do not precisely reflect or reproduce) the appearance of other contemporary, decoratively elaborated and culturally significant, products made of plaster, clay and coloured pigments. These include decorated house and cave walls, ceramic vessels, clay tokens, and anthropomorphic figurines, all of which sometimes occur in the same archaeological contexts as the stamps, but do not appear to have been decorated by them. Similarities may also have existed with archaeologically 'invisible' organic artefacts, including the products of weaving. Through the selective reproduction, transmission and transformation of a culturally-defined set of potent, memorable and communicative images, then, diverse elements of Neolithic material culture were ordered, unified and perhaps also subtly differentiated, by patterns of resemblance and contrast established over long distances of time and space.

The same, of course, also applies to the diverse producers and consumers of these objects and images, who belonged to extended networks of communicative early farming communities in Western Asia and Southern Europe, (and even neighbouring hunter-gatherers, in the case of an example found recently in a Mesolithic context at the site of Basi in Corsica – *B. Weninger pers. comm.. 2007*). Through this extensive process of visual reproduction of culturally significant information, people stamped order and significance onto their world. These powerful graphic signatures could have repeatedly attached, revealed and reproduced significant cultural concepts and relations across different people, their material world and the supernatural, during the course of the overlapping range of social, economic and ritual practices where they were produced and displayed. As the late Alfred Gell once stated, 'Decorative patterns applied to artefacts attach people to things, and to the social projects those things entail.' (*Gell 1998.74*) In other words, these powerful cultural symbols could have repeatedly highlighted social and cultural relationships or attachments between various categories of object and people, in the variety of mundane situations and more overtly ritual performances where they were displayed to audiences. More specifically, they could have been used to express a range of culturally and personally significant concepts: of classification, identity, ownership, protection, potency, authenticity, and so on. The act of stamping, then, is likely to have been a highly significant cultural activity.

This process of attachment extended to the human body. It is quite possible that, in some cases at least, the stamps were used to mark people's bodies with potent cultural symbols. Connections with the body are also emphasised by the Macedonian 'figurine seals'. But we also know that some of the stamps themselves were attached to parts of the human body, via their perforated handles, including within symbolically significant mortuary deposits. This bodily attachment of the stamps suggests that at least some were valued as carefully curated, culturally meaningful, tools, intimately associated with the bodies of particular individuals, which could not be left behind, even in death. These examples might even have been used as personal amulets (*c.f. Skeates 1995*). In this way these stamps could, like the patterns they carried, also have been used as personal markers of protection, identity, and so on,

which reinforced relations between different people, their material world and the supernatural.

The same could apply to the large and perhaps intentionally fragmented example from Cala Tramontana in South-East Italy (Zorzi 1958). One decorated half of this was placed in a grave (**Figure 2**), the other decorated half perhaps having been retained in cultural circulation, possibly as a tangible and symbolic marker of ongoing links between the newly-dead and their surviving relatives (*c.f. Chapman 2001*).

Conclusion

By exploring the conceptual dimensions of stamps and their symbols, then, I hope to have contributed not only to the biography of a distinctive category of archaeological artefact, but also to our understanding of a pair of cultural processes – those of embodiment and visual reproduction – that characterise the material culture of Neolithic Eurasia.

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Figure captions

- Figure 1 ‘Pintaderas’ from the Puglia region, South-East Italy (*after Skeates 2007*). 1. Cala Tramontana, 2. Cala degli Inglesi, 3. Punta Vuccolo, 4. Grotta Scaloria, 4. Grotta Scaloria, 5. Pulo di Molfetta, 6. Grotta Santa Croce, 7. Cave Mastrodonato, 8-9. Grotta Sant’Angelo, 10. Caverna dell’Erba, 12-14. Grotta dei Cervi, 15-17. Grotta delle Veneri.
- Figure 2 ‘Pintadera’ fragment from the Final Neolithic inhumation cemetery at Cala Tramontana, San Domino island, South-East Italy. Zorzi collection, Museo Civico di Storia Naturale, Verona.