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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Violence as Dominant Order: An Analysis of Power Hegemony in the Late Fourth-Millennium BCE Seal Impressions from Susa and Chogha Mish

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Abstract

This article investigates the origins and functions of violence in Proto historic Iran, focusing on Mid fourth-millennium BCE figural seal imagery from the sites of Susa and Chogha Mish. The principal aim is to analyze violence not as an exceptional act or an immediate reaction, but as a hegemonic mechanism in the formation of power and social order. The theoretical framework integrates Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, Michel Foucault's power/knowledge paradigm, and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, synthesized here under the rubric of "the hegemony of violence". Methodologically, the study employs a descriptive–analytical approach informed by semiotics, treating five selected cylinder-seal motifs as visual texts of power. The findings indicate that the examined motifs represent a coherent cycle of hegemonic violence comprising four interlinked phases: the pre-configuration of violence through bodily discipline and collective organization; the enactment of violence via physical elimination and military confrontation; the legitimation of violence through its alignment with sacred spaces and cosmic order; and, finally, the stabilization of violence through the disciplinary control of captives and the management of bodies. This cycle suggests that, in early historic Iranian societies, violence was a structural, generative force that simultaneously contributed to the production of political authority, social order, and ideological legitimacy. The article concludes that, in the absence of writing, the seals of Susa and Chogha Mish functioned as the earliest political media, not merely depicting scenes of warfare, but disclosing the internal logic of power. Thus, in these images, violence emerges as the shared language of power and the foundational semantic apparatus of domination in proto historic Iran.

Keywords: Hegemonic Violence, Seal Impressions, Susa and Chogha Mish, Early Historic Iran, Semiotics of Power, Social Order.

Introduction

Violence has been among the most fundamental yet contentious constituents of human social life throughout history (Guilaine & Zammit 2005; Girard 1977; Riches 1986; Keeley 1996; Kelly 2000). Contrary to traditional approaches that construe violence as an exceptional act, a reactive event, or the result of social breakdown (Durkheim 1897; Parsons 1951; Coser 1956; Elias 1994), more recent theoretical perspectives regard it as an integral component of the mechanisms by which power is formed, sustained, and legitimized (Weber 1978; Foucault 1977; Otterbein 2004). Within this framework, violence is not merely the application of physical force; it is a multilayered, hegemonic phenomenon that becomes internalized through institutions, discourses, and symbolic representations, and is reproduced as a taken-for-granted, "natural" order (Gramsci 1971; 2000; Bourdieu 1991). In proto historic societies, prior to the consolidation of fully developed writing systems, visual representation played a pivotal role in meaning transmission, the production of legitimacy, and the stabilization of power relations (Gamble 2007; Hodder 2012; Leick 2002). Seals and seal impressions, among the most significant administrative and symbolic instruments of these communities, were not merely devices for identifying ownership or regulating economic transactions (Amiet 1980; Álvarez-Mon 2020; Pittman 1993; 1997; Ferioli et al. 1996; Frankfort 1939; Collon 2005; Dittmann 1986); they functioned as ideological media that, through the repetitive deployment of specific imagery, reproduced social order and hierarchical power. In this sense, seals may be understood as "visual texts" carrying political and social messages which, in the absence of writing, operated as a language of power. The sites of Susa (de Morgan 1905; 1906; Scheil 1900; 1905; Mecquenem 1943; Le Brun & Vallat 1978) and Chogha Mish (Kantor & Delougaz 1996), as two principal loci of emerging political and social complexity in southwestern Iran during the mid-fourth millennium BCE, offer a robust context for examining these processes. Archaeological evidence from these settlements; including the expansion of administrative structures (Pittman 1997; Dittmann 1986), the intensification of social differentiation (Wright & Johnson 1985; Johnson 1973; Wright 1981), and the consolidation of political authority (Yousefi Zoshk et al. 2025), attests to a gradual transition from relatively egalitarian communities to systems marked by structural inequality. Within such a milieu, violence functions not only as an instrument of control but as a legitimate and necessary constituent for maintaining an emergent order (Weber 1978; Foucault 1977). The violent imagery on mid and late fourth-millennium BCE seals, including scenes of combat, captivity, domination of humans by humans, and displays of the subdued body cannot be reduced to mere reflections of historical events or mythic narratives. In the terms of "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu 1991), these images operate to naturalize unequal power relations and to stabilize domination through consent and internalization. Their repeated appearance on everyday administrative implements transforms violence from a transient act into part of the dominant, taken-for-granted social order. From this perspective, the concept of "power hegemony" enables an analysis of violent imagery on seals and seal impressions from Susa and Chogha Mish not as decorative or purely narrative

elements, but as active instruments in the production and reproduction of power. Building upon this theoretical framework, the present study addresses the central question: How did the visual representation of violence on late fourth-millennium BCE seals from Susa and Chogha Mish contribute to the stabilization and legitimation of the hegemony of power in proto historic Iran?

Literature Review

Scholarly research on proto historic seals from Iran and Mesopotamia largely began in the early twentieth century, coinciding with extensive excavations at sites such as Susa and Uruk (de Morgan 1905; Algaze 2001; Nissen 2002). Early studies primarily concentrated on the morphological, stylistic, and administrative aspects of seals (Frankfort 1939; Amiet 1980; Nissen 1977). Pioneering scholars such as Amiet (1972) and Frankfort (1939) examined seals as key indicators for reconstructing administrative systems, property relations, and exchange mechanisms within proto historic societies. Within this analytical paradigm, seal imagery was typically regarded as decorative or mythological in nature, serving as reflections of belief systems rather than as carriers of political or ideological meaning. Regarding the site of Susa, numerous studies have explored the evolution of seal design from prehistoric phases (Amiet 1972; Palarde 2022) to the historical periods (Porada 1970; Vallat 1971). These works demonstrate that, with growing social complexity and the emergence of early state structures, seal iconography transformed from simple naturalistic motifs, such as isolated plants or animals, into dynamic phases to the historical periods. These works demonstrate that, with growing social complexity and the emergence of early state structures, seal iconography transformed from simple naturalistic motifs, such as isolated plants, animals or humans, into dynamic, action-oriented compositions involving human and animal figures engaged in power-laden interactions like hunting, combat, action-oriented compositions involving human and animal figures engaged in power-laden interactions like hunting, combat, or ritual scenes of domination and worship. This visual shift directly reflects the bureaucratic and ideological needs of emergent polities in the late fourth millennium BCE (Nissen 1977; Schmandt-Besserat 1992). Concerning Chogha Mish, excavation reports and analytical studies by Delougaz and Kantor (1996) introduced a rich assemblage of figural seals featuring scenes of conflict, dominance, and violence as recurrent themes. Yet, the majority of these interpretations have tended either to read violent imagery as depictions of daily activities, such as conflict or warfare, or as symbols with purely ritual significance. Such approaches, however, seldom engaged with the theoretical question of how these images might have participated in the production and reproduction of power relations and social legitimacy. Consequently, analyses of early Iranian seals have largely remained at descriptive or functional levels, overlooking their potential role as visual mechanisms of hegemonic discourse.

Theoretical Framework

To analyze violent motifs on proto historic seals from Susa and Chogha Mish, this study employs the concept of "the hegemony of violence" as an integrative theoretical framework. Here, hegemonic violence refers to a process through which violence, mediated by ideological, discursive, and symbolic mechanisms, becomes stabilized within the social structure as a legitimate, naturalized, and internalized order. Drawing on the theoretical contributions of Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu, this framework enables an understanding of violence not merely as a physical act, but as a multilevel configuration of power.

Gramsci conceptualizes hegemony as a form of domination grounded not solely in coercion, but primarily in the production of "consent" among subordinate groups (Gramsci 1971). In this sense, power becomes hegemonic when the dominant order is accepted as natural, self-evident, and inevitable. Within a hegemonic framework, violence is not simply an instrument of repression; it constitutes part of the moral and intellectual order of society. Applied to early historic contexts, this perspective suggests that violent imagery on seals may function to naturalize inequality and domination. The repeated visual representation of violent acts, such as the subjugation of a defeated body by a dominant one, contributes to the production of tacit consent toward asymmetrical power relations (Gramsci 1971; 2000). Under such conditions, violence is perceived not as a disruption, but as a legitimate mechanism for maintaining social order. From this standpoint, seals can be understood as ideological instruments that reproduce the hegemony of violence at a collective level.

Foucault, through the conceptualization of the intertwined relationship between power and knowledge, demonstrates that power operates not primarily through physical coercion but fundamentally through the production and organization of discourses (Foucault, 1977). These discourses establish the frameworks for perception, interpretation, and judgment, delineating what is accepted as "truth" and legitimizing certain actions within society. Within this paradigm, imagery assumes an active role in the construction of meaning, the stabilization of social knowledge, and the articulation of power relations (Mitchell 1994). Visual representations do not simply reflect what exists, they actively shape reality by selecting, emphasizing, and perpetuating particular patterns, thereby guiding and constraining the horizons of thought and action. Applying this approach to early historic seals enables the interpretation of violent imagery as a constituent of the discourse of power; a discourse deeply embedded within the formation of emergent administrative and political structures (Hodder 2012). Through their constant presence in administrative transactions, economic exchanges, and formal processes, seals played a key role in the everyday reproduction of what may be termed the "truth of the dominant order". In this conception, seal impressions should be seen not merely as markers of identity or tools of control, but as carriers of visual knowledge that

naturalize, legitimize, and presuppose power relations. Scenes of violence, captivity, and domination, especially those highlighting the contrast between the dominant, active, armed body and the subdued, passive, or restrained body, serve to generate a particular form of visual knowledge about the legitimacy of power. This knowledge is not articulated through written propositions, but is conveyed through the visual logic of repetition, symmetry, and spatial hierarchy. Consequently, visual violence becomes part of what Foucault calls the "regime of truth" (Foucault 1984); a regime that not only justifies acts of force, but frames them as essential elements for preserving social and political order, thus minimizing the possibility of questioning their legitimacy.

Pierre Bourdieu deploys the concept of "symbolic violence" to describe forms of domination that operate without direct physical coercion, instead working through symbols, language, and representations (Bourdieu 1991). Symbolic violence becomes effective when subordinate groups accept the dominant order as natural and participate in its reproduction; a process intimately linked to habitus and the internalization of social structures (Bourdieu 1991; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). In the context of early historic seals, the repetitive display of violent motifs can be understood as a manifestation of symbolic violence. Such visual repetition, especially on instruments embedded in everyday life and economic relations facilitates the internalization of relations of domination. The subdued body, the instruments of violence, and the dominant agent are all rendered within a specific visual language that stabilizes social hierarchies. In this way, violence exceeds the level of physical action and becomes a symbolic structure that takes root within social consciousness (Bourdieu 2001).
By integrating these three analytical layers, the concept of the hegemony of violence offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the function of violent imagery in proto historic societies. Within this framework, the motifs on seals from Susa and Chogha Mish are not merely archaeological evidence; they are ideological, discursive, and symbolic media that actively contributed to the stabilization and legitimation of power.

Research Methodology

This study employs a descriptive–analytical method combined with a semiotic approach, treating the motifs on proto historic seals from Susa and Chogha Mish not merely as archaeological objects but as hegemonic visual texts. This approach makes it possible to analyze the layered meanings of imagery and to understand how such images participated in the reproduction of power relations and violence. Visual semiotics serves as the principal analytical tool. Following Rousseau and later developments in cultural semiotics, images are understood as constellations of signs whose meanings emerge not in isolation but within a relational network (Rousseau 1984; Barthes 1977). From this perspective, seal impressions are read as visual texts operating across multiple levels of signification. At the level of denotation, scenes depict observable actions such as combat, domination, or bodily restraint. At the level of

connotation, these scenes carry ideological meanings concerning social order, the legitimacy of violence, and hierarchical relations of power (Barthes 1977). This semiotic lens aligns with a Foucauldian view of imagery as a producer of truth, enabling seals to be interpreted as active components within the discourse of power (Foucault 1977). Within a Gramscian framework, such images function as ideological mechanisms that normalize and naturalize violence by embedding it within everyday visual experience (Gramsci 1971). From a Bourdieusian perspective, the same images constitute symbolic violence: forms of domination internalized without direct coercion through repeated visual exposure (Bourdieu 1991). Because seals circulated and were used within administrative and daily contexts, their imagery was constantly present before social actors. This visual continuity played a significant role in institutionalizing the discourse of violence and in reinforcing hegemonic structures. To operationalize the theoretical framework, three analytical criteria were defined as 1) Repetition of violent scenes; Repetition is a key indicator of discursive hegemony; what is continually reproduced gradually becomes perceived as natural and true (Foucault 1977). The frequency of violent imagery on the seals is therefore examined to show how violence became a dominant visual pattern rather than an exceptional motif. 2) Position of the dominant agent; This criterion assesses bodily scale, spatial placement (center/margin), posture, and direction of movement. Art historical research demonstrates that spatial and bodily prominence is a primary visual technique for representing authority (Panofsky 1955; Gombrich 1960). This analysis helps identify stable visual patterns of dominance and submission and 3) Relations between bodies, instruments, and space; Here, the interaction between human or animal bodies, instruments of violence (weapons, restraints), and the spatial structure of the image is examined. The body functions as the site of enacted power, instruments serve as mediators of violence, and space provides the legitimating frame for the action. This analytic strategy resonates with Foucault's notion of disciplined bodies and Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence (Foucault 1977; Bourdieu 1991).

Although semiotic analysis allows for deep interpretation of imagery, it is inherently interpretive. To reduce bias, this study employs comparative evaluation across multiple seals and interprets recurring visual patterns within their archaeological contexts. The analysis therefore rests not on isolated examples but on consistent, repeatable motifs. Integrating the perspectives of Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu allows for the articulation of the hegemony of violence as a comprehensive analytical framework. From a Gramscian standpoint, enduring domination operates through the production of consent and the naturalization of social order, such that violence, when ideologically legitimized, becomes part of societal "common sense" (Gramsci 1971). Foucault expands this logic at the discursive level, showing how power works through "regimes of truth" that define what is seen as legitimate, necessary, or inevitable (Foucault 1977; 1980). Bourdieu, in turn, demonstrates how this discursive order becomes embodied and internalized as "symbolic violence", reproduced

without direct physical coercion (Bourdieu 1991).Within this integrated framework, the violent imagery on proto historic seals from Susa and Chogha Mish can be understood as hegemonic media operating simultaneously on three levels: the production of consent and naturalization of domination, the stabilization of truth and legitimacy through representation, and the internalization of power relations at the symbolic and bodily level. Thus, the violence depicted on these seals is not a passive reflection of social reality, but an active mechanism in shaping, stabilizing, and reproducing dominant order, constituting a precondition for the persistence of complex power structures in early historic Iran.

Object Description (No.1)

The image discussed here appears on a sealed bulla, made of clay, discovered at the site of Susa, Acropole South, at a depth of 17.5 meters. Stylistically, the object belongs to the Susa II style and is classified under the original functional category Proto Urban (Roach, 2008). This motif depicts an organized, collective movement of archers in which violence is represented not as direct action but as military readiness and communal discipline. Six human figures are arranged horizontally in a single, orderly line, proceeding in the same direction one behind the other. Each figure carries a bow and two arrows. The precise repetition of weaponry across all individuals produces a visual and functional uniformity that underscores role standardization and the erasure of individuality. The bodily poses are simple, controlled, and free of exaggerated motion, conveying a sense of order, discipline, and preparedness. The shared orientation of bodies and equipment, together with the linear arrangement, accentuates purposeful collective movement. None of the figures is shown in a state of direct attack or releasing an arrow; all are depicted in a phase prior to engagement. This separates the image from a combat scene and transforms it into a representation of the latent potential for violence. The pictorial field lacks specific environmental, architectural, or natural elements. By eliminating the background, the composition concentrates meaning entirely on bodies, weapons, and their regulated movement, thereby presenting the group of archers as an autonomous unit of violent capacity (Fig. 1–1).

a sealed bulla, made of clay, discovered at Susa, Acropole South

Figure 1-1. A horizontal procession of six Bowman, emphasizing discipline, hierarchy, and controlled movement, After (Roach, 2008: Pl. 76. No.447).

At the primary (denotative) level, this seal image depicts a group of six archers arrayed in a disciplined line, each bearing a bow and two arrows, all proceeding in a unified direction. The careful regularity of their arrangement and weaponry indexes an intentional collective organization, foregrounding a visual grammar of order and coordination. At the secondary (connotative) level, the image functions as an emblem of potential, organized, and legitimate violence. The bow and arrows, specialized implements of war serve not simply as markers of combative intent, but as instruments that elevate violence from an instinctive, individual impulse to a deliberate, professionalized, and strategic practice. The consistent depiction of "two arrows per figure" further gestures toward the standardization of violent capacity, suggesting a system of centralized control and logistical regulation. This exactitude echoes broader processes of social discipline and militarization prevalent in early complex societies. According to Gramsci's theory of hegemony, dominance is established first through the organization and normalization of violence, before any direct exercise of force occurs. This motif visually substantiates such a dynamic: violence is rendered "naturalized" and accepted via the orderly, harmonized motion of the archers. The spectator, confronted with this tableau of collective readiness, is conditioned to perceive future violence as both legitimate and inevitable; a logical extension of the existing regime of order. From a Foucauldian perspective, the scene exemplifies disciplinary power that precedes the actual application of force. The bodies remain uninjured and untouched by combat, yet are thoroughly organized and preconditioned for violence. Weaponry extends the body, less as a tool of spontaneous aggression and more as an apparatus of latent control. The corporeal discipline embodied here constitutes a prerequisite for the effective enactment of regulated violence at subsequent stages. The uniformity of bodies, equipment, and gestures stands as an illustration of symbolic violence in Bourdieusian terms individuals are visually reduced to interchangeable units within a standardized collective, their individuality subsumed for the sake of hegemonic order. The image thus aesthetically naturalizes this homogenization, presenting it as an inherent feature of social organization.

The repetition of figures and armaments within the composition translates violence from an episodic event into a structured, rule-bound phenomenon. Notably, the hegemonic agent in this seal is not a singular dominant actor, but the organized group itself; order embodies the hegemonic function. By omitting spatial or contextual elements and focusing exclusively on bodies and implements, the image foregrounds potential violence as the fundamental premise of meaning. Through its portrayal of the regimented advance of six armed archers, the motif renders visible a preemptive phase of the hegemony of violence, a stage at which violence, although not yet enacted, is already conceptually and materially organized, normalized, and legitimated through bodily discipline, actor homogeneity, and weapon standardization. Viewed in this light, the imagery reveals that in proto historic Iran, violence was constructed and routinized prior to its actual occurrence. Its subsequent enactment was thus understood less as

transgression than as the logical fulfillment of a socially sanctioned order. The seal thereby serves not only as documentation of martial potential but as a visual technology that produces dynamic: violence is rendered "naturalized" and accepted via the orderly, harmonized motion of the archers. The spectator, confronted with this tableau of collective readiness, is conditioned to perceive future violence as both legitimate and inevitable; a logical extension of the existing regime of order.

This motif can be understood as part of a broader visual pattern that recurs throughout the corpus of proto-historic seals from Susa and Chogha Mish. Comparative analysis of this material has identified at least five additional motifs with closely related semantic structures, in which violence is not depicted as an actualized act but rather as a condition of readiness, order, and collective organization (Fig. 1-2). These motifs include scenes of disciplined movement by armed groups, the linear arrangement of human figures equipped with identical weapons, and a strong emphasis on bodily and performative repetition, elements that consistently signal the suppression of individuality and the privileging of collective action. The recurrence of this visual pattern across seals originating from diverse archaeological contexts and functional settings suggests that the representation of organized violent readiness formed part of a stabilized visual language, one whose function extended beyond the narration of specific historical events. Within the framework of the hegemony of violence, such images may be interpreted as symbolic mechanisms through which military discipline is naturalized, structures of power are legitimized, and collective order is internalized. Crucially, this process operates prior to the manifestation of overt violence, preparing it at the level of image, body, and social perception. Accordingly, these motifs should not be read merely as reflections of military capacity or defensive preparedness. Rather, they constitute elements of a broader discursive and symbolic process that transforms potential violence into a legitimate and self-evident component of social order in the proto-historic societies of Susa and Chogha Mish. Through repetition, standardization, and bodily regulation, violence is rendered conceptually familiar and socially acceptable, embedded within the visual and ideological foundations of early political organization. Viewed in this light, the imagery reveals that in proto historic Iran, violence was constructed and routinized prior to its actual occurrence. Its subsequent enactment was thus understood less as transgression than as the logical fulfillment of a socially sanctioned order. The seal thereby serves not only as documentation of martial potential but as a visual technology that produces, routinizes, and legitimizes violence as a structural principle within the political and social imaginary.

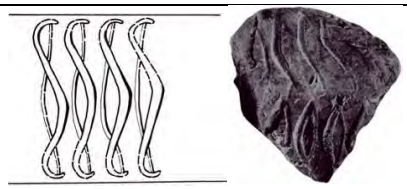
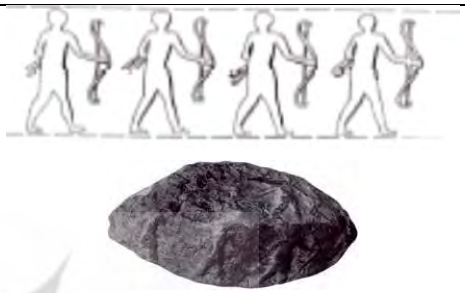
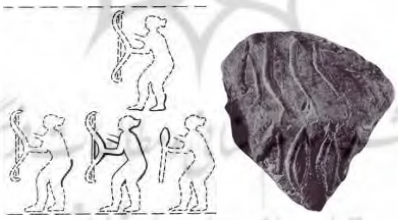
	
A fragment of a sealed bulla recovered from the site of Chogha Mish. Its specific provenience is recorded as R17. Chronologically, it is assigned to the Proto literate period, with thematic categorization noted under war scenes.	A sealed bulla recovered from the site of Susa. Stylistically, the seal impression belongs to the Susa II Style classification. Its original class is recorded as Proto Urban.
	
A sealing recovered from the site of Susa. Stylistically, the impression belongs to the Susa II Style classification, with its original class recorded as Proto Urban.	A sealed bulla recovered from the site of Chogha Mish. Its specific provenience is recorded as Q18. Stylistically, the seal impression belongs to the Susa II Style classification. Chronologically, it is assigned to the Protoliterate period.
	
A sealed bulla recovered from the site of Chogha Mish. Its specific provenience is recorded as R17. Stylistically, the seal impression belongs to the Susa II Style classification. Chronologically, it is assigned to the Proto literate period.	

Figure 1-2: Comparable visual schemes recur in at least five additional seal impressions from Susa and Chogha Mish, where human figures are likewise arranged in orderly horizontal processions. In these examples, the repetition of bodily posture, standardized movement, and regulated spacing reinforces a shared visual grammar of collective discipline and hierarchical control, suggesting a broader regional convention in the representation of organized force and social order.

Object No.2

This artifact, catalogued as Number 2, is identified as a sealing recovered from the site of Susa, with its provenience recorded as the southern sector of the Acropole, Level 17.5 m (Roach

2008). Stylistically, the impression belongs to the Susa II style classification, with its original class recorded as Proto Urban. The seal motif depicts a complex, multilayered scene rendered as a narrative composition centered on the enactment of violence within a ritual–political setting. On the right side of the scene stands an architectural structure in the form of a stepped temple adorned with protruding, horn-like elements. These horn-shaped projections, emerging from the body of the building, underscore the symbolic and likely sacred nature of the space in which the action unfolds. On the left, the figure of a man, larger in scale than all other characters, is shown with a full beard, long hair, and wearing a complete garment. His elongated and dynamic posture, together with the drawn bow held firmly in his hands, conveys the act of shooting an arrow. The extension of the arms, the tension implied in the bowstring, and the directed gaze collectively emphasize the intentionality, agency, and authoritative action embodied by this figure. Facing him is a naked male figure, rendered in a collapsed and constricted posture. A sword is shown piercing his body, and the curvature of his limbs along with the overall distortion of his pose express pain, defeat, and incapacity. His nudity, in sharp contrast to the fully clothed dominant figure, highlights social asymmetry and the absence of power. Based on his central placement and the manner of representation, this figure may be interpreted as a defeated ruler (King-Priest) or a disempowered agent of authority. In the background, two smaller human figures are depicted. One lies or appears in a low, fallen position with an arrow embedded in his body, an explicit sign of enacted violence and physical elimination. The other is shown seated with his hands bound behind his back, a posture that clearly connotes capture, subjugation, and the removal of autonomy. The overall composition is organized through a deliberate hierarchy of body sizes, directional gestures, and the visual focus on the acts of shooting and stabbing. The temple setting functions as a legitimizing backdrop, situating the display of violence within a sanctified or ideologically authorized environment (Fig. 2–1).

This seal impression is identified as a sealing recovered from Susa, with its provenience recorded as the southern sector of the Acropole, Level 17.5 m. Stylistically, the impression belongs to the Susa II Style classification, with its original class recorded as Proto Urban.

Figure 2–1. Drawing of a seal impression depicting a king-priest fighting enemies before a horned building. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Sb 2125.

At the primary (denotative) level, this seal image depicts a complex narrative scene organized around acts of structured violence, archery, sword penetration, wounding, and captivity, all enacted within a defined architectural setting. The stepped temple adorned with horn-like projections establishes a spatial frame that is both symbolic and sacred, situating the violence within a controlled, ritualized environment rather than in an open field of combat. The composition features multiple agents in differentiated power relations: the clothed, large-scale archer, active and deliberate is juxtaposed against the naked, wounded body of his defeated counterpart, while smaller figures in the background display signs of subjugation and demise, one fallen, another bound. Hierarchy, gesture, and spatial orientation together encode the visual grammar of domination. At the secondary (connotative) level, the image transforms violence into an emblem of ritual and legitimacy. The temple architecture functions as a sanctified backdrop that redefines aggression as an act of devotion and cosmic order. By embedding bodily harm within a sacred frame, the motif elevates violence from a mere physical transgression to a socially and ideologically authorized rite. Within this matrix, violence becomes a performative expression of authority, its sacred staging naturalizes domination itself. In Gramscian terms, hegemony arises not through coercion alone but through consent achieved via alignment with cultural and symbolic norms. Here, the scene exemplifies that dynamic: violence is portrayed as an instrument for the maintenance of divine and political order, rather than its violation. From a Foucauldian perspective, the naked and wounded bodies become sites where disciplinary power is visibly inscribed. The piercing of flesh by weapons and the display of captivity correspond to mechanisms of bodily control, forms of visible punishment that operate pedagogically. Violence is public, demonstrative, and didactic. Through its corporeal choreography, the composition conveys the normalization of controlled suffering within a sacral-political framework. The distinctions of clothing versus nudity, scale, posture, and spatial positioning together enact the logic of symbolic violence in Bourdieu's sense. Inequality is rendered aesthetic, intelligible, and internally accepted; the viewer is conditioned to perceive subjugation not as cruelty but as order fulfilled. The simultaneous presence of multiple violent gestures, archery, sword-strike, and bondage, reveals violence as a systemic principle rather than episodic event. The dominant archer, positioned at the compositional center, operates as the hegemonic agent whose actions visually articulate control and legitimacy. His weaponry, bow and sword, extends bodily agency into the ideological sphere, transforming instruments of harm into ritual apparatuses that sustain social coherence. Viewed within the broader framework of proto-historic Iranian imagery, the motif embodies a semiosis of hegemonic violence, wherein aggression is not disruptive but constitutive of legitimate order. By positioning physical domination within a temple context, the seal renders violence sacred, effective, and normatively embedded in the social imaginary of early complex society. Through the hierarchical arrangement of bodies, the integration of violence with ritual space, and the overt representation of punishment and captivity, the image visually consolidates violence as a legitimate, necessary, and internalized dimension of governance. Thus, this seal does violence

into an emblem of ritual and legitimacy. The temple architecture functions as a sanctified backdrop that redefines aggression as an act of devotion and cosmic order. By embedding bodily harm within a sacred frame, the motif elevates violence from a mere physical transgression to a socially and ideologically authorized rite. Within this matrix, violence becomes a performative expression of authority, its sacred staging naturalizes domination itself. In Gramscian terms, hegemony arises not through coercion alone but through consent achieved via alignment with cultural and symbolic norms. Here, the scene exemplifies that dynamic: violence is portrayed as an instrument for the maintenance of divine and political order, rather than its violation. From a Foucauldian perspective, the naked and wounded bodies become sites where disciplinary power is visibly inscribed. The piercing of flesh by weapons and the display of captivity correspond to mechanisms of bodily control, forms of visible punishment that operate pedagogically. Violence is public, demonstrative, and didactic. Through its corporeal choreography, the composition conveys the normalization of controlled suffering within a sacral-political framework. The distinctions of clothing versus nudity, scale, posture, and spatial positioning together enact the logic of symbolic violence in Bourdieu's sense. Inequality is rendered aesthetic, intelligible, and internally accepted; the viewer is conditioned to perceive subjugation not as cruelty but as order fulfilled. The simultaneous presence of multiple violent gestures, archery, sword-strike, and bondage reveals violence as a systemic principle rather than episodic event. The dominant archer, positioned at the compositional center, operates as the hegemonic agent whose actions visually articulate control and legitimacy. His weaponry, bow and sword, extends bodily agency into the ideological sphere, transforming instruments of harm into ritual apparatuses that sustain social coherence. Viewed within the broader framework of proto-historic Iranian imagery, the motif embodies a semiosis of hegemonic violence, wherein aggression is not disruptive but constitutive of legitimate order. By positioning physical domination within a temple context, the seal renders violence sacred, effective, and normatively embedded in the social imaginary of early complex society. Through the hierarchical arrangement of bodies, the integration of violence with ritual space, and the overt representation of punishment and captivity, the image visually consolidates violence as a legitimate, necessary, and internalized dimension of governance. Thus, this seal does not merely record an isolated act of conflict; it acts as a visual technology of power, producing, routinizing, and legitimizing violence as a foundational principle of sacred–political order in the fourth millennium BCE.

In connection with the material discussed above, three additional seal impressions from Chogha Mish exhibit analogous imagery, all revolving around the representation of the archer figure within scenes of conflict and domination. These impressions, stylistically belonging to the STS (20) group and datable to the Proto-literate period, reveal both compositional coherence and thematic variation in the visual grammar of violence. In the first seal, two nude male figures appear in dynamic motion, each depicted with a drawn bow, their bodies oriented forward in an implied advance. The composition is stripped of detailed ornamentation or architectural framing; the artist focuses instead on the act itself—the bodily gesture of tension, the drawing

of the bow, the moment preceding release. The absence of individualized features or contextual elements displaces attention from the agents to the process of violent action. Violence here is rendered abstract and performative, detached from identity and circumstance; it signifies the archetype of conflict rather than a specific event. The simplification of form, therefore, intensifies the symbolic function of the image—transforming corporeal movement into a concise expression of organized aggression. In the remaining two impressions, a single archer dominates the field, positioned as the controlling axis of the composition. He is shown shooting arrows toward a clustered group of human figures, whose smaller scale and passive stances communicate submission and vulnerability. The imbalance between the solitary aggressor and the multi-figure target group creates a powerful visual contrast that underscores the asymmetry inherent in social domination. Violence is no longer reciprocal but unidirectional—emanating from one figure of authority toward a collective of the subdued. In this sense, the composition reproduces, at the level of imagery, the hierarchical logic of rulership and discipline emerging in late fourth-millennium societies (Fig. 2-2).

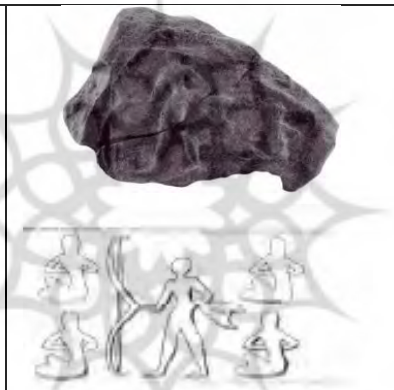
		
A sealed bulla recovered from the site of Chogha Mish, with its specific provenience recorded as R21. Stylistically, the seal impression belongs to the Susa II style classification. Chronologically, it is assigned to the Protoliterate period	A jar stopper sealing originating from Chogha Mish, recovered from the area north of R19. It is stylistically assigned to the Susa II Style group and dates to the Protoliterate period.	A sealed bulla from the site of Chogha Mish, with its provenance recorded as east of R21. Stylistically, it belongs to the Susa II Style group and is dated to the Protoliterate period.

Figure 2-2: (left): two nude male figures appear in dynamic motion, each depicted with a drawn bow, their bodies oriented forward in an implied advance, (Right): Bowmans shown shooting arrows toward a clustered group of human figures, whose smaller scale and passive stances communicate submission and vulnerability (Roach 2008).

Object No.3

This artifact, catalogued as Number 3, is a sealed bulla originating from Chogha Mish, with its provenance recorded as R18. It is stylistically assigned to the Susa II Style group and dates to the Proto-literate period (Roach 2008). The imagery is categorized under war scenes, indicating its association with representations of organized conflict and violence characteristic of this phase at the site. The motif of the third seal depicts a scene of organized collective conflict, in which violence is represented in direct association with a ritual–architectural structure. The composition is structured around three principal elements: a stepped temple, a group of defenders positioned atop the structure, and a group of attackers located at its base. At the center of the image stands a stepped temple composed of three clearly defined tiers, arranged vertically in a terraced manner. Through its emphasis on height, verticality, and stratification, this architectural form is visually distinguished from the surrounding space and endowed with a symbolically elevated status. The temple's architecture establishes it as the primary axis of the composition and the focal point around which all violent actions are organized. Rather than serving as a neutral backdrop, the structure actively frames and legitimizes the conflict, transforming the scene into a confrontation over a sacralized space. At the levels two and one of the temple, a group of four human figures is depicted in active and dynamic postures. These individuals are shown throwing stones downward, clearly engaged in the defense of the temple. The bodily gestures, arm positions, and directional movement of the stones convey a coordinated, collective, and purposeful action. Their elevated placement reinforces both their spatial and symbolic superiority, visually asserting dominance over those below and emphasizing the defensive legitimacy of their violence. In the lower register of the scene, three human figures are represented as attackers. Two of these figures are shown standing and appear to be actively participating in the confrontation, possibly engaged in stone throwing or advancing toward the structure. The third figure is depicted collapsed or lifeless on the ground, most likely killed as a result of the stones hurled from above. The immobility of this body, in contrast to the dynamic gestures of the other figures, renders the consequences of violence explicitly visible and underscores the asymmetrical outcome of the encounter. The composition deliberately excludes secondary elements or naturalistic background features, directing the viewer's attention entirely toward a vertical opposition structured along multiple binaries: above/below, defender/attacker, and sacred space/exterior space. Violence is thus not portrayed as chaotic or incidental, but as structural, organized, and spatially ordered. Through this clear architectural and bodily hierarchy, the seal transforms collective aggression into a legible and normalized mechanism of control, reinforcing the idea that violence exercised in defense of a sacred and elevated space is both justified and necessary (Fig. 3-1).

A sealed bulla originating from Chogha Mish, with its provenance recorded as R18. It is stylistically assigned to the Susa II Style and dates to the Proto-literate period.

Figure 3-1. A defender/attacker conflict.

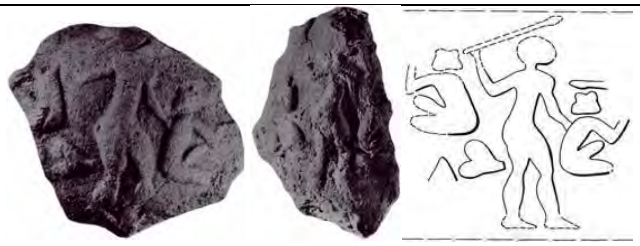
At the primary level of denotation, the image depicts a scene of group conflict in which a number of individuals positioned atop a stepped temple attack another group located at the base of the structure by throwing stones downward. As a result of this assault, one of the attackers has been killed, his body rendered inert at the lower register of the composition. At the secondary (connotative) level, the image represents a confrontation between sacred space and the forces that threaten it. The temple functions not merely as an architectural element, but as a symbol of order, authority, and the centralization of power. Within this framework, the violence exercised by the defenders is constructed as defensive, legitimate, and necessary. The vertical opposition of above/below binds violence to a hierarchical order: those positioned above possess the right to enact violence, while those below are exposed to it. In this motif, violence emerges directly from the temple space itself.

In Gramscian terms, this configuration demonstrates the integration of violence within the ideological and value-based order of society. The defenders' violence is not framed as a disruption of order, but rather as a mechanism for its preservation. The image encourages the viewer to internalize the logic that the violent defense of the temple is self-evident and legitimate. From a Foucauldian perspective, power operates through the organization of space and bodies. In this seal, bodies are arranged vertically and stratified: dominant bodies above, vulnerable bodies below. The death of one attacker transforms the body into the ultimate site of power's inscription, rendering violence visible, public, and didactic. Through the depiction of the attacker's death and the defenders' spatial superiority, violence is presented as the natural consequence of violating the sacred order. This visual mechanism constitutes a clear example of symbolic violence in Bourdieu's sense, whereby inequality and domination are naturalized and internalized without the need for textual explanation or verbal instruction. The image silently inculcates acceptance of hierarchical power relations by embedding them within a sacred spatial logic. Violence in this seal is not an individual act, but a collective and coordinated practice carried out by a clearly defined group. The dominant agents are the defenders stationed on the temple, who occupy a superior position spatially, symbolically, and performatively. The instrument of violence, the stone, is simple yet effective, and derives its

meaning through its direct relationship with the stepped temple. Here, space itself produces the legitimacy of violence. By representing collective conflict centered on a stepped temple, this motif demonstrates that in early historic Iran, violence was not merely a tool of individual domination, but a collective mechanism for safeguarding the sacred–political order. Through the vertical organization of space, the coordinated action of the defenders, and the explicit depiction of the attacker's death, the image stabilizes violence as legitimate, necessary, and internalized within the structure of power. In this way, the seal constitutes a clear instance of the hegemony of violence, in which the defense of the sacred becomes the ultimate justification for the exercise of force.

Object No.4

This artifact, catalogued as Number 4, is a sealed bulla from Chogha Mish, with its provenance recorded as R17. It belongs to the Susa II stylistic group and dates to the Proto-literate period (Roach 2008). The imagery is classified under war scenes, indicating its association with representations of direct violence and conflict characteristic of this phase at the site. The fourth motif depicts a focused and recurrent scene of direct violence, structured around an explicit opposition between power and vulnerability. At the center of the composition stands a male figure of noticeably larger scale than the other characters, represented in a standing position. This figure raises a mace above his head with his dominant hand and is either on the verge of delivering, or actively delivering, a blow to another individual. The posture of the body, the angle of the arms, and the directional movement of the mace collectively convey an active, decisive, and violent action. Opposite this dominant figure, another human figure is depicted at a smaller scale, positioned in a seated or semi-seated posture. This individual raise both hands upward in a clear gesture of supplication, submission, or a plea for mercy. The seated position, combined with the hand gesture, emphasizes powerlessness, the absence of any capacity for resistance, and the complete asymmetry of power between the two figures. In the composition of this seal, an additional smaller human figure is depicted behind the standing male figure, suggesting that the same violent action, the dominant standing figure with a raised mace confronting a smaller, subordinate body, is about to be repeated once again. This visual repetition, carried out without any substantial change in bodily gestures or proportions, creates a rhythmic structure that points to the continuity and regularization of violence. The image lacks any clearly defined architectural or natural elements, and its focus is directed entirely toward bodies, gestures, and the instrument of violence (the mace). By eliminating the background, violence is detached from a specific context and transformed into a generalized, trans-temporal, and universally applicable act. (Fig. 4-1).



A sealed bulla from Chogha Mish, with its provenance recorded as R17. It belongs to the Susa II stylistic group and dates to the Proto-literate period. The imagery is classified under war scenes, indicating its association with representations of direct violence and conflict.

Figure 4-1. A male figure of larger scale than the other characters, represented in a standing position, raises a mace above his head on the verge of delivering (Roach 2008).

At the primary denotative level, the image presents a scene of direct physical assault: a standing man raising a mace in preparation for a blow, and a seated figure with raised hands expressing submission or supplication. At the secondary connotative level, the image articulates a hierarchical and unequal order in which violence functions as the primary mechanism for the exercise and stabilization of power. The supplicatory gesture of the defeated figure frames violence as a unilateral and non-negotiable act, one that does not cease even in the face of submission. Through the repetition of the violent scene, the image transcends the narration of a specific event and becomes a normative model of power in action. The viewer is confronted not with exceptional violence, but with violence that is systematic, expected, and recurrent. According to Gramsci's concept of hegemony, domination becomes durable when it is represented as natural and self-evident. In this seal, violence is normalized through the visual repetition of a single act, rendering it ordinary and socially acceptable. The image guides the viewer toward internalizing the logic that the use of force constitutes a legitimate and customary mode of exercising power. From a Foucauldian perspective, power operates through bodies. In this motif, the seated and supplicating body is entirely exposed to power and deprived of any capacity for reciprocal action. The mace, as the instrument of violence, functions as an extension of the will of power inscribed upon the dominated body. Violence here is spectacular, public, and pedagogical; a form of violence that must be seen in order to instruct. From a Bourdieusian perspective, the stark contrast in body size, the opposition between standing and seated postures, and the juxtaposition of active versus supplicatory gestures constitute a clear instance of symbolic violence. The image renders inequality self-evident and embeds it in the viewer's perception without the need for written text. The repeated depiction of a single violent scene across the surface of the seal indicates that violence is not a momentary occurrence, but a stabilized and structural pattern. The mace-bearing figure, with his larger body, upright posture, and visual centrality, occupies a hegemonic position around which the entire meaning of the image is organized. Bodies and instruments of violence are the sole elements of the composition. By eliminating spatial context, the image abstracts violence from a specific

historical situation and elevates it to a structuring principle of social order. By concentrating on the recurrent act of the mace striking a submissive body, this motif offers a clear representation of the hegemony of violence in proto historic Iran. Through the repetition of violent action, the hierarchical organization of bodies, and the removal of any narrative or spatial context, the image stabilizes violence as a naturalized and legitimate rule of power. This seal does not narrate a specific punishment; rather, it functions as a visual manifesto articulating the fundamental logic of domination and obedience in early historic societies.

In addition to the motifs discussed above, three further seal impressions depicting scenes of conflict and physical assault have been identified within the corpus of seals and sealings recovered from Susa and Chogha Mish. Although these examples vary in compositional detail, they share a common visual logic centered on direct bodily confrontation, asymmetrical power relations, and the enactment of violence through close physical engagement. These seals reinforce the argument that scenes of beating, striking, and interpersonal aggression were not marginal or exceptional within the visual repertoire of the late fourth millennium BCE, but rather constituted a recurrent and recognizable iconographic category. The repetition of such imagery across multiple artifacts and archaeological contexts suggests the existence of a stabilized visual language of violence, one that was widely understood and socially legible within both administrative and ritual spheres (Fig. 4-2). From an analytical perspective, the recurrence of conflict and assault motifs across seals from both Susa and Chogha Mish indicates that violence functioned as a shared symbolic resource within the broader Susiana cultural sphere. These images do not merely document isolated acts of brutality; instead, they articulate a conceptual model of power in which domination is enacted through the body and made visible through repetitive visual conventions. The consistency in gestures, bodily hierarchies, and instruments of violence across different seals points to a codified grammar of force, rather than to spontaneous or anecdotal representations.

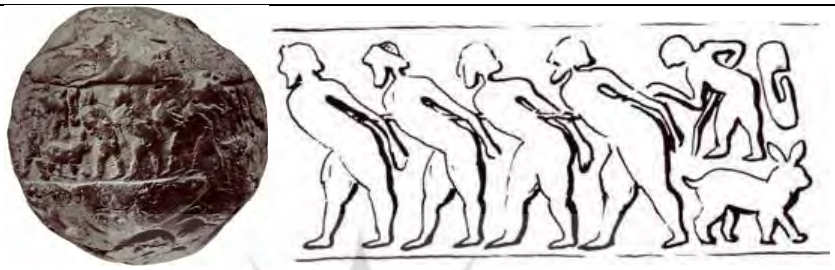
	A seal impression from the site of Susa, crafted in the Susa II style and assigned to the Proto-Urban group, belongs to a well-established visual and administrative system in which imagery functioned as a repetitive and recognizable language of authority.
	A sealing from the site of Susa, executed in the Susa II Style and classified within the Proto Urban group within a well-established visual and bureaucratic system, where imagery operated as a repetitive and recognizable language of authority.
	A sealing from the site of Susa, executed in the Susa II Style and assigned to the Proto Urban classification.

Figure 4-2. Recurrence of conflict and assault motifs across seals from both Susa.

Object No.5

Object No.5 is a clay bulla sealed by two-cylinder seals (cf. No. 266). It was recovered from the site of Susa, specifically from the northern sector of the Acropole. On stylistic grounds, the object is attributed to the Susa II style and is classified within the Proto Urban original class. The fifth seal motif depicts a scene of transfer and control of captives, in which violence is represented not as a final, fatal blow, but in the form of a systematic, sustained, and disciplinary practice. In this composition, a group of four human figures is portrayed as captives, all standing and moving in a unified direction. The hands of each captive are bound behind the back, and a single rope links all four together in a chain-like arrangement. This rope connection not only imposes a concrete physical restriction of movement, but also signifies the complete dependency of each individual upon the collective group, such that the movement or condition of one captive directly affects and is conditional upon that of the others (Fig. 5-1). The bodily posture of the captives, absent of any gesture of resistance or active initiative, clearly connotes submission and the absence of autonomous will. At the rear of the line stands another human figure who occupies a distinctly different functional and semantic position within the scene: in one hand he holds a long whip, while with the other he is engaged in driving the captives forward. His location behind the group, combined with the presence of the whip, serves to intensify the visual emphasis on forced control and coercive guidance. The whip functions, even without direct application, as a symbol of constant threat and as an instrument of latent

violence that regulates behavior through intimidation. The composition focuses on the linear movement of the captives and the stark contrast between the bound bodies of the dominated and the unbound, commanding body of the controller. By omitting any architectural or natural background, the image draws the viewer's attention entirely to the interpersonal dynamics of power and to the mechanisms of violence-based control. From an analytical standpoint, this motif visualizes a disciplinary form of violence—a mode of coercion that is ongoing, regulated, and embedded in everyday procedures of domination, rather than confined to spectacular acts of killing or striking.



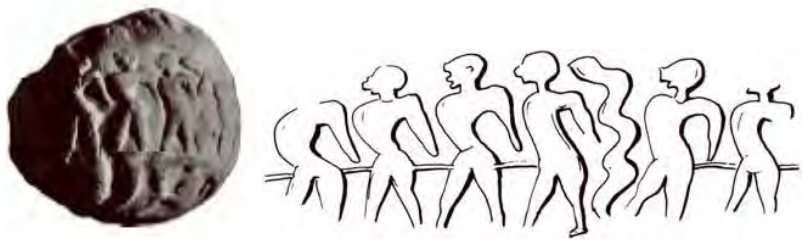
A clay bulla sealed by two-cylinder seals. It was recovered from the site of Susa, specifically from the northern sector of the Acropole. On stylistic grounds, the object is attributed to the Susa II style and is classified within the Proto Urban original class.

Figure 5-1. A scene of transfer and control of captives from Susa.

At the primary (denotative) level, the image depicts a group of captives moving under compulsion, with their hands bound and connected to one another, while being driven forward by a figure armed with a whip. At the secondary (connotative) level, the scene represents a form of controlled and institutionalized violence. Violence here is neither explosive nor momentary; rather, it is enduring, supervisory, and threatening in nature. The whip functions less as an instrument of immediate and more as a symbol of the permanent possibility of violence. The rope transforms bodies into objects that are transferable, manageable, and administratively controlled. The collective movement of the captives elevates violence beyond the individual level and converts it into a collective mechanism for the erasure of will, identity, and autonomy. According to the concept of hegemony, domination is not consolidated solely through the final act of force, but is sustained through the continuity and normalization of violence. This motif demonstrates that, following victory, violence persists in an orderly and predictable form. The captives, moving in disciplined formation without resistance, visually articulate a state of imposed consent; a consent that does not arise from acceptance, but from the internalization of coercion. From a Foucauldian perspective, this image constitutes a clear manifestation of disciplinary power. The bodies of the captives, through the binding of hands, their linkage by a single rope, and their linear guidance, are transformed into docile and governable bodies. The

whip, as a classic instrument of discipline, simultaneously performs the functions of threat, surveillance, and instruction. Violence here is "displayed in order not to be used," yet its potential application remains constantly present. The connection of the captives by a single rope eliminates individuality and reduces them to a homogenized mass. This process exemplifies symbolic violence, as domination is exercised not only over bodies, but also over identity and social position, rendering absolute inequality between guard and captive self-evident and naturalized. Violence in this seal represents the post-conflict phase; a stage that reveals that domination does not end with the conclusion of battle, but continues in the form of everyday control. The dominant agent is the whip-bearing figure, who exercises complete authority over the captives through instrument, spatial position, and the constant capacity to apply force. Bound bodies, rope, and whip constitute the three fundamental elements of the hegemonic mechanism of violence: restraint, connection, and threat. Spatial context is deliberately eliminated so that the power relation itself emerges as the primary meaning. By depicting the collective transfer of captives under the control of a whip-armed individual, this motif represents the final stage of the hegemony of violence—a stage in which violence is transformed from an explosive act into a disciplinary and enduring system. Through the binding of bodies, the elimination of individuality, and the permanent threat of violence, domination is rendered ordinary, routinized, and internalized. In this way, the seal demonstrates that in early historic Iran, violence was not merely an instrument of victory, but a foundational principle of social order and post-victory control.

Within the corpus of seal impressions from Susa and Chogha Mish, only a single additional seal has been identified from Susa that presents a comparable motif of captives with bound hands (Fig. 5-2). The rarity of this iconographic theme is significant, as it indicates that while scenes of direct conflict, combat, and physical assault are relatively recurrent, the explicit visualization of post-conflict control through the organized transfer of captives is far less common. This limited occurrence suggests that the representation of bound captives was not intended as a generalized or routine image, but rather as a highly specific and ideologically charged motif. Unlike scenes of striking or battle, which emphasize the moment of confrontation, the captive-transfer motif focuses on the aftermath of violence—the phase in which domination is stabilized, regulated, and transformed into a sustainable system of control. Its selective appearance within the assemblage may therefore reflect a deliberate visual strategy aimed at articulating a more advanced stage of hegemonic power, in which violence no longer needs to be enacted continuously, but is maintained through discipline, surveillance, and the constant threat of force.



A clay bulla sealed by two-cylinder seals, recovered from Susa, specifically from the southern sector of the Acropole at a depth of 17.5 m. The impression is executed in the Susa II Style and is classified within the Proto Urban group. fourth-millennium BCE Susa.

Figure 5-2. A scene of transfer and control of captives from Susa (Roach, 2008).

Conclusion

The study of seal motifs from the second half of the fourth millennium BCE at the sites of Susa and Chogha Mish demonstrates that violence in the protohistoric societies of Iran was not merely a momentary, instinctive act or a phenomenon limited to the battlefield. Rather, it constituted a complex, multilayered, and hegemonic structure. These motifs, which represent some of the earliest visual media of power, depict a complete cycle of the organization, execution, and stabilization of violence; a cycle in which violence was not only an instrument of victory, but also the foundation of social order and a means of producing legitimacy. Semiotic analysis of the seal impressions shows that the images contribute to the formation of a hegemonic structure of violence through four meaningful stages. In the archer motif, violence is represented in a preliminary and potential form. Six archers equipped with standardized weapons, identical gestures, and coordinated movement reflect an early form of centralized control and military discipline. This image demonstrates that violence was subjected to organization and guidance long before actual confrontation, and was imagined as a normal and accepted component of the social order. In Foucauldian terms, bodies are "disciplined" prior to the application of force; and in Gramscian terms, this state of readiness itself constitutes a form of imposed consent and a structuring mechanism of domination. In the war and mace-blow motifs, violence is embodied in its practical and naked form. In the collective battle scene, the defense of the temple confers religious and ritual legitimacy upon violence, transforming it into a necessary act for the preservation of order. In the individual mace scene, the physical elimination of the enemy is represented in a rule-governed, repetitive, and unquestioned manner. This stage reveals the hard core of the hegemony of violence: a point at which domination is not only exercised, but also rendered self-evident through visual repetition. Violence here corresponds to what theories of power describe as "foundational violence". In the motif of ritual violence (the archer and the victim in front of the stepped temple), violence takes place within a sacred space and is thereby elevated from the level of action to the level of ritual and legitimizing representation. The opposition of bodies (clothed/nude,

dominant/submissive) signifies a conceived cosmic order within protohistoric societies. This image presents violence as not only permissible, but necessary and constructive for maintaining sacred order. In Bourdieusian terms, this is the stage at which violence becomes symbolic violence, no longer requiring justification or explanation. The motif of bound captives represents the final stage of the hegemonic cycle of violence; a stage in which violence is transformed from an explosive act into a stable, disciplinary, and everyday mechanism. The shared rope, submissive bodies, and the ever-present whip signify a system of bodily management and the persistence of domination. This image is fully consistent with Foucault's theory of "docile bodies": bodies that are not only defeated, but transformed, isolated, and converted into objects that are portable, manageable, and controllable. The theoretical synthesis of this study is grounded in the semiotic analysis of four principal motifs from the seals of Susa and Chogha Mish, demonstrating that violence in protohistoric Iran was not a sporadic or accidental act, but a structural, continuous, and hegemonic process. At every stage of this cycle, violence functioned simultaneously with the production of power and social order, ascending from the level of behavior to the level of meaning and legitimacy. In the first stage, the pre-structuring of violence, the archer scenes present a visual form of bodily discipline and collective organization that prepares the ground for violence without direct confrontation. The repetition of uniform bodies, the standardization of weapons, and the guided movement of individuals demonstrate that violence is "constructed" prior to its enactment and, through bodily discipline, becomes an instrument of order. In the second stage, the execution of violence, the war and mace-blow seals embody raw and physical violence, where the elimination of the victim or enemy occurs in a repetitive and rule-based manner. This stage reveals the hard, practical face of domination; a domination that presents itself as natural and necessary through the repeated depiction of violent acts. In the third stage, the legitimation of violence, the image of the ritual victim before the stepped temple expresses the transfer of violence from the corporeal sphere to the sacred realm. This sacralization elevates violence from action to truth and to the creation of cosmic order, where sacrifice is imagined as necessary for maintaining balance and harmony, and power derives legitimacy through religious ritual. Finally, in the fourth stage, the stabilization of violence, the image of controlled captives demonstrates that violence continues even after victory and becomes institutionalized in the form of everyday discipline and bodily management. The shared rope, the subordinate position of the captives, and the whip as a symbol of constant threat express the disciplinary and enduring form of power; a power that has moved from physical elimination to psychological and symbolic control. Through these four stages, it becomes evident that in protohistoric Iran, violence was not merely a tool for exercising power, but the foundation for the production of hegemony and social order; a process that forms a complete cycle of the establishment of power, from preparedness to discipline, from elimination to sacralization, and from force to legitimacy. This cycle clearly demonstrates that in protohistoric Iran, violence was neither an accidental event, nor merely a permanent potential, nor simply an instrument for victory in battle. Rather, it

constituted the foundation of the power structure, the organizer of social order, and the principal strategy for the representation of legitimacy.

In this period, violence operated in an internalized and multilayered manner: both as a practical force for maintaining authority and as a discursive mechanism for legitimizing itself. Based on the integrated theoretical framework of hegemony (Gramsci), power/knowledge (Foucault), and symbolic violence (Bourdieu), the seal impressions of Susa and Chogha Mish reveal the processes through which violence was generated, organized, executed, sacralized, and ultimately habitualized within the visual and cultural context of protohistoric societies. In these representations, violence is not merely an instrument, but the internal logic of power; a logic that is stabilized through visual repetition, ritual practice, and bodily order, gradually leading the viewer to perceive the order of violence as natural. For this reason, in the absence of writing, these seal impressions can be regarded as the earliest political media, whose function was not simply to narrate war, but to articulate and explain the structure of power itself. These images constitute the first visual apparatus of meaning-production in Iranian history; an apparatus that transforms violence into a shared language of power and elevates it from the level of action to the level of meaning and social order.

In conclusion, the study of the seal impressions from Susa and Chogha Mish reveals that violence in the fourth millennium BCE was not a fragmented phenomenon, but a structural, productive, and organizing force in the process of the formation of early polities on the southwestern Iran. These images expose one the earliest visual forms of the configuration of power, in which violence, as a hegemonic and pervasive mechanism, lays the foundations of social order, political sacrality, and the control of human bodies. Thus, the motifs are not merely reflections of scenes of combat, but fundamental documents of the emergence of the first semantic apparatus of power; an apparatus in which violence becomes a creative, order-producing, and institutionalized force that secures its own legitimacy through the production of meaning.

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Conflict of Interests

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