A Sealed History

In our lives we all have to deal with numerous seals and stamps. Primitive communities could place a certification stamp directly on one's body in the form of a tattoo; a more civilized society could put it on a document. In fact, animal tracks on wet soil, the ones followed by Pleistocene hunters and their Holocene descendants, served as natural seal imprints that certified the virtual presence of the creature that had left them. An example of humans coming into awareness of this phenomenon might be the handprints found on the walls of caves (e.g., Cueva de las Manos, or the Cave of the Hands, in the south of Argentina), which can be interpreted as a personal sign of the individual who left the imprint, i.e., as that person's substitute or stamp. The earliest examples of actual seals and stamps appeared in the Near and Middle East and gradually spread to the territories of modern China and Japan. In the new issue of SCIENCE First Hand, our regular authors from the SB RAS Institute of Archeology and Ethnography in Novosibirsk, attempt to consider this phenomenon using examples from the history of the Far Eastern civilization

Key words: sphragistics (sigillography), China, Han Empire, Dian Kingdom, state of Nakoku, traditional handicrafts, insignia

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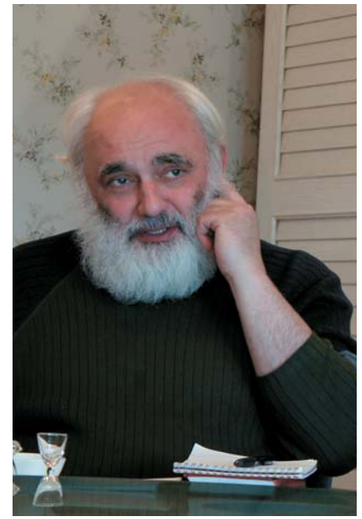

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The Great Round Seal gleamed before him,
and everything inside me went dead.

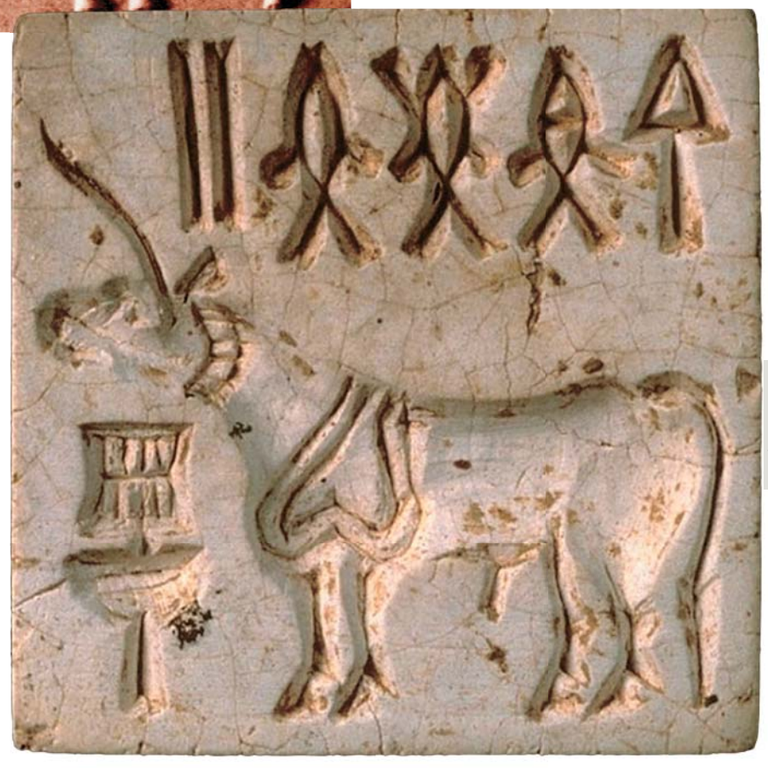
Tale of the Troika by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky

A small imprint of a seal acts as a proxy for the person or organization on whose behalf it was affixed. The importance of the seal rises so high that it becomes a symbol of ubiquitous bureaucracy.

The seal acquires a magical or even mystical meaning. Many have heard about the Seal of King Solomon, which gives one power over animals and even potent genies. And, of course, one cannot but remember the sixth chapter in the last book of the New Testament, *The Apocalypse, or the Revelation of Saint John the Theologian*, about the seven seals – from the solemn "And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, 'Come and see'" (Revelation 6:1) to the mysterious "And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour" (Revelation 8:1).

Let us now put aside both mysticism and metaphysics (and there is a lot to talk about – recall Ingmar Bergman allegorical film *The Seventh Seal*) so as to concentrate on the enormous role of seals in the history of humankind and, accordingly, in historical research. This topic is so important that one has invented a special historical discipline for it, i.e., *sphragistics*, or *sigillography*, a field of research that studies seals and their impressions.

The earliest specimens of the first seals appeared in the Middle East; these are the famous cylinder seals to be rolled over the still moist surface of clay tablets, which were used for writing in the ancient states of Mesopotamia (4th to 3rd millennium BC). A rich collection of seals carved on stone and ceramic tiles was assembled while studying the Moenjodaro monuments in the Indus Valley (2500–1700 BC). Spreading further to the East, the traditions of manufacturing and applying seals penetrated into China, and from there to the easternmost region, i.e., the Japanese Islands.



Seals from Moenjodaro, an ancient city of the highly developed Harappan civilization in the Indus Valley (in modern-day Pakistan). In total, over 2500 seals dating from the period 2500–2000 BC were found at the monument. The seal shields, carved mainly from soapstone (terracotta and faience specimens, too, were found), depict animal and, sometimes, human figures and bear inscriptions. An altar is often depicted in front of the animal, which indicates its sacred nature. The characters in the Proto-Indian (Harappan) writing are essentially hieroglyphs, most of which have not been deciphered yet. There is a hypothesis that the Harappan culture, to which Moenjodaro belongs (including the tradition of making seals), takes its origin from the ancient civilizations of the Middle East

A bit of etymology

First of all, we should clarify that we use the word 'sealed' in this article's title in the original biblical, rather than broadening, sense, i.e., in the meaning 'to affix a seal'. In English, *seal* and *stamp* are the two words most often used to denote the same meaning. While the former is traced back through the Old French language to the Latin *signum* ('sign'), the latter has a much more ancient proto-Indo-European stem *stemb-* with the meaning 'to trample' or 'to flatten'.[1] So you see that originally, the stamp had a belligerent, suppressive nature.

In the Russian language, the word *pechat'* ('seal') sounds very similar to *pech'* ('stove'), and this is not a coincidence. A similar word exists in almost all Slavic languages and has a common stem **pečat-*, which means 'a tool for burning a sign'.[2] The first seals might have been brands to be burned on the skin of livestock and, perhaps, on the bodies of slaves.

In the Chinese lexicography, seals are mainly represented by two hieroglyphs. The xi character indicates the seals attributed to the emperor (king) and members of his family. In this capacity, it was included in the *Shuowen jie zi* lexicon, which was compiled in the 1st century BC, and described through another, even more ancient hieroglyph *yin* (王者印也).[3] This pictogram occurs in the inscriptions on oracle bones (*jiaguwen*) – shoulder blades of animals, mainly rams, and turtle shells – and consists of two elements: a hand that grabs or holds a kneeling human. In other words, here too the origin of seals is associated with violence and subjugation. Thus, at an early stage in history, the seal was already identified with power, and power is always violence.

Made of bronze, gold, and jade

On the territory of modern China, the first seals and stamps appeared in the Shang-Yin Epoch (13th-11th centuries BC). Judging by their design, this tradition was evolving independently of the old civilization centers. Seal impressions, bearing the name of either the owner/customer or the official overseeing a complex manufacturing process, were applied onto clay molds for casting bronze items, so their outlines could be traced from the finished products.

During the Zhou Epoch (11th-3rd centuries BC), stamps and seals were issued by government bodies; some of them certified official documents and others confirmed commercial transactions, e.g., the acquisition of land rights.

During the Zhanguo period (475–221 BC), senior officials acquired personal signets in addition to governmental signs of power. After uniting the country under Qin Shihuangdi, the ruler of the first centralized Chinese state, and introducing a new administrative system, a huge army of administrators went down to the local tier, as low as the township level, and each one of them possessed a small bronze seal.

The Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) even introduced a special position of an officer responsible for making seals. The specimens intended for members of the imperial family and high nobility were crafted of gold or jade, and those for officials were made of bronze. As the borders of the empire were expanding, major local administrators also received the right to issue a seal; in this case, the inscription on the shield was usually cut out rather than cast along with the seal itself.

The rapid development of the bureaucratic apparatus, typical of imperial rule, as well as a considerable rise in crafts, controlled by the same bureaucrats, required the issue of a huge number of seals. Thus, while certain standards were adhered to in the production of official stamps, the more numerous personal seals show a fair amount of diversity.

Even more finds are recorded of ceramic imprints of seals, which were used to certify documents. These imprints have holes in the back to pass a cord for tying together rolled up wooden or bamboo strips, which served for writing down most of the Han texts.

With the appearance of documents on silk and paper, the clay imprints could also be used as hanging seals. Moreover, one began to increasingly apply seals covered with red ink directly onto the surface of a document.

The red color is used to mark the hieroglyph *yin* ('seal') in the most ancient writing; one can clearly see two of its constituent elements: a hand that restrains a kneeling human figure. On the left, the yin character is written in the modern form. It is no coincidence that the red character appears against the background of a tortoise shell since ancient writing served primarily for fortune telling, which made wide use of tortoise shells and ram shoulder blades. This is why it was called *jiaguwen* (literally "inscriptions on shells and bones"). Its time of origin and development is attributed to the second half of the Shang dynasty (14th – first half of the 11th centuries BC) and the early stage of the Zhou dynasty (second half of the 11th – first half of the 10th centuries BC). In modern China, the *jiaguwen* script may be used in advertising

[1] Stamp // Wiktionary, the free dictionary. URL: https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/stamp#Etymology (access date: May 1, 2024).

[2] Online Etymological Dictionary of the Russian Language by Max Vasmer // ΛΓΩ Lexicographic Internet Portal: online dictionaries of the Russian language. URL: https://lexicography.online/etymology/vasmer/п/печать (access date: May 1, 2024).

[3] Xi [璽 // 词典网]. Hieroglyph xi // Online dictionaries. URL: https://www.cidianwang.com/shuowenjiezi/xi7676.htm (access date: May 1, 2024).

Seal of the Dian wang[4]

During the expansion of the Han Empire, seals bearing Han titles were often issued to the best performing local rulers. A sovereign who accepted such a seal from a representative of the imperial court became its vassal; sometimes this dependence was purely nominal and sometimes quite strict. A substantial number of seals dated to the Han era were discovered on the territory of the Yunnan–Guizhou Plateau, which was inhabited by the *xi'nanyi*[5] tribes (the southwestern yi). Yet only one seal among all those finds was made of gold, i. e., the famous Seal of the Dian wang.

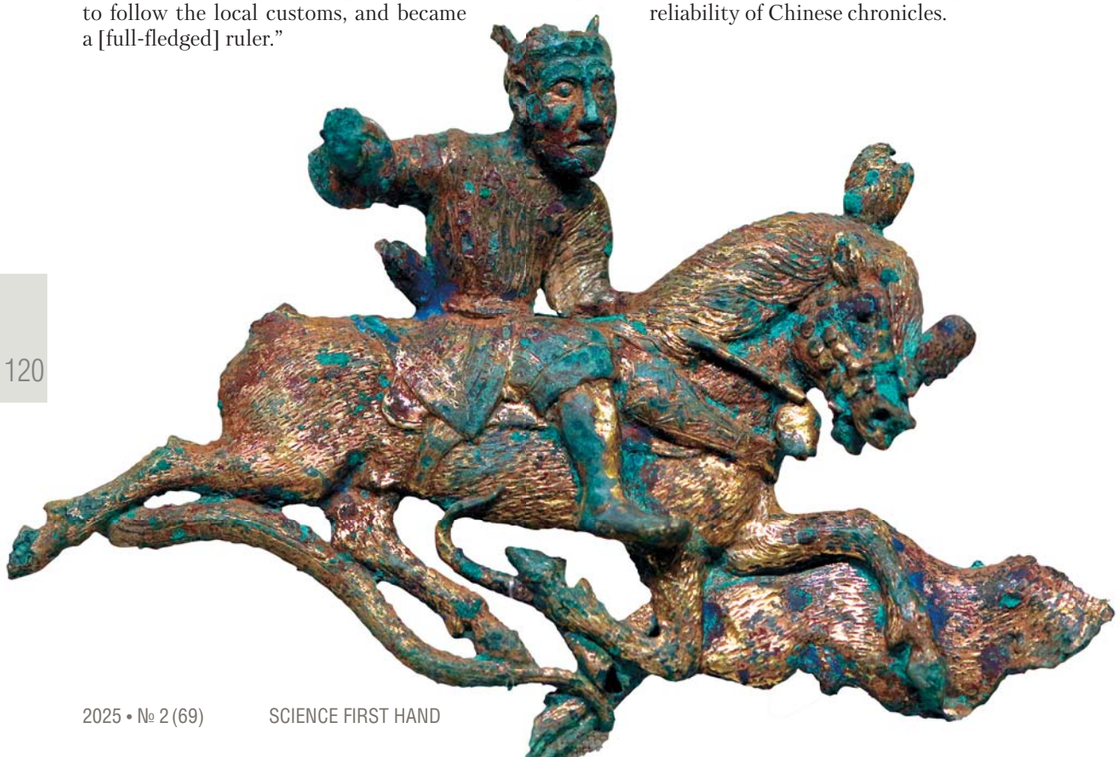
The Dian Kingdom arose in the area of the Yunnan great lakes on the basis of local, probably Austroasiatic, peoples, who created the so-called *Dong Son civilization*, i. e., one of the oldest archaeological cultures of the Bronze Age in Southeast Asia (including South China).

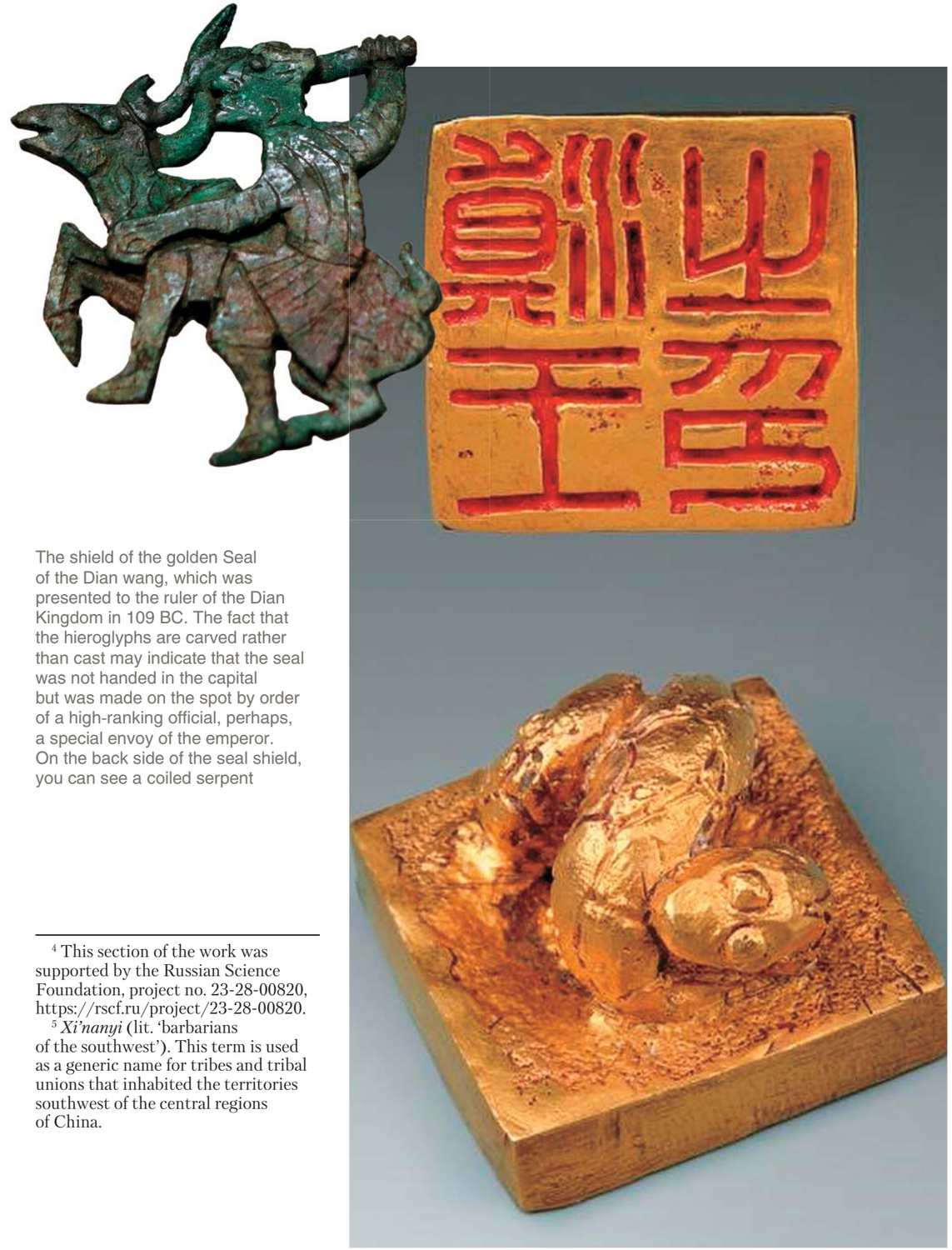
An important role in both the emergence and the fall of the Dian Kingdom belongs to "newcomers from the north." At first, those were tribes of an "equestrian culture," who subjugated the local inhabitants, likely, in the 4th century BC. Then, no later than in 276 BC, the area around Lake Dianchi was seized by the troops of the Chu Kingdom. As reported by the great historian Sima Qian (died ca. 86 BC) in his famous *Shi ji* ('*Records of the Grand Historian*'), the commander Zhuang Qiao, who relied on his numerous troops, declared himself the Dian wang ('Dian king'), "changed his clothes, [began] to follow the local customs, and became a [full-fledged] ruler."

The artistically and technologically advanced Chu culture, brought here by the conquerors, completed the formation of the unique Dian tradition, which manifested itself primarily in bronze items, most intricate ones in terms of content and technique, such as the ritual Dong Son drums and situls (bucket-shaped ceremonial vessels), and in weapons.

Finally, the third wave of conquests was associated with the expansion of the Han Empire, which occupied the kingdom's territory in 109 BC; these events were also described by Sima Qian. Since the ruler of Dian did not resist, he was mercifully granted a golden seal and left on the throne although Yizhou County, too, was established, which was governed by Han administrators.

Therefore, one can understand the joy of Chinese archaeologists when during the excavation of an extremely rich burial M6 (a part of Shizhaishan, a vast burial ground of the Bronze and Early Iron Ages), located near Lake Dianchi in Yunnan, they discovered a golden seal with exactly the inscription indicated in *Records of the Grand Historian*: "the seal of the wang (king) of the Dian State" (滇王之印). This discovery allowed one, firstly, to attribute the materials retrieved from the excavated burial ground to the Dian culture and kingdom. Secondly, based on numerous analogies, the elite burials discovered in Lijiashan, Tianzimiao, Yangfutou, etc. were also attributed to the same culture. Thirdly, this find once again confirmed the high reliability of Chinese chronicles.





The shield of the golden Seal of the Dian wang, which was presented to the ruler of the Dian Kingdom in 109 BC. The fact that the hieroglyphs are carved rather than cast may indicate that the seal was not handed in the capital but was made on the spot by order of a high-ranking official, perhaps, a special envoy of the emperor. On the back side of the seal shield, you can see a coiled serpent

[4] This section of the work was supported by the Russian Science Foundation, project no. 23-28-00820, https://rscf.ru/project/23-28-00820.

[5] *Xi'nanyi* (lit. 'barbarians of the southwest'). This term is used as a generic name for tribes and tribal unions that inhabited the territories southwest of the central regions of China.

The personal bronze seal of a man named Geng Sheng, dated to the period of the Western Han dynasty (2nd–1st centuries BC). Calligraphy experts believe that the style of writing the hieroglyphs on this seal is completely identical to that of the inscription on the Seal of the Dian wang, which confirms the dating of the latter. The red paint covering the entire shield may indicate that its imprints were made on silk rather than clay (paper was still rare at that time). However, the color could have fixed on the seal surface at a later point, when seal imprints served to compile numerous catalogs

The Dian state came under a protectorate regime, a time that witnessed the greatest flourishing of Dian art, as evidenced by the finds of bronze objects. However, this period did not last long – as early as in the Eastern Han period (no later than the 2nd century AD), the empire began to directly administer the conquered territory.

This change manifested itself also in seals, or rather, their ceramic impressions, found in the large (about 316 hectares) ancient settlement of Hebosuo, just 1 km away from the "royal" (*wang*) cemetery of Shizhaishan. This site might have been the location of the capital of the Dian Kingdom and, subsequently, without any noticeable break in time, the administrative center of Yizhou County.

In the early layers of this settlement, archaeologists discovered several ceramic imprints of the seals of Dian officials (e.g., the "seal of the chancellor of the Dian State"), while the later layers contained numerous imprints of the seals of Han bureaucrats of various ranks and virtually no Dian items.

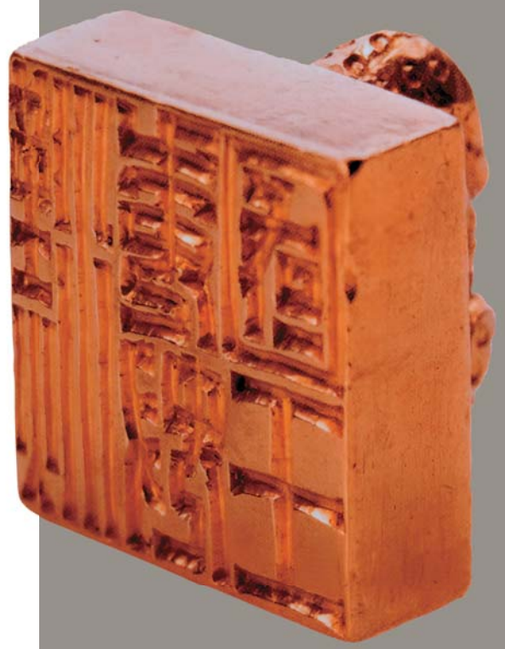
It appears as if the last Dian wang, already deprived of power, took all the valuables with him to the grave, including the state seal, which he had no right to do under the Han laws. Other representatives of the Dian aristocracy followed his example. As a result, the high Dian culture ceased to exist. The tradition of producing bronze drums, which had emerged within of the Dong Son civilization, continued to develop in other areas of Southern China and Southeast Asia but without the multifigure Dian compositions and without the sets of ceremonial weapons.

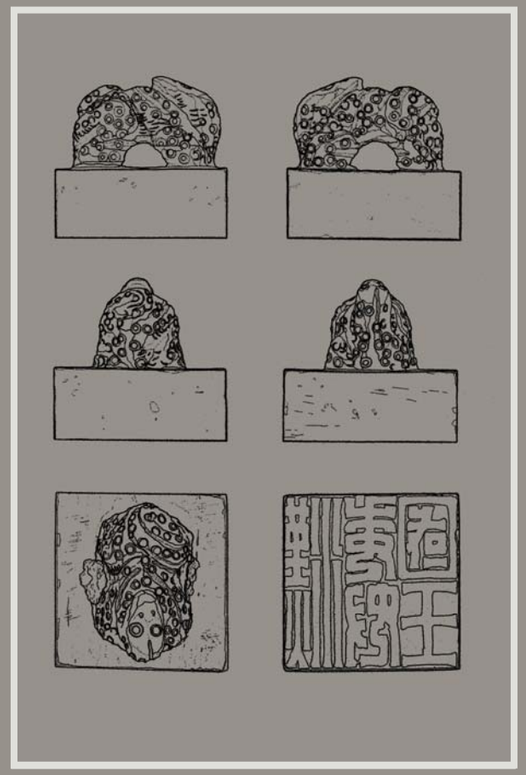
The Na state of the Wa people

However, the Dian golden seal was not the only one. In the spring of 1784, on one of the Sakishima Islands (Fukuoka Prefecture), a peasant named Jimbei, who was repairing a ditch near rice fields, discovered in the ground beneath the stones a shiny object that turned out to be a golden seal. A special report was compiled about that find, *Shakushou jimbei koujougaki* ('Report about Jimbei the Peasant'), according to which the stone structure resembled a box, and the top stone was so heavy that only two peasants working together were able to lift it. For a long time, the seal was part of the collection belonging to the Kuroda samurai clan, who ruled that territory, but in 1978 it was transferred to the Fukuoka administration and placed in the city museum.

The seal consists of a body with a shield with engraved hieroglyphs and a handle in the shape of a coiled serpent raising its head upward. The handle has a hole at its base

A clay imprint of the seal of the chancellor of the Dian Kingdom, which was placed on top of the document's binding or hung from it on a cord. The find indicates that the Han administration approved not only the ruler but also the main officials of the vassal states





The seal and its drawing with the inscription "The wang of the Na state of the Wa (people) of the Han (empire)." The handle has a shape of a serpent, which often acted as a symbol of time, so it would be tempting to see a calendar meaning in the number of circles. But this would require one to prove the existence of a three-season calendar, which was practiced by many peoples, but so far no evidence exists of its use in Han China

Reconstruction of a storage box for the seal

Items on display at the exhibition "The Country of Na. The Beginning of Fukuoka." *City Museum, Fukuoka City, 2015*

to pass a tape through. The five hieroglyphs on the shield make up the inscription: *Han wo nu guo wang* (汉委奴国王; Japanese reading *Kan wan a koku ou*), which means "The wang of the Na state of the Wa (people) of the Han (empire)."

Chinese chronicles refer to the population of the Japanese islands as the "Wo (Wa) people." In relation to the Yayoi period (10th century BC – 3rd century AD), Chinese authors describe several state entities, which include the country of Nu (Na), located in the north of Kyūshū, the third largest island of the Japanese archipelago. At least, the chronicles mention its rulers, officials, and the number of houses in the settlements.

Mirror from the Hirabaru burial ground. *Itokoku Historical Museum, Itoshima, Fukuoka Prefecture*

Reconstruction of a Yayoi-period warrior's defensive weapons. *Yayoi Culture Museum, Izumi, Osaka Prefecture*

The surface of the serpent on the handle of the seal is decorated with 125 circles, which serpent scales. The seal itself is almost square in shape with a side length of 2.37 cm and a height of 2.23 cm; the seal's weight is 108.7 g. The ratio of gold, silver, and bronze in the alloy is 95; 4.5; and 0.5 %, respectively

The shield of a golden seal with a relief inscription, which indicates that the seal was made in the capital of the Han Empire. This fact is further confirmed by the chronicle *Wei zhi*, which communicates that the seal was granted to ambassadors during an imperial reception

Map accompanying the report on the discovery of the seal belonging to the wang of Nakoku. At the top of the map, you can see a drawing and imprint of the seal

Items on display at the exhibition "The Country of Na. The Beginning of Fukuoka." *City Museum, Fukuoka City, 2015*

The chronicle *Hou Han shu* ('*History of the Later Han Dynasty*') contains a notice about an embassy sent in 57 AD by one of its rulers to China: "The ruler of the state of Nu (Na) of eastern foreigners (Wa) sent ambassadors and offerings." In response, Emperor Guang Wu-di granted him a golden seal as an *insignia*, i. e., a sign of power and high status. In this case, the vassalage was clearly of a nominal nature, but the resulting "royal" status contributed to increasing the authority of the Nakoku ruler among the other leaders of the Wa people.

It remains unknown when and under what circumstances the seal was lost; perhaps, it was hidden during some critical events in the course of internecine wars. Today, there is evidence of nine such seals, of which the westernmost one was presented by Han officials to the rulers of the Kushan Kingdom (which existed in the 1st-3rd centuries AD in the southwest of Central Asia), and the easternmost one was given to the Japanese ruler of the Na country.

In conclusion of our short journey into the history of the Han Empire, we should once again emphasize the great importance of seals and stamps in organizing the administration of contiguous lands in the era of early empires and their crucial role in historical research.

Excavations at the Sugu Okamoto site

Items on display at the exhibition "The Country of Na. The Beginning of Fukuoka." *City Museum, Fukuoka City, 2015*

Watchtower with residential buildings at the Yoshinogari Historical Park, which presents the most fully restored Yayoi-period settlement. *Saga Prefecture*

Yayoi-period ceramic vessel at the Nakoku Historical Park. *Fukuoka City*

Subsequently, in the Middle Ages, i.e., the time of finalizing the form of the powerful Confucian bureaucratic apparatus, which, inter alia, had helped China maintain its identity for centuries, seals and stamps gained even greater importance. Concurrently with official and personal stamps, this period saw a surge in the popularity of the so-called Taoist seals, with which fangshi-magi would seal away all kinds of evil spirits, and of stamps with benevolent texts, with which people would abundantly adorn painted and calligraphic scrolls as well as personal correspondence (so these stamps served as Middle-Age "emoticons").

These traditions continue to this day. In many institutions of China and Japan, an employee or client can issue a personal seal with only the first and last name on the shield, carved in the statutory kaishu script, and use it instead of a personal signature to certify, e.g., bank documents or even election ballots. The Japanese people even consider impressions of a personal hanko seal twice as reliable as a handwritten autograph.

Funeral urns from the burial ground at Sugu Okamoto. *Nakoku Historical Park, Kasuga, Fukuoka Prefecture*

At the beginning of the 1st millennium AD, large settlements, surrounded by ditches with contiguous burial grounds, emerged in the north of Kyūshū Island. The settlements could well have acted as centers for bringing together the local population, as is evidenced by Chinese chronicles. Thus, the Wei zhi chronicle speaks of the Nu (Na) country, which has 20,000 households and is governed by a female wang.

With Nakoku, or the country of Na, one associates the archaeological complex of Sugu Okamoto, which is located on the territory of the city of Kasuga, Fukuoka Prefecture. The complex occupies an area of 2 km from north to south and 1 km from west to east.

This complex was excavated in the 1970s-1990s to discover more than 300 burials in urns and wooden and stone structures. Directly next to the burial complex, a large settlement with numerous dwellings was found, as well as the remains of rice fields in the nearby town of Itazuke. Under the largest earthen mound, archaeologists discovered a burial with a large jug that contained, along with the buried person, over 30 bronze mirrors of the early Han period, bronze swords, dagger-axes, and spearheads. In addition, one found in Sugu Okamoto more than 150 casting molds for the production of various bronze objects, which is why this monument can be called a technopolis of the Yayoi period. Burials like this one, i.e., with a large number of mirrors or weapons, are considered to be those of rulers, so it is possible that one of the Na country's leaders found his last repose under the mound in Sugu Okamoto.

The graves of rulers as well as the abundance of jewelry, mirrors, and weapons, which were found here, give reason to look at Kyūshū for traces of the state of Yamatai, known from various historical chronicles, which was ruled by Himiko, a legendary female ruler. However, today, despite the temptation to accepts such a hypothesis, we do not have sufficient evidence to connect this state with the owners of a golden seal received from the Han rulers

Of course, the art of seal carving is developing in both countries, where it is becoming a type of folk crafts and applied arts. Thus, in 1999, the Museum of Sphragistics in the beautiful city of Hangzhou opened its doors to visitors, and in 2009, the Chinese art of seal engraving was included in the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

But most importantly, in the streets of almost every Chinese city, including the main historical street of Wangfujing in Beijing (see SCIENCE First Hand, 2023, vol. 62, N 1), you can see carvers who will make, in a matter of hours, a most intricate seal or stamp that will bear your name and position written in exquisite hieroglyphs of the xiaozhuan script, which was introduced by Emperor Qin Shihuangdi almost 2250 years ago! A truly amazing example of preserving an ancient tradition, which has imprinted in history.

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In preparing the article, we used photos of bronze figurines from the exhibition of the Yunnan Provincial Museum (Kunming, China)

The editorial board thanks the authors for the photos they prepared and provided for publication

Street in Xi'an (*below*), *China*

Maria Kudinova, a researcher from the SB RAS Institute of Archeology and Ethnography and an author of our journal, is talking with a seal-carving master on the street in Xi'an. *Shaanxi Province, China*

Even in modern Japan, the personal hanko stamp in official papers takes precedence over the signature. It is believed that "stamps are twice as effective as handwritten visas." In *ringi* (a decision-making procedure), high importance is attached to the position of the *hanko* on the *ringisho* (the final document). "If the personal stamp is straight, it means consent. If the *hanko* is turned sideways, the owner of the stamp communicates that s/he has read the *ringisho* but cannot or does not want to express an opinion. <...> an inverted *hanko* is a sign of objection."

The Fifteenth Stone of Ryōanji Garden
by Vladimir Tsvetov