



# AN EDUCATOR'S HANDBOOK

## for Teaching about the Ancient World

Volume I

Edited by Pinar Durgun



AN EDUCATOR'S HANDBOOK  
FOR TEACHING ABOUT THE ANCIENT WORLD  
(volume I)

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Cover: Teachers (inspired by ancient Assyrian, Mayan, and Greek depictions holding teaching tools) and students (holding various school supplies) in a classroom. The image imitates the style of painted ancient stone reliefs. The colors and details are worn off. Artwork by Hannah M. Herrick.

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## Signed, Sealed, Delivered: Carving and Using Seals

By Erhan Tamur and Pinar Durgun

**Materials:** Sculpey III medium firm clay, a rolling pin; talc/baby powder; a toaster oven (optional, see the warning below), sandpaper scraps, seal stones, and seal carving tools (and a brush for cleaning)

**Preparation time:** None

**Expenses/budget:**

-Clay: A box of Sculpey III (1 lb) costs around \$15

and should be sufficient to make eight seal impressions.

-Rolling pin: The cheapest ones cost only a few dollars. One rolling pin is enough for the entire class.

-Talc/Baby powder: The most affordable ones are sold for \$2-3. 4 oz (100 grams) is certainly sufficient.

-Seal stones: Can be found in a variety of stones and sizes on Amazon/Etsy as "Chinese seal stones". If you order the "circle" stones, you can work with cylinder shaped stones. Steatite is easy to carve. A set of 5 is \$15.

-Carving tools: You need one per each student. Sets often come with 5-6 carving tools and 5 stones for \$25 plus shipping.

**Level of students:** High school to graduate

Alternative to stone and metal carving tools if you are working with

[younger audiences](#): You can use air-dry clay (Sculptit) and form your own cylinder-shaped clay seals. After they are dried, use pencils or tooth picks to carve them.



**Sites:** The ancient Near East and the Mediterranean

**Dates:** From sixth millennium BC up until the Hellenistic Period

**General background/information:** Seals were introduced in the Ancient Near East during the sixth millennium BC and used to secure and authenticate goods, rooms, and documents for millennia to come. They were also markers of individual and group identity, often acting as signatures. Additionally, particular seal stones were considered to have amuletic properties, and some of them were imported from as far as Afghanistan.

A wide range of motifs were carved or incised on their tiny surfaces, leaving a positive impression on soft clay when the seal was rolled or impressed. The most important difference between stamp and cylinder seals is that the latter can be rolled (rather than impressed) multiple times, enabling the user to make a continuous band of a scene, which dramatically increases the compositional potential of the medium.



### Instructions for the activity:

- Study reproductions of stamp and cylinder seal designs, choose one and sketch the overall design on a piece of paper. Alternatively, feel free to create your own original design!
- Consider the fact that the design you are about to carve on the seal stone will be reversed when you make the impression.
- Slightly sandpaper your stone's surface before carving it.
- Start from simple incisions marking the boundaries of your design or the silhouette of the main figure. Try to practice modelling by making your incisions deeper; and try to pay attention to particular details such as garments and headdresses.
- Carefully carve your stone. Blow or use a brush to get rid of dust.
- When the carving is completed, knead your clay into a ball and roll it out with a rolling pin into a smooth, even thickness of around 1 cm (0.4 inch).
- Spread a tiny amount of talc/baby powder on the clay so that the seal stone does not stick when you impress or roll it.
- Make your impression -- for cylinder seals, do not forget to roll the seal multiple times.
- If you like, you can bake your seal impression in a toaster oven for five minutes at 250 Fahrenheit (120 Celcius) and keep it as a souvenir.

**WARNING:** After baking a seal impression, you cannot use the same toaster oven to heat up food without cleaning it up substantially. See the [FAQ](#) "Is it safe to bake Sculpey in the same oven I use to prepare food?".

### **Learning Outcomes:**

- To discuss and learn the ways in which seals were carved and used in antiquity.
- To experience translating two-dimensional imagery into a three-dimensional medium.
- To experience workshop practices of the seal carver and the use practices of the seal owner.

### **Bibliography:**

- Collon, Dominique. 1987. *First Impressions. Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Porada, Edith. 1993. "Why Cylinder Seals? Engraved Cylindrical Seal Stones of the Ancient Near East, Fourth to First Millennium B.C." *The Art Bulletin* 75(4): 563-582.
- Sax, Margaret, John McNabb, and Nigel D. Meeks. 1998. "Methods of Engraving Mesopotamian Cylinder Seals: Experimental Confirmation." *Archaeometry* 40 (1): 1-21.

### **Online resources:**

- [Cylinder Seals: Tiny Treasures That Leave a Big Impression](#), The Met.
- [Mesopotamian Seals](#). CDLI.
- [Cylinder seals](#). Teaching History with 100 objects, British Museum.

**Notes or suggestions for instructors:** It is possible to lower the budget for the activity if you want to work with air-dry clay. Cylinder seals were often made of stones, which is why the stone gives a more authentic experience for carving and using.