

## THE “SEAL OF RODOGUNE” FROM PARTHIAN NISA

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**Abstract:** The name of Rodogune was not applied only to the well known statuette of Aphrodite Anadyomene from Parthian Nisa, but also to a seal impressed on a sealing from the Nisa Square House. Although the attribution of the seal, unlike that of the statuette, was not discussed in detail, the portrait depicted on it was recognized as that of the Arsacid princess. Actually, the head is not female, but male, and can in all likelihood be that of Apollo with a laurel wreath. The style of execution suggests a relatively late date for the seal, not before the end of the 1st century BC – 1st century AD, and allows its impression to be included in the general group of sealings from the Square House of Nisa.

**Keywords:** Parthian Nisa, Parthian seals.

The interpretation of the Aphrodite Anadyomene from Parthian Nisa (**Fig. 1**) as Rodogune, once proposed by Masson and Pugačenkova,<sup>1</sup> was not referred to the daughter of Mithridates I, who we know from Appian (*Rhōmaikà* 11.67) was given in marriage to the Seleucid king Demetrius II while he was living in the palace of Phraates II in his golden Parthian captivity, and whose fame survived antiquity so much that she was brought to the theatrical stage by Pierre Corneille in the homonymous tragedy. The reference was to the legendary character protagonist of an Armenian story reported in the 2nd century AD by Polyaeus (*Strat.* 8.27): the princess Rodogune wasted no time styling her wet hair in the bath, and at the announcement of a sudden rebellion rushed to attack the rebels; for her bravery, she was depicted on the seals of the Persian (i.e., Parthian) kings. The lack

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<sup>1</sup> The marble sculptures were published in 1957 by M. E. Masson and G. A. Pugačenkova. An abstract of their article was published in *Bibliotheca Classica Orientalis*, 7, no. 4 (1962), 219–222, and an integral translation into Italian was given in the appendix to the monograph Invernizzi 2009, 153–163, where the Aphrodite Anadyomene is the subject of a detailed stylistic examination on pages 3–41. Although literature, especially in Russian, has generally seen in the statuette a stylistic relationship with the Alexandrian production, it is certainly an autonomous masterpiece of Central Asian Hellenism.

I wish to express my thanks to Paola Piacentini for her cooperation in bibliographical research.



**Fig. 1.** Nisa, Aphrodite Anadyomene (from Invernizzi 2009, 16, fig. 1)



**Fig. 2.** Nisa, seal impression N22 (from Masson 1953, 151, fig. 9)

of concrete evidence, however, left the heroin confined within the literary sphere, and the pseudo-historical attribution was soon abandoned.

The revival here of the name of the princess is due to the fact that it was not applied only to the sculpture, but was also evoked for the seal N22, which is impressed on one of the sealings recovered in the rooms of the same building (**Fig. 2**). Unlike the statuette, which is one of the best-known finds unearthed in Nisa, the seal has been completely ignored. However, on the one hand it invites to reconsider Rodogune's relationship with Nisa, on the other hand its portrait has good reasons for attracting scholarly attention.

For the interpretative history of the Nisa finds it is interesting to note that the sculpture was automatically interpreted as Aphrodite Anadyomene at the time of its discovery (in 1949 the drapery in room XII, in 1952 the torso in the courtyard), and that became Rodogune only later, in the 1957 article. The subsequent restoration of her divine state took place gradually. G. A. Pugačenkova did not abandon the princely attribution in her monograph on the art of Turkmenistan, printed in 1967, where also the illustration bears only the caption *Rodoguna*,<sup>2</sup> and the name was confirmed in the small Nisa guide printed

<sup>2</sup> Pugačenkova 1967, 48–50, fig. 18.

in 1972.<sup>3</sup> But already in 1966 G. A. Košelenko, while adopting the “official” names of the sculptures in respect of the authority of the discoverers, and writing about the archaic statuette as *Nisijskaja boginija* (the Nisa goddess), and of Aphrodite as *Rodoguna*, puts the latter name in quotation marks.<sup>4</sup> “*Rodoguna*” also appears in 1977 in his general presentation of the results of the excavations in Nisa.<sup>5</sup> Only in 1985 V. M. Masson identifies her as a divinity in the new guide of the archaeological site,<sup>6</sup> as does V. N. Pilipko in 2001 in his monograph on the results of archaeological research in Nisa in the Soviet period,<sup>7</sup> though the name of *Afrodita Nisijskaja* used by the latter seems to hold something of the special traditional link of the sculpture with the archaeological site.

It was probably the small seal impression, which was first published in 1954 as a portrait of Rodogune, to provide tacit support to the new princely identity of the sculpture, although the interpretation of the seal was advanced solely on the basis of a lapidary bibliographic reference to the text of Polyaeus. The local collocation of the seal, in fact, is likely in terms of creation, certain in terms of use. That this historical-literary reading was not accompanied by even the slightest justification, was probably due to the fact that the authors already lent themselves to address the subject more thoroughly in the article to be printed in 1957, where, however, the seal is no more discussed. In any case, the loose hair of the statuette on the one hand and the relationship of the seal with the female portrait to the royal administration on the other corresponded to the essential data of the legend—the loose hair of the princess and her appearance on the royal seals—and could therefore support each other.

The attempt to read Aphrodite Anadyomene and the portrait on the seal as Rodogune should be seen in the situation of the classical studies in Moscow at the time, dominated by the strong scientific personality of V. D. Blavatskij, whose wide erudition emerges from the pages of the 1957 paper. In fact, the strong Hellenistic character of many Nisa finds, including the architectural features, in a region of which very little was known, influenced their interpretation already in the initial stages of the research. In the search for possible ancient models for the first excavation results, the attribution of two artefacts to Rodogune may after all be understandable, all the more so because the portrait seal was unique among those of the royal administration found in Nisa, and apparently remains so still today in Parthia.

The sealing on which the seal is impressed belongs to the group recovered in different rooms of the Square House, which for a long time was our main source of information on Parthian glyptics and sphragistics. Its close link with the Arsacid ceremonial complex of central importance for the dynasty, which is the citadel of Old Nisa, lends it a particularly representational value. So, M. E. Masson immediately announced the discovery of the seal in 1953, in a short preliminary report on the work carried out by the Nisa mission in the 1950–1951 campaigns. The report includes a preview of the enlarged image of

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<sup>3</sup> Pugačenkova 1972, 18–19.

<sup>4</sup> Košelenko 1966, 37.

<sup>5</sup> Košelenko 1977, 94, 97, fig. 36–37.

<sup>6</sup> Masson 1985, cover flap.

<sup>7</sup> Pilipko 2001, 264, fig. 186.

the seal impression N22 (**Fig. 2**), but the figure is not accompanied here by any specific commentary, and serves only as an example of the sealings recovered<sup>8</sup>.

The overall publication of the unearthed sealings followed in 1954, by M. E. Masson and G. A. Pugačenkova,<sup>9</sup> and may perhaps be judged too timely, since the lack of a subsequent final excavation report and the incompleteness of the information entrusted to the article, in particular about the specific discovery context of each sealing, is a serious obstacle not only to the clarification of the general functioning of the archival operations of the materials in the various rooms of the treasury, but also, in particular, to the definition of the chronology and interpretation of the individual sealings and original seals. In their article, the authors provided only brief descriptions of the subjects and general indications on the type of the seals. They recognize 50 iconographic motifs impressed by as many seals, sometimes on more than one sealing. The seal motifs are illustrated by scale drawings, replaced in three cases by photographs. Type N22 is one of the three, but the key illustrative document remains the one published in 1953.

The Nisa sealings have then entered in the repertoire. M. A. R. Colledge redesigns a selection of seal motifs in a different technique to illustrate his volume on Parthian art,<sup>10</sup> but our seal is not among those chosen, and no mention of it is made in the text. The comments by G. A. Košelenko to the corpus of Nisa seals in his presentation of documents from Parthia and Margiana are aimed at the cultural framework of the main groups of subjects and are devoid of illustrations.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the seal is ignored by Košelenko's and Pilipko in the presentation and the illustrative table of the main seal motifs of Parthia, in the monograph on the cultures of the Caucasus and Central Asia.<sup>12</sup>

A re-examination of the original sealings, which are preserved in the Ashgabat National Museum, is resumed in 1992 by A. B. Nikitin, who, however, republishes only a small number of them, with the kit of good photographs taken by S. D. Nikitin.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, our seal is not among those reviewed. The communication presented by A. N. Bader at the 1993 Turin conference on archives and seals in the Hellenistic world updates on the state of research on the sealings and inscriptions of the Nisa collection. The author writes that, apart from the 50 seal impressions of the 1954 publication, "quite a lot of poorly preserved exemplars remain unpublished. The total number of sealings with traces of impressions far surpasses the number of published impressions."<sup>14</sup>

Košelenko takes up Bader's plates, but makes no comments specifically referable to the seal N22.<sup>15</sup> The plates of both authors reproduce the entire set of seals published by Masson and Pugačenkova, but replace with drawings the photographs of the three seals of the original publication (N22 among them). The drawings of the three seals are of the same style as the others and were probably taken from the original graphic typology drawn by the excavators. In publishing the plates of the 50 seal types, Bader notes in

<sup>8</sup> Masson 1953, 151–152, fig. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Masson – Pugačenkova 1954, 159–169.

<sup>10</sup> Colledge 1977, 102, fig. 42: F–M.

<sup>11</sup> Košelenko 1977, 138–140.

<sup>12</sup> Košelenko – Pilipko 1985, 377, pl. 89.

<sup>13</sup> Nikitin 1993/1994. An identical version of this text in Russian language was published in 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Bader 1996, 395.

<sup>15</sup> Košelenko 2005.



**Fig. 3.** Nisa, seal impression N22 (from Bader 1996, 403, fig. B22)



**Fig. 4.** Nisa, seal impression N22 (from Pilipko 2001, 319, fig. 229, no. 16)

general that many drawings are not faithful to the originals, though without going into detail. It can be taken for sure that the drawing of the seal N22 (**Fig. 3**) is among those judged to be inaccurate by Bader, because it is really difficult to recognize the head of the 1953 photograph in the drawing.

A qualitative leap in the study of the Nisa sealings takes place in 2001, when Paolo Mollo, on the occasion of the excavation campaign of the Centro Scavi e Ricerche Archeologiche di Torino per il Medio Oriente e l'Asia, faces the systematic re-examination of what he was able to examine in Ashgabat. The results obtained by him are very satisfactory, compatibly with the limitations caused by the lack of an excavation report. Good photographs made by M. Gonella of both, the sealings and the original impressions, and a new set of drawings by the author illustrate Mollo's study. The drawings are naturally of great importance because the generally careless impression of the seals on the clay does not help to fully evaluate their iconographic and stylistic features. In his research in the Ashgabat museum, however, Mollo found no trace of some sealings.<sup>16</sup> Type N22 is unfortunately among the missing items, and is therefore not included in his new rearrangement, which is composed of 43 different subjects for a total of 94 impressions. Other seal impressions found in the recent excavations of the SW Building<sup>17</sup> have increased the number of the Nisa glyptic material.

<sup>16</sup> Mollo 2001, 174.

<sup>17</sup> Lippolis 2010, fig. 6–7; Manassero 2010; Manassero 2014; Manassero 2015.

Lastly, a new graphic image of our seal appears in 2001 in the table that illustrates a selection of Nisa seal impressions in V. N. Pilipko's general book about Nisa (**Fig. 4**).<sup>18</sup> The subject, redrawn in simple linear outlines, is finally recognizable, but once again there is no mention of it in the text, which merely defines the character of the various groups of subjects. It is not known whether the author was able to execute the drawing directly from the original or if he obtained it from the enlarged photograph published in 1953. In conclusion, the old photographic image is fortunately of good quality, higher than the average of the illustrations in the Soviet publications of those years, and allows for well-founded judgements, although of course the impossibility of a comparison with the original sets limits.

In their publication,<sup>19</sup> Masson and Pugačenkova note that the seal N22 stands apart from the rest of the group, that the profile setting of the head follows the Seleucid tradition of the 2nd century BC, and that the style of execution suggests a date within the Hellenistic age, in the 2nd–1st century BC, in a time older than that of most seals. In the face, they do not recognize a generic type, but individual features suggesting the portrait of a person of the Arsacid ruling house. Given the absence of the crown on the head, which is instead worn by queen Musa on the coins, they interpret the image as the portrait of a princess, precisely of Rodogune on the simple reference to the Polyaeus passage that will soon be at the centre of the interpretation of the Anadyomene as Rodogune, despite the comparison with the head of a seal in a coarser style from Seleucia on the Tigris, dated to the 2nd century AD, and interpreted dubiously by Debevoise as Aphrodite.<sup>20</sup>

The attribution of the seal to Rodogune, stated without discussion, is completely ignored in the subsequent scientific literature, indeed silence will almost always weigh on the seal N22. A. Bader, the only subsequent commentator, defines it “rather unusual: a profile of a woman to the right. It seems to be a local copy of a Hellenistic gem. The impression is not of very high quality, so we may suppose a local production of the gem.”<sup>21</sup>

Although there is no concrete reason in favour of a seal of Rodogune, whose historical personality is completely evanescent, the portrait of the seal N22, an iconographic type of clear Hellenistic origin, is nevertheless of particular interest, as it is isolated among the official seals of Nisa, where there are impressions of other seals with subjects of Hellenistic origin, in particular representations of Greek divinities, but in a different iconography and a much simpler style of execution.

In fact, the attribution of the seal N22 to a character of the ruling house is not only questionable, it is even doubtful that it represents a female portrait. It is first of all questionable that the engraver intended to represent a realistic portrait, as the publishers believed, while the possibility of an ideal portrait remains open. The general expression of the face looks in fact generic in its almost astonished fixity. The physiognomic features are regular, only the chin can be considered particularly prominent, but the detail does not appear realistic, compared to the many sure portraits, in particular of Ptolemaic rulers, whose prominent chin looks like a dynastic iconographic trait, but also of Seleucid kings.

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<sup>18</sup> Pilipko 2001, 319, fig. 229, no. 16.

<sup>19</sup> Masson – Pugačenkova 1954, 167.

<sup>20</sup> Debevoise 1938, fig. 126:c.

<sup>21</sup> Bader 1996, 398.



**Fig. 5.** Seleucia on the Tigris, Antiochus III, seal impression (from Messina 2004a, 37, 41, no. Se 13: S7–3339, pls. 16 and III)



**Fig. 6.** Dionysus, intaglio (from Spier 1992, 21, no. 21)

In the portrait of Antiochus III on a sealing from Seleucia (**Fig. 5**),<sup>22</sup> the detail has a naturalistic effect completely different from the generic one of the Nisa head, thanks to the relief dosage of the modelling, while taking of course into account the very different quality of execution. Not only that. An unusually pronounced chin sometimes characterizes the gods themselves, as shown by the ideal head of Dionysus with the ivy wreath on an intaglio from the late 2nd–1st century BC in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, said to come from Iran but believed to be of a Ptolemaic production referable to the Ptolemaic royal ideology (**Fig. 6**),<sup>23</sup> a Dionysus with a chin perhaps worthy of the Lagids, but with nose, mouth and eye cut schematically.

The Nisa head, as commonly occurs in seal impressions, is not impressed with care, and the surfaces with the strongest relief, on the central axis of the head, are worn and confused. Only the front profile is clear-cut, other descriptive details are uncertain. Clear are the strings of hair that go down parallel from the upper head profile, two small protrusions above the forehead, and a slight hair swelling at the nape; the rest of the surface is worn, including the ear. However, despite the difficulty of judging individual details on the basis of photography alone, the general iconography of the Nisa head is understandable.

<sup>22</sup> Messina 2004a, I: 37, 41, no. Se 13: S7–3339, pls. 16 and III. Poor care of the impression often affects the reading of the iconographic details. The physiognomic features of the portrait of Seleucus I on the seal of the chreophylax of Seleucia on the Tigris, for example, acquire different evidence depending on the different degree of inaccuracy of the impression, as shown in the limited choice of images of the different seal impressions in Messina 2004a, I: 35, 39, pls. 15 and I.

<sup>23</sup> Spier 1989, 29, 33, no. 48, fig. 31; Spier 1992, 21, no. 21; Plantzos 1999, 81, 125, no. 349, pl. 53. According to Plantzos, this type of Dionysus is not limited to the Alexandrian area, but “seems to have evolved simultaneously at other centres.”



**Fig. 7.** Xanten, Venus with stephane, intaglio (from Simonenko 2011, 122, fig. 73: 2)



**Fig. 8.** Aphrodite, intaglio (from Spier 1989, no. 8, fig. 10)

The editors have not discussed the iconography in detail; however, they have probably attributed the protuberances above the forehead to a stephane, which is consistent with their definition of a princely female portrait. In fact, the upper prominence could adapt to the tip of a stephane, and the one on the front to the hair rolled up along the face, as in the Venus portrait on a sardonic from the 2nd half of the 1st century BC from Xanten (**Fig. 7**),<sup>24</sup> or in that of a gem in the Walters Art Gallery coming perhaps from Syria (**Fig. 8**),<sup>25</sup> which probably represents Aphrodite, and whose context of creation is referable to the celebration of a Ptolemaic queen of the 2nd–1st century BC. In a country continually disputed between Rome and the Parthians, such as Armenia, O. Neverov recognizes in one of the seal impressions of the Artaxata archives the portrait of Octavia with the stephane of Venus, an attribution that in the catalogue of Ž. Hačatrjan is more cautiously supplemented with a question mark.<sup>26</sup>

The stephane is the ornament of Hera and above all of Aphrodite, but also of other divinities, like Artemis. In Delos, the goddess is represented on a conspicuous group of sealings with a thin-tipped stephane and the long hair folded on the top of the head, while a different type of portrait with stephane and small chignon at the nape, possibly comparable to the Nisa head, is much less numerous.<sup>27</sup> In more general terms the stephane is a typical female ornament, and Roman matrons aspired to represent themselves as god-

<sup>24</sup> Platz-Horster 1987, 38, pl. 13:68; Simonenko 2011, 122, fig. 73:2. Cf. the intaglio from the mid-1st century BC from Dalmatia depicting Juno or Venus: Middleton 1991, 109, pl. 188; Simonenko 2011, 122, fig. 73:6.

<sup>25</sup> Spier 1989, 22, 23, 31, no. 8, fig. 10; Plantzos 1999, 80, 125, no. 335, pl. 52.

<sup>26</sup> Hačatrjan – Neverov 2008, 110–111, no. I.44, and 133, no. I.44 respectively.

<sup>27</sup> Boussac 1992, 150–163, no. Ap 123–310, and 163–164, no. Ap 311–327 respectively.





**Fig. 9.** Ptolemaic queen with a laurel wreath, intaglio (from Vollenweider 1995, no. 109, pl. 60)



**Fig. 10.** Seleucia on the Tigris, Male head, seal impression (from Messina 2004a, no. TM 205, pl. 33)

desses with this ornament on their heads, as for example the lady on a gem dating from the end of the republic—early empire, to the period 40 BC – 1st century AD.<sup>28</sup>

The Nisa portrait might therefore represent a divinity with *stephane*, more than an anonymous Arsacid princess. In the ornament, however, instead of the *stephane*, it is possible to see a laurel wreath with a double series of leaves, of which the two upper terminal leaves are corresponding to the two visible reliefs. The subsequent course of the laurel towards the nape cannot be followed due to wear of the surfaces, it can only be said that the ends of the laces of a possible knot were not represented. The laurel wreath appears rarely on the head of female figures, though it adorns, for example, the queen, once again Ptolemaic, of the gem in the Paris Cabinet des Médailles (**Fig. 9**) believed to be Cleopatra II or Arsinoe III,<sup>29</sup> or the queen of another gem from the same collection, believed to be Cleopatra II assimilated to Hygeia.<sup>30</sup> Another reading of the attribute, less likely, might be a crown of ears, such as the one that adorns the head of Demeter on a gem from the former de Clercq collection.<sup>31</sup>

The laurel wreath seems to me the most likely attribute on the Nisa head. However, the laurel wreath is a characteristic male ornament and, on a closer unbiased inspection, the slender face of this unrealistic portrait appears to be better suited to male types. On the whole, the interpretation as a male head is in fact preferable to that of a female head. Female faces generally have fuller proportions, and in our seal the swollen hair at the nape hardly fits a female chignon. In the corpus of the seal impressions from the Seleucia

<sup>28</sup> Vollenweider 1984, 172, no. 291.

<sup>29</sup> Respectively Vollenweider 1995, 119–120, no. 109, pl. 60, and Plantzos 1999, 49, 114, no. 34, pl. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Vollenweider 1995, 117–118, no. 106, pl. 59.

<sup>31</sup> Spier 1989, 24, 27, no. 34, fig. 23.

on the Tigris Archives, which constitutes the most important evidence for the glyptics and sphragistics of Seleucid Mesopotamia for number of seals and variety of types, the chapter of the heads, male and female, is one of the richest. The style of execution of the heads, especially female, varies between the opposite extremes of naturalism and schematic decomposition of the features, and is generally not such as to suggest physiognomic portraits, although obviously single seals were possibly considered ideal or intentional portraits by the owners of the intaglios. The motifs with heads, male or female, are by contrast much less numerous than other subjects among the seal impressions of the Artaxata archives, which document the Armenian sphragistics between the 2nd century BC and the 1st half of the 1st century AD.

In Seleucia, female heads generally have the hair gathered at the nape in a chignon that is well defined in shape and evident in size, sometimes with the addition of a ribbon.<sup>32</sup> By comparison, the tiny swollen hair of the original seal N22, which is carved in high relief, can hardly fit a female chignon. This slight swelling looks the natural hair lapel at the nape of the short male—more rarely female (**Fig. 8**)—hair, the thickness of which along the face is not recognizable because the surface is worn. If so, the two protuberances may both belong to a laurel wreath, of which nothing else can be glimpsed any more, or, alternatively, one to the laurel and the other to the frontal tuft of hair.

For this male head, one will hardly think of an Arsacid ruler, and a divine identity is most probable. Among the gods, Apollo is certainly the favourite. Apollo crowned with laurel leaves is a very common subject in Hellenistic glyptics and sphragistics, both as a purely religious motif and in possible reference to the royal state, specifically being the dynastic god of the Seleucids. In the corpus of the Delos sealings the iconographic and stylistic variants of the heads of Apollo with a laurel wreath are very numerous,<sup>33</sup> and his hair rolled along his face often thickens into a more or less important swelling or bun at the nape. Similar variants are also observed in Seleucia.<sup>34</sup>

In Seleucia, the arrangement of the hair in the form of a roll in relief along the face is frequent for male heads without a diadem, portraits of common characters or ideal heads.<sup>35</sup> In this group, the variants of execution of the roll termination at the nape, more or less slightly prominent, offer good parallels to the corresponding detail of the Nisa Apollo. The head of sealing S6-2632<sup>36</sup> is a good example of this type of short hairstyle (**Fig. 10**).

The face of our seal can easily be compared to that of Apollo with a laurel wreath on seal S7-406 from Seleucia (**Fig. 11**),<sup>37</sup> known from several impressions, although it differs in the hairstyle falling in long curls on the neck, a rather common hairstyle for Apollo (**Fig. 12**),<sup>38</sup> while at Nisa the hair roll is short and completely worn. In the seal impression from Seleucia the laurel wreath is composed of two leaves in weak relief, but only one of the upper terminal leaves protrudes in strong relief from the head profile,

<sup>32</sup> Messina 2004a, pls. 45–53, XIV–XVI.

<sup>33</sup> Boussac 1992, 90–95, pls. 29–33.

<sup>34</sup> Messina 2004b, 50–51, no. ApT 10, pl. 25.

<sup>35</sup> Messina 2004a, pls. 30–31.

<sup>36</sup> Messina 2004a, 74, no. TM 205, pl. 33.

<sup>37</sup> Messina 2004b, 52, no. ApT 33, pls. 26, IV.

<sup>38</sup> Spier 1992, 89, no. 207.



**Fig. 11.** Seleucia on the Tigris, Apollo with a laurel wreath, seal impression (from Messina 2004b, no. ApT 33, pls. 26, IV)



**Fig. 12.** Apollo with a laurel wreath, intaglio (from Spier 1992, 89, no. 207)



**Fig. 13.** Apollo with a laurel wreath, intaglio (from Mandrioli Bizzarri 1987, 83, no. 123)

the second, perhaps already executed in weaker relief on the original seal, is instead impressed very faintly. The hair strings of the Nisa head, depicted by incisions on the head, clearly run along the face like a smooth or worn raised band. The elongated proportions of the face, the apparently parted lips and the heavy chin are also comparable, so much so as to suggest the dependence of the two seals on an ideal model. This Apollo type is widespread and lasts for a long time. A Roman carnelian from the 1st century AD in the Archaeological Museum of Bologna<sup>39</sup> (**Fig. 13**) can be cited in comparison for the general proportions, for the two-leaf laurel wreath and for the banded hair along the face, only a little longer at the nape.

The Apollo of the Nisa seal is distinguished by a particular treatment of the drapery. The long neck seems to emerge from an unusual collar of folds, which are clearly modelled only in the front, worn in the back. The very first folds, in front, go straight down, but soon curve slightly and seem to continue like this up to the back. The absence of a neckline distinguishes this dress from the common drapery treatment of the Hellenistic portraits from Seleucia and can be interpreted as a simplified rendering of a richer drapery.

The tendency towards a richer drapery and a portrait cut including the shoulders is clear in Hellenistic glyptics, and is particularly favoured by the cameo technique. The portrait of a Ptolemaic princess assimilated to Artemis, for example, is framed by the folds of the chlamys, which is tied on the right shoulder and falls from the left shoulder in enveloping curves.<sup>40</sup> The numerous portraits of Ptolemy VIII, IX, X and especially of Ptolemy XV Caesarion on the sealings from Edfu offer a wide range of variations in the rich treatment of the drapery.<sup>41</sup> In the aforementioned carnelian from the Bologna museum (**Fig. 13**), a bundle of folds lies on the left shoulder of the god, from which one comes off to go up to the right shoulder so framing the portrait. The enveloping design of the folds just outlined around the neck of the Nisa Apollo, in its mechanical schematism, can probably be considered the transformation of models of this type in a late age.

The identification with Rodogune involved a high date of the seal, which in addition to being an exception in the group for the subject, was also chronologically isolated from the remaining seals, that the context of use and the sealing operations of the rooms of the Square House place in a late period. The interpretation as Apollo, instead, allows the seal N22 to be joined to the general group of representations of Greek gods, while the style of execution, in particular of the drapery, brings it to share the chronology of the rest of the sealings, in a date not before the end of the 1st century BC – 1st century AD.<sup>42</sup>

The motif of the seal N22 nevertheless remains isolated, with its representation of a divine head, while the remaining Greek deities are full-length and much more simplified in style. Isolated the seal is not only in Nisa, but apparently also in Parthia. The excavations of the fortress of Göbekly-depe in Margiana led to the recovery of a large number of sealings relating to the management of assets and economic resources. Their study

<sup>39</sup> Mandrioli Bizzarri 1987, 83, no. 123.

<sup>40</sup> Vollenweider 1995, 110–111, no. 99, pl. 56.

<sup>41</sup> Kyrieleis 2015, pls. 2–8 (Ptolemy VIII); 9–12 (Ptolemy IX); 13–21 (Ptolemy X); 34–56 (Ptolemy XV).

<sup>42</sup> Three seal impressions on a khum are now added to the glyptic material from the Square House (Nikitin – Gaibov 2020, fig. 1–2).

opens a new decisive phase for the advancement of our knowledge not only of the administrative practice in the Parthian provinces of Central Asia, thanks to the availability of excavation data, but also of the art and iconography of Parthian glyptics and sphragistics, including the ideological aspects. The Göbekly-depe seal impressions published so far<sup>43</sup> significantly expand the Nisa repertoire, but no motif among those published so far is comparable to that of the seal N22, which still remains exceptional within the royal Arsacid administrative management.

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