

PREFACE

Half a century ago when I was a senior at Dreher High School in Columbia, South Carolina, the Anchor Club, a girls' service organization arranged a day in an adult work place for each and every student in the senior class, who was willing to spend a single workday in a place of business and bring home a paycheck paid to the order of the Anchor Club in support of its activities of service to the community.

I was sent to Edisto Farms Dairy, a company which supplied milk and milk products such as cottage cheese, sour cream, and ice cream to stores and homes throughout the area. My supervisor for the day of clerical work I performed at Edisto Farms Dairy was Charlie Foster, who took me to lunch at the Rotary Club where once each week members of the business elite met, ate lunch together, and heard a lecture on one or another topic related to science, government, religion, education or what have you by a gifted speaker from near or from far.

As he was driving me to the luncheon meeting of the Rotary Club, Charlie Foster told me that when he was younger he very much enjoyed collecting stamps and reading books because such interests, which involved holding objects — such as stamps or books — close to the eyes, were appropriate for a person who was nearsighted. However, Charlie Foster explained, as one became middle-aged and consequently far-sighted rather than nearsighted, one tended to find much less pleasure and interest in activities such as stamp collecting and reading books, which are, indeed, most appropriate for persons who are nearsighted.

Naturally, this insight into the function of nearsightedness and farsightedness in the choice of leisure activities intersects with and confirms the validity of Rony Feingold's conjecture that the artists who sought and successfully found employment in the ancient

Near East as cutters of cylinder seals were likely to have been nearsighted.

This particularly brilliant insight is an especially apt illustration of the way in which in the fascinating book you are about to read, Rony Feingold has gone far beyond all previous studies of the cylinder seals of ancient Babylonia and surrounding areas of the ancient Near East. Important previous studies of cylinder seals concentrated on the iconography of the mythological scenes and the body language depicted on cylinder seals. Rony Feingold has done something more. She has, as it were, gotten into the shoes of or, if you will, the fingers of the seal cutters to attempt to understand these people, the materials with which they worked, and the day to day interaction between the materials, the seal cutters, and the women and men, who ordered original seals for the conduct of their businesses or who requested the alteration of old seals just as moderns might make use of someone else's heirloom furniture, fine china, or flatware.

It was my very good fortune to be present at a graduate seminar at the Department of Bible, Archaeology and Ancient Near East at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, when Rony Feingold gave a power-point presentation concerning various aspects of a data-base of one thousand cylinder seals.

It should be recalled that in the study of the ancient Near East in modern times priority had been given first and foremost to monumental art that enhanced the prestige of famous museums such as the Louvre in Paris, the Pergamon in Berlin, and the British Museum at London. Perhaps, second in importance to monumental art depicting historical figures and events were texts, which shed previously unknown light upon historical events, which correlated with the narratives of Hebrew Scripture (commonly called the Old Testament) and/or the writings of ancient Greek historians such as Herodotus and Xenophon. Small objects such as the tokens and their envelopes, on the basis of which Denise Schmandt-Besserat reconstructed the beginnings of the shared history of both writing and counting (alluded to in the question raised in the Babylonian Talmud, Qiddushin 30a as to why the early sages of Proto-Rabbinic Judaism were called *sopherim*, which can mean both counters and writers) were largely ignored until the last quarter of the twentieth century CE.

An important exception to the rule that small objects interested scholars and laypersons less than large objects was the cylinder seal (and the seal impression), whose function in business transactions (identifying the source of a particular barrel of wine, for example) was apparent and the value of whose iconography for the study of the history of religions and mythologies was equally obvious early on.

Consequently, it ought to be said that while Schmandt-Besserat in her monumental studies of the history of writing and counting has shed great light on the previously unknown as did Gershom Scholem in his monumental studies of the history and varieties of Jewish mysticism, Rony Feingold has exemplified the very best of the tradition of learning here at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, where greatness is achieved by shedding powerful new light on a subject, which we thought we already knew.

I could not put this book down because it reads like a detective novel, and I am certain that you the reader, be you a fluent reader of ancient Babylonian cuneiform writing, a beginning student of the world of the Bible, or an educated layperson, who can devote only a small portion of her or his leisure hours to discovering new knowledge concerning the seals and the seal cutters of the ancient Near East, will agree that the story Ms. Feingold tells is totally exciting. She exposes for us aspects of the daily life of businesswomen and businessmen in antiquity who depended on the seal cutter in order to carry on their work. Of no mean importance is the section of *Engraved on Stone* devoted to seals produced for women, which challenges the still widespread male chauvinist myth that women in antiquity did not engage in business but simply stayed at home and cooked and cleaned and took care of their families.

Modern counterparts of the ancient seal cutter, in terms of their importance for the work that we do, include but are not limited to the women and men — often anonymous — who debug our computers, create our software, and produce the graphics that sell our products, illustrate the textbooks used to educate our health-care deliverers, and enable us to compete for contracts in finance, engineering, and educational technology.

One of my great and famous mentors, Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, taught me that a great institution of learning is a place where you meet great people. One of the truly great people I

encountered during thirty-one years at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, is Rony Feingold, who shows us in the book you are about to read how some of the smallest objects in the museum cases of typical museums of the ancient Near East, can open up to us a world of human experience that we had never imagined and which, hopefully, will evoke in us a sense of gratitude to the anonymous seal cutters of antiquity and their functional equivalents in our places of work, our schools, our hospitals, and in the world of entertainment.

Mayer I. Gruber
Professor, Department of Bible Archaeology and Ancient Near East
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
Beer-Sheva, Israel