

## Data Description and the Integrated Study of Ancient Near Eastern Works of Art: The Potential of Cylinder Seals

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... Roboti si všechno pamatují, ale nic víc.  
Dokonce se ani nesmějí tomu, co lidé říkají.<sup>1</sup>

KAREL ČAPEK, *R.U.R. Rossum's Universal Robots* (1920)



For several decades, the investigation of ancient Near Eastern cultures has needed to operate within a complex situation of modern conflicts and political instability. In some areas of great importance, such as Mesopotamia (situated in present-day Iraq and Syria), direct contact between scholars and archaeological sites and museums has been almost completely interrupted for decades, and the integrity of cultural heritage is now very precarious across Western Asia. Furthermore, since the beginning of the age of modern archaeological exploration in the region, both authorized excavations and (especially) illicit digs and the flourishing market for antiquities have led to the international dispersion of ancient artifacts into public and private collections. This removal of material products of ancient cultures from their regions of origin brings with it multiple complications affecting the work of the researcher. Most significantly, it limits the opportunity for a clear interpretation of the artifacts and the correct historiography of the civilizations to which they pertain. This is true in particular for most ancient Western Asiatic cultures, of which the largest part remained forgotten for many centuries, and a number

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1 “The robots remember everything, but that’s all they do. They don’t even laugh at what people tell them.” (Translated from the original Czech by David Wyllie for Penguin’s edition of the drama, London-New York, 2004).

are still very poorly known. The lack of continuity through the ages of a historical memory of these peoples, including testimony relating to most of their contacts with other cultures (especially Mediterranean Europe) and the transmission of their own traditions, puts the scholar at risk for very easy misunderstandings and involuntary prejudices. Visual language or written documents, for example, can frequently become sources for a large number of ambiguities and misinterpretations, since their contents can be seemingly familiar, but the comprehension of their contexts of origin, and especially of their relative cultural values,<sup>2</sup> is very often insufficient.

The traditional art-historical approach finds in the artifacts themselves enough information that the loss of knowledge about their find contexts does not present a serious hurdle to their interpretation. One consequence of this approach is that interpretations that could seem obvious, evident, or taken for granted can hardly be incorporated with other evidence resulting from the same (or a closely related) context. Therefore, this paper advocates for the contextualized interpretation of materials, since the lives and possible meanings of ancient artifacts are very dynamic, and their interpretation is equally dynamic and complex.

### Approaching Artifacts

In addition to find contexts (when such information is available), cross-comparison and experimental approaches open the way for new perspectives on ancient materials, including promising re-studies of long-known corpora. New studies of old corpora are needed especially when the material is of unknown or not homogeneously documented provenance. For those who are accustomed to the use of digital tools, it is not surprising that quantitative and computer-aided methods and procedures can play a central role in this research,

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2 The issue of relative cultural values pertains to the proper contextualization of the values of symbols and concepts that are expressed through images or written words. The scholar needs to face not only the deciphering of their possible meanings and roles in the specific context of use, but also the factors that played a role in their production, perception, and interpretation in the original cultures. Furthermore, it is of great importance to locate the logical context in which such production and perception acted, since it is fundamental for the identification of the correct historical and cultural contexts in which these witnesses acted. For example, modes of communication related to an oral and rural context need to be considered according to general logical principles that are very different from those coming from official written sources (on this theme see, for example, Goody 1986).