1. **Know Your Collection and Digitization Goals**

- How many ways can a single object be documented / represented?
- What are the artistic and functional qualities of the objects you seek to document?
- Who is your audience and what are their most basic and most advanced needs?
- Do objects need conservation treatment or other forms of documentation?
- What are your limitations in resources and your areas of expertise?

The Yale Babylonian Collection (YBC) Seal Digitization Project took a cultural heritage approach to documentation—aiming for the standardization of photographs rather than artistic approach in which the qualities of each object is brought out by individually-specified lighting and processing protocols. Our goal was to create a compareable way for specialists and non-specialists.

Right: Stamp seals in the YBC were photographed from 6 sides using standardized camera settings for HDR photography and a color chart. Each seal was assigned a number, and each seal was made and photographed as a set. Assembled into a single plate, the 7 images provide a sense of the object, its function(s), and engraved imagery.

### WHAT IS A SEAL?

- A small object made from various materials (natural and man-made) carved into different shapes
- An administrative device that can be stamped or rolled to create an impression
- A wearable object that could have protective properties

Over 4,000 cylinder and stamp seals exist in the Yale Babylonian Collection, dating from ca. 6,000 BCE – 600 CE. Examples of ancient cylinder and stamp seals are known from across West Asia and beyond. It is estimated that some 10,000 cylinders and an unknown (possibly greater) number of stamp seal exist in collections around the world.

2. **Organize Objects by Visual Types in Advance**

- Consider material and size/shape
- Various materials present contradictory lighting, photography, and processing challenges
- Miniature objects can be difficult to balance or may require different photographic approaches depending on their size and shape
- Try documenting different objects to determine steps in documentation

### METHODS FOR CAPTURING SMALL CYLINDRICAL OBJECTS

**Orange Monkey Turntable with DSLR Camera, Light(s), and Software:**

- **Pros:** affordable and portable; produced high-quality results; objects can be difficult to process; quality dependent on skills of the photographer
- **Cons:** transparency

**4x5 Better Light Scanning Back System with Panoramic Adaptor, Cyclorama, and Software:**

- **Pros:** increased standardization and automation
- **Cons:** cost and size of equipment

For small collections we recommend a turntable method. Contact the YBC to learn more about ongoing Better Light developments.

3. **Decide How to Track the Progress of the Project**

- What are the individual stages of the project?
- Who will be responsible for each stage?
- Will you remove all objects from collection storage at once or in phases?
- What information do you need to process images?
- When will you perform a quality check and how?

The YBC used Excel documents to track the progress of a multi-component seal digitization project, identifying which activities needed to be performed by the postdoctoral associate and which could be achieved by university students working at the collection. Images were checked at multiple stages, and all photographs (and impresses) were measured, with measurements entered into Excel documents.

4. **Hire the Right People at the Right Times**

- What level of expertise is required to interpret the objects for photography?
- What are the contributions that a specialist in the material vs. a specialist in digitization will offer the project?
- What resources are already available to you?

As the YBC, a grant-funded Postdoctoral Associate led the digitization project with the help of over 15 undergraduate and graduate students over a two-year period. The collection had the most success working with students during the summer, when it was possible to offer positions for 20-40 hours per week. Summer student workers were given a 4-day introduction to the material and then assigned specific tasks that were part of the larger digitization project. Photographers and digital humanities specialists on campus helped advise in the project and the setup of photography stations. The Postdoctoral Associate was responsible for sorting objects, photographing stamp seal, training students, and performing quality checks.

### LEARN MORE!

- Visit the Yale Babylonian Collection’s website (https://babyloniancollection.yale.edu/) or follow us on Instagram (@yalebabyloniancollection) or Facebook (YaleIsraelABCD)
- E-mail Elizabeth with questions at ekj324@yale.edu
- Visit the Babylonian collection@yale.edu to sign up for notifications regarding a forthcoming open-access best practices publication

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