Map of the Islamic World
heast Asia
Conventions used in this book

The word ‘seal’ can mean both the object used for stamping, sometimes called the ‘seal matrix’, and the mark made by the seal matrix when pressed in a medium such as ink or wax onto paper, called the ‘seal impression’, ‘seal stamp’ or ‘sealing’. The specific meaning of ‘seal’ is usually clear from the context, and in this book the word ‘seal’ is used to refer to both seal matrix and seal impression. Seal matrices are carved in ‘negative’ or mirror-wise, so that the inscription reads in ‘positive’ when stamped. The formal term for the study of seals is ‘sigillography’.

The photographs of seal matrices shown here have all been reversed, to enable the inscriptions to be read in positive, unless the emphasis of the photograph is to show the handle or setting of the seal.

Captions to illustrations of a single seal present the inscription in a number of different ways. For most seals the inscription is transliterated with English translation, where appropriate; for very lengthy or formulaic inscriptions a description of the contents will be given. If the focus of the accompanying text is on specific aspects of the seal, such as physical characteristics or date, then full readings may not always be given. Other information presented when available: medium (of matrix); dimensions in mm of the longest side of the seal face; manuscript source for seal impressions, and date; holding institution and accession number. Seal matrices from the British Museum include a reference number commencing ‘P’ which is the catalogue number in Porter 2011. Seals from Southeast Asia include a reference number commencing with a hash ‘#’ which refers to the record number in Gallop 2002.

For simplicity diacritics have not been used in the spellings of Arabic words except for ‘ayn and hamza.

Transliterations are presented according to standard local conventions for Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Malay. This means that a personal name may be written in different ways depending on geographical origin, for example, ‘Abd al-Majid (Arabic), Abdülmecid (Turkish) or Abdul Majid (Malay).

It should be noted that the Arabic letter shin is transliterated ‘sy’ in Malay and Indonesian, and not ‘sh’. This means that words of Arabic or Persian origin such as Shah and Sayyid are spelt Syah and Syaiikh in a Southeast Asian context.

When two dates are given in the form ‘1276/1859 – 60’, the first is the AH date and the second is the AD date.

The authors of the texts are identified on the contents page. Seals from the collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia were selected, read and described by Dr Heba Nayel Barakat, Nurul Iman Rizali, Ras Mahwati Ahmad Zakaria and Fariba Roomi of the Curatorial Affairs Department of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.
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The following abbreviations are used:

BL – British Library
BM – British Museum
IAMM – Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia

a. – circa, approximately

b. – century
c. – died
d. – folio

r. – recto, the first page of a folio
v. – verso, the second page of a folio

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Islamic seals are extremely valuable sources for the social, political and religious history of the Muslim world, but one reason that their potential has not been fully realised is that the study of seal matrices and seal impressions have tended to inhabit separate spheres. Seal matrices, as small discrete objects made of hard material such as stone or metal, can be found today in many museums and private collections. They are usually classified, stored and catalogued alongside other artefacts of similar size and form, such as coins, rings and especially amulets, which resemble seals in that they bear inscriptions but are carved in positive and are not designed to be stamped. However, unless seal matrices are accompanied by information on provenance or bear the name of an identifiable owner, it can be extremely hard to date them or to establish their precise geographical origin, or to ascertain the contexts in which they were used.

Seal impressions, on the other hand, are normally found in manuscript books or documents in libraries or archives. The manuscripts on which they are stamped are an invaluable source of historical context, and it is thus much easier to identify the date, owner and origin of Islamic seal impressions. Yet libraries tend to treat seal impressions on documents and in books as minor and usually incidental parts of a greater whole, so that they are barely mentioned in catalogues, let alone described adequately. Thus although many more Islamic seal impressions have survived than seal matrices they are much less well documented, and relatively few catalogues are available.

The social, spatial and temporal profiles of the surviving seal matrices and seal impressions also appear to differ. A substantial proportion of the seal impressions preserved in libraries or archives today are found on royal letters or official documents. In many Islamic states, though, great care was taken to destroy or re-engrave seals following the death of a ruler or senior official as a safeguard against forgery or misuse, and therefore relatively few royal seal matrices have survived. This means there is a considerable disjunction between the types of Islamic seal matrices found in museum collections, which are mostly the personal seals of individuals, and seal impressions found on manuscript documents, which are very often seals of high-ranking officials.
Chronological disparity is a particular and critical consideration. Some very early sealings in clay and lead are known from the eighth to tenth centuries, but the earliest dateable Islamic seal impressions in ink only survive from around the fourteenth century onwards. There is therefore a period of some three centuries when we have no known seal impressions, and almost no evidence of how Islamic seals were used. On the other hand, there is a large extant body of seal matrices engraved in angular script, which though undated have been attributed to the period up to the thirteenth century, and it is possible that some of these might date from the 'missing link' of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

There are thus potentially rich insights to be gained from bringing together the complementary evidence of seal matrices and seal impressions, as has been attempted in this book. One example may suffice. Many documents issued by Islamic chanceries needed validation by various officials, and the word sahib, 'correct', is often scribbled in the margins of decrees; sometimes just the letter sa is found, as an abbreviation for sahib'. The British Museum holds three teardrop-shaped carnelian seals, in all of which sahib is the main element of the inscription, always written in a distinctive loop. The three seals are dated from 1225/1810 – 1 to 1236/1820 – 1 and bear personal names, but none have any further indication of origin, or information on how they were used. However, the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia has recently acquired an edict issued in Qajar Iran by Nasir al-Din Shah (r. 1848 – 1896). On the back are a number of annotations accompanied by seals of chancery officials, including a teardrop-shaped black ink seal impression inscribed sahib and dated 1264/1847 – 8, exactly resembling the British Museum seals, which can now almost certainly be attributed to early Qajar Iran.
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This book is presented in five sections, starting with a survey of the uses of Islamic seals, followed by an examination of seal matrices and seal impressions, and then a consideration of content and form. Rather than attempting to stitch together a narrative which glosses over the glaring gaps in our current knowledge, each of the five sections acts as a springboard to explore in greater depth specific aspects of Islamic seals through a series of detailed vignettes. Many of the seals are published here for the first time, and while others may have been seen on letters, in the margins of books or on calligraphic scrolls, they may never have been scrutinised or read before. Masterworks in miniature, each of these seals leaves lasting impressions of the people who commissioned and used them, and the Islamic worlds in which they were created.

1Reinard 1828; Kahlu 1981, 1986; Content 1987; Porter 2011.
2Important exceptions are the studies by Hammer-Purgstall 1858; Qasim Maqami 1971; Schimkowitz 1982; Lowry & Beach 1988; Dastur 1993; Richard 2005.
3Tirmizi 1883; Gallop 2002; and see the pioneering Islamic Seals Database at the Chester Beatty Library: www.cbl.ie/islamicseals/
4Castre 1922: 234.

inscribed Sahib Muhammad Ali 1235/1819 – 20, 17 mm. (PP175), BM 1878

sahib, inscribed Sahib Malik al-Kattab wa mardini bash/ 1264, 'Correct, the
ry 1264/1847 – 8. 17 mm, stamped on the back of a firman of Nasir al-Din

Above: Seals from Mocha in the Persian Gulf, then under Ottoman control, described by John Sarto in 1611. These are the earliest known published reproductions of Islamic seals. Purshau & Pilgrims, London, 1625. BL W.3113, vol. 3, page 144.

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