Seals from the Islamic World

Seals have functioned as symbols of authority from the earliest days of Islam. According to tradition and the early Islamic historians, the Prophet Muhammad had a seal ring made engraved with the words Muhammad rasul Allah, “Muhammad is the Prophet of God.” Ever since the time of the Prophet in Islamic seals the inscription has taken centre stage, in marked contrast to European seals, which are primarily pictorial. It is this focus on writing, in the sacred Arabic script, which links seals from all parts of the Islamic world, from Morocco to Malaysia, from Iran to India, and from China to Indonesia.

The striking cohesion of form over a period of 1400 years nonetheless masks considerable variation in how, where and when Islamic seals were used, and by whom. The earliest seals were used for a variety of purposes (1.1), but there is then a long gap before the first appearance of paper documents with ink seal impressions in the thirteenth century (3.1), and it is only from the sixteenth century onwards that large numbers of Islamic seal impressions survive, stamped on a wide range of documents (1.3) and manuscript books (1.7). It is however important to stress the variables in this picture: for every letter bearing an Islamic seal found, many more unsealed documents exist (1.2).

The use of seals in society also varied across regions. Literary and other references suggest that in much of the Islamic world the use of seals was spread throughout all echelons, and Edward Lane wrote of Egypt in the early nineteenth century, “Almost every person who can afford it has a seal-ring, even though he be a servant.” In the Muslim lands of Southeast Asia, on the other hand, the use of seals was restricted to the court hierarchy. The elitism of Malay seals is a useful model to bear in mind in considering the seal culture of other less well-studied parts of the Islamic world. What should also be remembered is the unifying role of the hajj pilgrimage, for many pilgrims from Southeast Asia and elsewhere had seals made on arrival in the Hijaz (4.5), and these seals were then carried back to all corners of the globe.

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1 Cf. Porter 2011: 1 – 2 for sources.
2 Lane 1890: 26.
The use of seals in early Islam

The first Muslims followed the practice of using seals for affairs of state or for personal use that they had inherited from both the Sassanian rulers of the eastern Islamic lands and the Byzantines in the west whose lands they had conquered in the seventh century. The Prophet Muhammad is said to have adopted a seal when he needed to communicate with the Byzantine emperor in the year 9/628 and that this had engraved upon it the words Muhammad rasul Allah, 'Muhammad is the Prophet of God.' The Prophet discouraged the use of gold, and his seal is described by some authorities as being made entirely of silver, and by others as made of silver with an agate stone. A hadith narrated by Anas bin Malik states: 'Allah's Prophet took a silver ring and had 'Muhammad, the Prophet of God' engraved on it. The Prophet then said (to us), 'I have a silver ring with 'Muhammad, the Prophet of God' engraved on it, so none of you should have the same engraving on his ring.' This seal was used by the successors of the Prophet Muhammad and is said to have been lost down a well by Caliph 'Uthman.'

The Umayyad (661 – 750) and Abbasid (750 – 1258) caliphs all had seals but these do not survive. The phrases engraved upon them were recorded by medieval chroniclers and historians. The seal of the caliph Mu'awiyah II bin Yazid (c. 683 – 84) for example was inscribed billah thiqat Mu'awiyah, 'God is the trust of Mu'awiyah.' Following the practice of the caliphs, those who needed them had seals engraved with names, or names added to simple pious phrases, or pious phrases on their own (B – D). Seals with pious inscriptions were regarded as protective both of the person wearing the seal and of the document or object on which it was stamped. The stones were placed in rings (E). The surviving seals most of which are now without their rings never bear dates at this stage. They are made of a variety of stones such as carnelian or hematite and engraved in the angular-style Kufic script (see 2.1 and 4.1). Their impressions are found in clay. From about the eighth century, it was the practice to stamp seals onto a piece of clay which was then attached to a document made of papyrus.
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These sealings were either pressed into the document itself or fixed with string onto it (A). The latter are known as bulla. Such was their fragility, however, that the clay impressions rarely survive.

While the seals and their impressions in clay referred to above are personal seals, seals that were used for administrative purposes have also survived. These are made of lead or bronze (F–G). They can be stamped on both sides, cloth impressions on some indicating that they were probably fixed by means of a string or wire to a sack, perhaps carrying coins. They have the names of officials or names of particular territories and are often dated. It is also known that lead sealings were worn around the necks of non-Muslims living in Islamic lands to prove that they had paid the poll tax.

A possible exception to this is a lead seal purporting to be in the name of the caliph Mu’awiyah I bin Abi Sufyan (41–60/661–680) and dated to 44/664 (Baldwin 2012: 15. 3).
Mu’awiyah 1 307; Gignoux and Kalus 1981: 144.
Porter 2011: 5; Watson and Hanmore 1999.

Above from left (All ca. 9–11th c.) (A) Hamadin, al-Khidir bin Murshid ibn. 1.1 mm. (P64). BM OLM 1454. (B) Hamadin. 2.5 mm. (P94) BM Objects 11. (C) Castellsan, ‘Abd bin Hakams seeks refuge in God’ (billah warah). 46 mm. (P94). BM Objects 11. (D) Castellsan, ‘As God wills / there is no power except in God’ (sak bi‘allah wa la iswa ala ilah). 16 mm. (P321). BM OLM 1453. 12. 15 mm. (P84). BM OLM 1453. 13. 15 mm. (P84). BM OLM 1453.
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Qur'an in Kufic script, Near East, probably 9th c. The elongated form of this Qur'an manuscript is suited to the elongated horizontal but short vertical strokes of the Kufic script. (Q, 79: 24–25) al-Ankabut (the right); (Q, 31: 22–25) al-Isra' (the left); (Q, 1: 128–106)

Right: Rock crystal, ca. 9th–10th c., 16 mm. Ahmad b. 'Abd al-Rahman believes in the Merciful One (tawabul 'ilah al-rahman).

Left: Seal (C). Lead seal in the name of 'Abd al-Khaliq, ruler of the Jihal, central Iran, (ca. 255–60/868–745); referring to the tribute of the Kufi seal of Bursa, dated 259/872–3. The back has an impression of cloth and the string can be clearly visible. (P236) AAM 1942.3.179
Documents without seals

In seeking to understand the history of Islamic seals, it is important to consider also documents without seals, in order to obtain a clearer understanding of the role and function of seals in Muslim societies. When searching for Islamic seals in libraries or archives, for every sealed document that is found, there are many more letters and official papers without seals. Nor is it the case that the most important royal decrees were always sealed. In the early Islamic era, although Arabic literary sources refer to the seals of the caliphs and give their inscriptions (1.1), edicts were validated not with a seal but with the 'alam, a hand-written motto of religious phrases which functioned as a signature. This practice continued into the Fatimid and Ayyubid dynasties.

Even in bureaucracies in which seals played a significant role, such as at the Ottoman court where each sultan is known to have had several seals, the highest manifestation of royal authority on a document was not the sultan's seal but his tughras, a hand-drawn calligraphic emblem comprising his name and honorific titles. Early tughras were drawn simply in black or brown ink, but later examples were embellished lavishly with illumination.

The tradition of the 'alam lasted longest in the western Islamic world of the Maghreb. Royal letters and edicts of the sultans of Morocco were often validated with their illuminated 'alam, comprising the words al-hamdu lillah wahdahu, 'Praise is to God alone.' This was also sometimes impressed with a large metal stamp (tahar), thus occupying a half-way house between hand-written signature and seal impression.

1 Slem 1964: 123-165.
2 Castries 1921: 240.
3 Castries 1921: 247.

Below A secretary (misnaj) at the court of Ottoman Sultan Selim II (1512-1574) inscribing the tughras on a firman, while an attendant holds his purse and inkpot. Selim Han Name, by Seyyid Ishaq, 1687. Image code: 416.77.
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Below A scribe at the court of Ottoman Sultan Selim II (r. 1566 – 74) inscribing the tughras on a firman, while an attendant holds his pen-case and inkpot. Sultan Han Name, by Seyyid Ali, 1687. BL Or. 943, f. 77v

Taghria of the Ottoman Sultan Murad III (r. 1574 – 1595), inscribed in gold in a prayer book, 16th c. BL Or. 15048

Grant in Greek by the Ottoman emperor Mehmed II (r. 1444 – 1450 – 1451 – 1481) with his tughras at the top, addressed to the Genoese inhabitants of Galata, issued immediately after the capture of Constantinople by the Turks on 29 May 1453. BL Egerton 2487