Letter from the Sultan of Morocco, Ahmad al-Manur (c.1578 – 1603), to Queen Elizabeth I, 1 November 1569, with his 'ulama impressed in glittery black ink by a large stamp. 105 mm. BL Cotton Nero 875, f.17v

Letter from Maday Ima'il ibn Sharif, sultan of Morocco (c.1672 – 1727), to Queen Anne of England (c.1702 – 1714), with his name presented in the form of a hand-drawn illuminated emblem resembling a seal, 1703, BL Add.2469, f.33r – 34r
Un amigo escribió estas letras en recuerdo de un amigo en quien me confiaron estos textos. Los firmamos de nuevo al igual que en la antigua escritura, pero con la mano. Se ha firmado con el nombre y firmas escritas en tinta negra. Ese es el fin de los hechos: nos han dado armas reales, en nombre de Dios. Doce de enero de mil cuatrocientos setenta y seis años.
Seals on Documents

The most important source for Islamic seal impressions is manuscript documents. These include letters, petitions, decrees and treaties, and a wide range of legal and official documents such as powers of attorney, land or property leases, records of sale transactions, wills, marriage certificates, travel permits and tax receipts, all of which reflect the primary function of seals as a means of authentication and validation.

From the late thirteenth century onwards, documents with Islamic seals can be found in Iran and central Asia. From other parts of the Islamic world, seal impressions only begin to survive rather later, and even now, from outside Iran and Anatolia only a handful of seal impressions on documents from before ca.1520 are known, including those of the Mamluk Sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri (r.1501 – 1516)1 and the Bahmani Sultan Mahmud (r.1482 – 1518) of the Deccan.2 In this context, the earliest Islamic seal impression from Southeast Asia, on a letter of the Sultan of Ternate of 1560,3 is not as late as might otherwise have been thought.

Some categories of sealed documents were only found in certain regions. For example, marriage certificates bearing the seals of witnesses, often beautifully illuminated, are well-known from Iran and India (1.4), but were not produced at all in the Malay world. In Southeast Asia, seals were essential to validate official letters and royal edicts, but as seals were not used outside court circles, legal or business documents such as records of purchases of ships, land or slaves are generally unsealed.

While it is possible in some cases to build up a picture of the parameters governing the use of seals in certain Muslim societies, to a large extent our understanding of the world of Islamic seals is dependent on the chance survival of documents, which, at the time of production, were often regarded as of ephemeral value, and were frequently discarded after use.

1Richards 1999.
2Kahn 1980: PIV.
3With thanks to Pedro Pinto for this information, 4.3.2012.

For left Detail of seal of Sultan Khairal Jamal of Ternate, from the letter on the left. Eligible, but the inscription begins al-seabiq ... `he who trusts in God'. In shape and calligraphy it resembles Persian seals such as that shown alongside.

Left Round nephrite seal, al-seabiq br-al-Malik al-Ghuri Haji Muhammad bin Haji, `He who trusts in the King, the Independent One, Haji Muhammad, son of Haji Timurid of Safavid, ca.15th – 16th c. 22 mm, IAMM 1000.5.80.
Detail of octagonal seal (top of text), inscribed 'Abd al-\(\text{H}^2\)d, 'Um\(\text{a}^2\) al-U\(\text{n}^2\)an\(\text{a}^2\) 1233'. His servant, 'Um\(\text{a}^2\) al-U\(\text{n}^2\)an\(\text{a}^2\) 1237/1821 - 2.16 mm. IASSM 2001.1.87

Detail of oval seal (top of text), inscribed Rabb \(\text{H}^2\)dd, 'Abd \(\text{H}^2\)d 1878. 'O God make the affair easy for 'Abd \(\text{H}^2\)d.' [13]78/1764 - 5.14 mm. IASSM 2001.1.87

Document recording property transactions composed by Q\(\text{a}^2\)l\(\text{i}^2\) b\(\text{a}^2\)b\(\text{s}^2\)\(\text{b}^2\)\(\text{a}^2\) d\(\text{d}^2\)d, also known as Mut\(\text{b}^2\)d, \(\text{Z}^2\)d\(\text{a}^2\), the chief judge of Damascus, dated 1239/1824. IASSM 2001.1.87
Above and left Charter drawn up on the orders of Shir’Ali Khan, Amir of Afghanistan, conferring the right of heirs-apparent upon his youngest and favourite son Sarde ‘Abd Allah Khan, and calling upon all his subjects to recognize him as his successor, with signatures and seals of the witnesses, Shawaal 1290/Nov.-Dec. 1873. The charter, which is 1.28 m long and 0.5 m wide and is made up of numerous pieces of paper pasted together, contains 946 seal impressions, mostly oval in shape and each measuring ca. 8 x 12 mm. Il. Photo 10(7).3

Below Amir Shir’Ali Khan of Afghanistan, seated in the centre of his soldiers, with his favourite son ‘Abd Allah standing beside him, photographed at Fort Jamrud by Baker and Brooks, April 1869. Il. Photo 10(7).2

Detail of oval seal (top of text), inscribed: Rabbub rahulum illa ‘Ali illa ‘Ali (‘Abd Allah 1798); O God, make the affairs easy for ‘Abd Allah (11)1798 1794.– 5. 14 min. Lamm 2001.1.09

Document recording property transactions composed by Qutul al-‘ulaman Sayyaq ‘Abd Allah, also known as Mafi Zalab, the chief judge of Damascus, dated 1290/1874. Lamm 2001.1.80