Left: Tazkhirat al-Malik, 'A Memorial to Kings.' This work is an account of the administration system of Iran during the Safavid period (1500–1732) by an anonymous author, and was written after the fall of the dynasty in about 1723. It contains significant information about the role of various officials who served under the ruler, the most senior of whom was the Keeper of the Great Seal (muhrab-i muhti hamayun). He was responsible for the correct placing of the seal on a variety of administrative documents after they had been recorded in the official registers. (Minorsky 1943:62). This manuscript is probably the original copy of the text. loc. cit.65, 63–69.


Left: Pictograph of Shah 'Abbas I of Iran, discussing the distribution of water in certain districts around Qazvin, and appointing the minister of Qazvin, Aslan Barg, as overseer, dated 1020/1611 – 2. ISMM 2004.6.44
Left: Tawfiq al-Mahdi, ‘A Memorial to Kings.’ This work is an account of the administrative system of Iran during the Safavid period (1500–1722) by an anonymous author, and was written after the fall of the dynasty in about 1725. It contains significant information about the role of various officials who looked after the seals, the most senior of whom was the Keeper of the August Seal (emadkar-i mubtadari kumayr). He was responsible for the correct placing of the seal on a variety of administrative documents after they had been recorded in the official registers (Minorsky 1943:62). This manuscript is probably the original copy of the text. [P. 999, R. 13–14.]

Above: Detail of seal of Shah Abbas I, inscribed in the centre: band-i shah-i wilayat

Left: Firman of Shah Abbas I of Iran, discussing the distribution of water in certain districts around Qazvin, and appointing the minister of Qazvin, Asaf Bugha, as overseer, dated 1020/1611 – 2. IAMM 2006.5.14.

On the left side, the text discusses the administrative system of Iran during the Safavid period, highlighting the role of the Keeper of the August Seal. It contains valuable information about the placement of the seal on various administrative documents. The manuscript is a probable original copy of the text.

On the right side, there are details of a seal of Shah Abbas I, inscribed with blessings on the Prophet and the twelve Imams. The text also includes a firman of Shah Abbas I discussing the distribution of water in certain districts around Qazvin and appointing a minister as overseer.

The illustrations depict various seals and coins, some with intricate designs, while others are simpler and rely on patterns and inscriptions.
Illuminated marriage certificates flourished in Qajar Iran as visual expressions of the sacred art of marriage. Such certificates appear in two forms, as a scroll or a booklet. Both formats contained the essential components of the marriage arrangement known as 'ṣaʿīd nikah, starting with an introduction which usually comes in both Persian and Arabic describing the importance of marriage as an institution blessed by God. This section is followed by introducing the bridal couple, names of the groom, the groom's father, the bride and the bride's father, followed by a detailed account of the bride's dowry, concluding with prayers and the date. The document is not regarded as complete, nor is it valid or legalized, without the seal impressions of the witnesses.

According to the certificate of the marriage of Aga Muhammad Hadi and Fatima Begum in 1838 (A), the ceremony took place in the company of their representatives (the fathers of both the groom and bride) and in the presence of dignitaries of the city who came as guests. In the right-hand decorated margin of the scroll are over twenty seal impressions of witnesses. Most of the seals are of family members, and are oval or square in shape, engraved in esquisite thuluth and nastaʿlīq script with dates. The seal impressions are in most cases accompanied by a statement, sometimes indicating the kinship of the seal owner, and in other cases testifying that he was physically present at the 'ṣaʿīd nikah ceremony. Among the witnesses is the bride's uncle and the brother of the groom, as well as members of prominent families. One particular seal contains the blessing phrase Yu Rahim, 'O Compassionate', calling out for God to bless the union. These kinds of seals are in general more decorated than personalized ones. This particular seal has a beaded ring around its oval shaped format. Such seals are frequently inherited by family members and reused by younger generations.

Marriage certificates in booklet format follow the same section divisions as the scroll certificates. In both formats the text alternates between Persian in black nastaʿlīq and Arabic in red thuluth and commences with the statement 'He is the One who brings hearts together'. The document is dated 9 Rabīʿ al-awwal 1260/ 23 January 1880 and it certifies that Mirza Ali Muhammad Khan and Fatima Begum Khanum were married in the company of family members and witnessed by 13 prominent members of the city of Shiraz (B). The booklet, which consists of 8 folios or 16 pages, dedicates the last four pages to seal impressions of the witnesses, who certify that the marriage has taken place on that date, and sign and seal their testimony, thus elevating this certificate to the status of a binding legal document. The pages of this certificate are compartmentalized and highly decorated. Several of the seals appear to have been erased. This may have been a deliberate act, possibly indicating that the marriage ended in divorce, and that a prominent member of the society chose to show his discontent by removing his name from such document. In other cases, the witness may have been regarded, at a later date, as
Qajar marriage certificates

Certificates flourished in Qajar Iran as visual art of marriage. Such certificates appear either as a booklet. Both formats consisted of the marriage arrangement known as a récit which usually comes in describing the importance of marriage as an act. This section is followed by introducing the groom, the bride and by a detailed account of the bride's dowry, ad the date. The document is not regarded or legalized, without the seal impressions of prominent families. One particular seal contains the blessing phrase Ya Rahim, 'O Compassionate', calling out for God to bless the union. These kinds of seals are in general more decorated than personalized ones. This particular seal has a beaded ring around its oval shaped format. Such seals are frequently inherited by family members and reused by younger generations.

Marriage certificates in booklet format follow the same section divisions as the scroll certificates. In both formats the text alternates between Persian in black nasta'liq and Arabic in red thuluth and commences with the statement 'He is the One who brings hearts together.' The document is dated 9 Rabi' al-awal 1266/23 January 1850 and it certifies that Mirza 'Ali Muhammad Khan and Fatima Begum Khanum were married in the company of family members and witnesses by 13 prominent members of the city of Shiraz (B). The booklet, which consists of 8 folios or 16 pages, dedicates the last four pages to seal impressions of the witnesses, who certify that the marriage has taken place on that date, and sign and seal their testimony, thus elevating this certificate to the status of a binding legal document. The pages of this certificate are compartmentalized and highly decorated. Several of the seals appear to have been erased. This may have been a deliberate act, possibly indicating that the marriage ended in divorce, and that a prominent member of the society chose to show his discontent by removing his name from such document. In other cases, the witness may have been regarded, at a later date, as an undesirous guest, perhaps due to some foul act he may have committed, and thus his acquaintance and presence as witness was no longer welcomed by the couple. In yet other cases, erasure may be due to wear and tear.

An important scroll marriage certificate dating from the last quarter of the nineteenth century records the marriage of Mirza Sayyid Muhammad Hadi and Tutu Khanum (C). It gives the name of the calligrapher of the document as Mahmud al-Husaini al-Farahani together with his seal. Witnessing the event, signing the document and sealing it, were five family members: Mahmud al-Husaini, Husain al-Husaini, the father of the groom Navroollah al-Husaini, a renowned member of the Qajar Constitutional Revolution, and the father of the bride Mirza Muhammad Manshi Khalqali, a well known Qajar poet. The illuminated scroll has a large decorative border with a continuous vegetal and floral scroll, as well as a narrower border filled with plain cartouches where the seals and signature of the witnesses are located. The top signature and seal is that of Khalqali, the father of the bride, who confirms that the marriage took place in 1292/1875 according to the contractual agreement.

Right (A) Marriage certificate of Aga Muhammad Hadi and Fatima Begum, Shawwal 1254/December 1836, 1AM06.388.681
A marriage certificate booklet dated 9 Rabi 'al-Awwal 1316/28 July 1898 (D) has the seal impression of the groom on the last line of the document within the text box. This location is unusual as witnesses were expected to sign and seal the document on the side cartouches allocated for their impressions. The groom therefore was representing himself, while his father acted as witness to the contract, a tradition which
A marriage certificate booklet dated 9 Rabi’ al-Awwal 1316/28 July 1898 (D) has the seal impression of the groom on the last line of the document within the text box. This location is unusual as witnesses were expected to sign and seal the document on the side cartouches allocated for their impressions. The groom therefore was representing himself, while his father acted as witness to the contract, a tradition which increased in popularity towards the twentieth century. The groom’s seal impression reads Ya Baqir al-Ulam, ‘O Revealer of Knowledge’, a popular ‘blessing’ phrase in Qajar Iran. As the name of the groom is Mirza Baqir Khan, this choice reflects the long-standing tradition of pious phrases linked to the seal owner’s name. The seal is dated 1307/1889-90, a few years prior to the marriage contract.

Another contract in booklet format with ten pages shows the survival of the tradition of illuminated marriage certificates into the twentieth century (E). It starts with a richly decorated title panel and the usual religious invocation, followed by a prayer in Arabic and the contract in Persian. The contract clearly documents the name of the groom Mirza Nasrullah Khan Nasr al-Mamalik, his father’s name, that of the bride Begum Aga Khanum, and her father’s names and titles. The last double pages have cartouches set into the illuminated margins for the signatures of the witnesses and their seal impressions. All the witnesses declare in writing that the marriage took place on the 25 Rajab 1338/14 April 1920, according to the agreed contract.