Islamic seal matrices were made of a wide variety of materials. In the early period, most common were carnelian, jasper, haematite and agate, as well as rock crystal and lapis lazuli and even precious stones such as garnets and emeralds (2.1). From the fourteenth century onwards chaudeony become popular, and many more metal seals are known, made of brass and silver, for the Prophet Muhammad is said to have disapproved of the use of gold for seals.

Seal engraving was an honourable and highly skilled profession. According to a Persian treatise in verse on seals and seal-engraving composed in Delhi in the seventeenth century, a seal engraver had to be proficient in many different disciplines and lead a pious life (2.2). In Istanbul seal engravers belonged to professional guilds, and undertook never to engrave identical seals, to prevent forgery. They kept albums of impressions of all the seals they had carved, from which new clients could select designs of their choice. Away from the rarified atmosphere of the Ottoman connoisseurs, in rural Persia and Afghanistan even in the second half of the twentieth century seal engraving was still a specialist craft, working mainly in brass and kept in business by high rates of illiteracy and the need for a seal to validate all official documents.

Seal stones were often set in rings, while other small seals had a looped handle so that they could be hung from a belt or from a chain around the neck. Larger seals might have finely-carved handles of wood, ivory or metal. Although many of the earliest seal matrices survive today just as stones, they were probably originally set in signet rings, the type of Islamic seal setting most frequently mentioned in the literature, and in emulation of the form of the seal of the Prophet.

Alongside Islamic seals exist numerous small objects of a similar size and shape, the major difference being that they are engraved with inscriptions in positive rather than negative. These artefacts are amulets or talismans, and usually bear inscriptions of a religious or magical nature, which were believed to impart protection to their owner or wearer. Amulets are also found in Southeast Asia, but Islamic seals from the Malay world are notable for sometimes including talismanic elements in the inscription.

Above: Jade seal ring, inscribed al-wali hu al-Malik al-Samad `abduba Yunus ibn Ahmad, ‘He who trusts in the King, the Eternal One, His servant Yunus, son of Ahmad’, ca.1464 – 17th c. 27 mm. IAMMIL2.2.3.00
Left: Details of Malay seal matrices from the collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (see 2.7).
Seal stones and their properties

The material from which the seal stone was made was as important as the inscription itself, and stones were often endowed with particular properties. These attributes were not specific to Islamic cultures but were popular from ancient times and in cultures across the world.

The most popular stone for Muslims was carnelian (‘ajq) (A). This was the stone particularly favoured by the Prophet partly on account of the fact that much of it came from Yemen – the tribes of Yemen were among the early converts to Islam. A hadith of the Prophet Muhammad stated: "The one who wears a carnelian ring will always have divine favour and happiness." Some of the properties that it was believed to have were that it could control fear in times of battle, that its red colour could stop haemorrhage and that if rubbed again the teeth it could remove tooth decay. Carnelian was employed for the earliest seals and continued in use throughout the centuries.

Other stones are associated with particular periods, such as for example haematite (C) (khunahab) which, when Tifashi was writing in the thirteenth century, came from Jordan and it is generally only found in early seals. Agate (jar) (B) had many varieties and was known to be difficult to work with on account of its hardness. In the thirteenth century the main sources were Yemen and China. Among its perceived benefits were that it could soothe the pains of labour. Garnet (banahk) (D) was a family name for a number of minerals such as almandine and came from India or Sri Lanka. Lapis lazuli (lajward) (E) came largely from Afghanistan as it still does today. Ground down, it was used as a pigment for painting in the Islamic world and in Renaissance Europe. It was believed in medieval times to cure fever, liver disorders and leprosy spots, and when worn as a talisman to protect from anxiety.

ich the seal stone was made as a trophy itself, and stones were often used as warriors. These attributes were i but were popular from ancient times on.

Muslims were camelid (saqq) (A). It is said that the Prophet preferred camelid stone to other types. A hadith of the Prophet says, "The one who wears a camelid stone will be happy and prosperous." Some of the stones were thought to control fear and anxiety, which could stop hemorrhage and reduce tooth decay. Camelid stone was used in the Middle Ages to cure fever, liver disorders, and leprosy spots, and was worn as a talisman to protect from anxiety.

Other stones are associated with particular periods, such as the haematite (C) (khususuwa) which, when Tifaschi was writing in the thirteenth century, came from Jordan and it is generally thought to have been found early. Agate (jaz) (B) had many varieties and was known to be difficult to work with and account for its hardness. In the thirteenth century, the main sources were Yemen and China. Among its perceived benefits were that it could soothe the pains of labour.

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Rock crystal (bullaq) (F) was believed by classical authors to be found in water, and al-Biruni (d.1048) described it as being like water. It is in fact quartz and found all over the world, and in varying quality. The best rock crystal is the clearest, most limpid and transparent, of the strongest strings, free from cracks. It was used for seals and also for the making of amulets. Jade and its family – nephrite and jadeite and known as yashins (G) – was mostly mined in China and Central Asia (Kashgar for example) and became particularly popular from the fourteenth century for seals, although it was known much earlier for making bowls and other objects. Tifaschi says that when worn as a ring it could dispel nightmares. Seals made of jade family are generally round and associated with the Timurid dynasty; an important jade dated seal is that of Timurid Prince Pir Bulaq (d.1466). Impressions of round, flat Timurid seals are on manuscripts in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Another popular stone for both seals and amulets was chalcedony, a form of quartz.
Early Islamic seal stones in Southeast Asia

Although the earliest surviving Southeast Asian Islamic seal impression is from Ternate in 1560 (1.2), there are frequent references to the earlier use of seals by Muslims in the region. When Ibn Battuta visited Pasai in north Sumatra – the first Islamic sultanate in the Malay world – in about 1345, he was greeted at the audience-hall by the sultan’s lieutenant, who ‘wrote a note to the sultan informing him of our arrival, sealed it and gave it to a page, who brought the reply written on the back.’ One and a half centuries later, when Diogo Lopes de Sequeira visited Pasai in September 1509, he received a letter in Arabic from the sultan for the king of Portugal, which was stamped with the sultan’s own seal. He then went on to Melaka and concluded a Treaty of Friendship, which was sealed by the Sultan, Mahmud Syah. However, no known Malay seal matrices survive from before the eighteenth century.

Very much older is a seal recently found at Barus, an important early centre for the camphor trade on the west coast of Sumatra, which has also been described as possibly ‘the oldest Islamic inscription in the Malay world.’ It is a small piece of translucent bottle-green glass, oval with a chamfered edge, inscribed in negated script Allah Muhammad or perhaps Ilaah Muhammad, by God, Muhammad. The seal was found in 1997 in an unstratified context during an excavation at Lebu Tuai, Barus, and has been tentatively dated to the tenth or eleventh centuries. It is definitely not of local manufacture; Iran, or more specifically, Khorasan, has been suggested as a possible source.

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surviving Southeast Asian Islamic seal stones in Southeast Asia

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A helpful context in which to consider the Barus discovery is a group of seven Islamic seals in the Khalili collection, dated from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries. 2 The seal stones are all inscribed in Arabic, with one in Persian. All are set in gold rings, and in each case the association with Southeast Asia is based not on the seal itself, but on an assessment of the ring. One of the earliest of these seals is a carnelian, set in a ring from central Java dated to the ninth or tenth centuries, inscribed yathiq illah Muhammad bin Bakr, "Muhammad, son of Bakr, in God." 3 Another carnelian with a Kufic inscription reading Dua bin 'Abd, dated to the ninth or tenth centuries, is set in a Balinese ring dated to the thirteenth century. 4 The seal stone is held in place by two pin-claws which appear, from the illustration, partially to obscure the inscription. This suggests that the seal stone may have been valued as an amulet or amulet in its own right, rather than being used as a seal. A third seal-stone, dated to the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, is a turquoise inscribed yathiq bi-nabbi al-satar Jawani Abdar, "Jawani!" Abdar in (the) Lord, the Véler (of air)." In this ring too the stone is held in place by four gold claws which project vertically slightly above the surface of the seal-stone. It would therefore not have been possible to produce an ink seal impression with this signet, although it could have been stamped in a three-dimensional medium such as clay, which is known to have been used for seals on Javanese letters written on young lontar palmleaf. 5

The evidence of the Khalili seals suggests that the Barus seal may have been set in a ring, and may have been used for personal adornment for many centuries after its manufacture.

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1 Reid 1993: 9.
2 Pintado 1993: 85.
4 Kuhn 2000: 33.
6 Warren 1993: 36, 197-8 nos.89, 90, 91, 92, 97; 96, 233, nos.281-2.
7 Warren 1993: 36, 197 no.89.
8 Warren 1993: 36, 198 no.97.
10 Vose 1970: 388.
A Persian treatise on seal engraving

A recent publication in Persian has brought to light the existence of a unique treatise in verse on seals and seal engraving. With the kind permission of the editor, Arif Naushahi, the English abstract from the critical edition is reproduced here in full.

"The poem, Kanz al-Ektasab, is the only known work on seal engraving in Persian. Its composer, Rahmati, was probably a resident of Delhi during the reign of Shah Jahan (r. 1038 – 1070/1628 – 1659), and composed his poem in 1057/1647. Although we know very little about Rahmati’s life, he does refer to his father ‘Ata Allah, who was a skilled calligrapher, painter and seal-engraver and had invented a number of techniques in seal engraving.

Rahmati, though a professional seal engraver, was a disciple of a mystic by the name of Mirza Mohammad Fazel, and composed the Kanz al-Ektasab as a manual to train his master’s son in the art. Because he refers to the art of calligraphy in his poem, we can deduce that he was a calligrapher as well as an engraver.

The Kanz al-Ektasab is comprised of 496 distiches in various meters. It begins with an exaltation of surrender to the divine will, labour, art and the masters of seal engraving. Following these laudatory lines, it discusses the preliminaries of seal engraving which are given as: familiarity with calligraphy, different varieties of paper, pen, pairing of pens, and the techniques of preparing inks. It then turns to the subject of seal engraving and discusses the criteria of seal composition, seal calligraphy, carving, finishing, rules of applying carving tools, and miniaturising letters. Because the punch is a crucial tool of engraving, the poet does elaborate on the techniques of sharpening and hardening the punch.

According to Rahmati, a professional seal engraver must be skilled in calligraphy, astrology, the science of numbers and geometry and, a number of other arts. He must also be familiar with poetry and must lead a pious life. The poet lists five criteria according to which the engravers’ art is measured. These are: calligraphic skill, which he considers to be of essence, drawing ability, skill in poetry, goldsmithy, and carving. He adds that because seals are indispensable to the royalty, engravers must pay special attention to the composition of the seal, its calligraphy, the size of the engraved text, and depth and clarity of their carvings. He recommends that novices in the art of seal engraving train with a master engraver before entering the profession. He ends his treatise with eighteen edicts concerning seals, seal engraving, goldsmithy, and embossing.

Aside from its technical value, Rahmati’s poem is of significance because he names a number of well-known engravers who were his contemporaries. Some of those are: Molla Hosain-e-Naath-Nab’ali (d. 1201/1689/1693), Molla Ahmad-e-Nab’ali (d. 1249), Molla Ahmad-e-Nab’ali (d. 1251), Molla Ahmad e-Nab’ali (d. 1251). "Ata Allah the disciple of Molla ‘Ali Ahmad, Khalil Allah and ‘Abd Allah, both of whom were exceptionally skilled in carving stones, Bibidal Khan – also known as Sidi of Gilan – who was alive in 1057/1647, and Khoras, Hasan and ‘Ali – all of whom were skilled in gold inlaying.

Two manuscripts of Kanz al-Ektasab are kept in the central library of the Punjab University in Lahore. Pakistan (nos. 9026 and 5921/2284), neither of which is dated. The present critical edition was prepared based on these manuscripts. The editor has added two appendices, the first of which includes the names of eighteen seal engravers and carvers of the subcontinent of the 10th-13th centuries AH (16th – 19th centuries AD), and the second is a bibliography of 36 Persian and 13 Urdu articles about sigillography.”

Rahmati 2008.
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