Malay seal matrices were generally made of metal, either silver or brass, and most surviving seals have large handles of wood or metal. As Malay seals were stamped in lampblack rather than ink, the matrix needed to be made of a material which could withstand the heat of being held over a flame (3.6). The seals were engraved by gold or silversmiths, and the decorative borders found on seal matrices are similar to those found on de luxe silver objects such as trays or bowls.

Malay seals generally had symmetrical shapes such as circles or petalled circles, and some matrices bear a marker either on the handle or on the back of the seal face to indicate the correct orientation of the seal as it was stamped on the document. In the collection of Perak seals seen on display in the Royal Museum in Kuala Kangsar, three silver seals had beautiful ornamental markers on the reverse of the seal face, in the form of a flower on the great seal of Sultan Jaafar of 1856, a butterfly on the seal of Sultan Ali dated 1865, and an exquisite little naga dragon on the seal of Raja Muda Idris dated 1886.

Malay signet rings and pendant seals have also survived in small numbers. In 1833, T.J. Newbold met the Penghulu of Sungai Ujong, Dato’ Kual, at his home in Pantol on the Linggi river, in present-day Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia. Newbold gives a vivid picture of how the Penghulu wore his seals in the European fashion, attached to a watch-chain: ‘In the left-hand sleeve of his close vest of purple broadcloth lined with light green silk, and adorned with silk lace and small round buttons of gold filigree, was a watch of antique shape, to which were appended a gold chain and seals.’ Other materials used for seals are wood, ivory, stone and gemstones.

Around two hundred Islamic seal matrices from Southeast Asia have been recorded. Nearly half are from Aceh, but important collections are held by the royal families of Perak and Johor, while the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia collection includes ten seals from Kelantan, Trengganu and Pahang.

Malay seal matrices

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Above silver seal of Tengku Petra, son of Sultan Ahmad of Kelantan (c.1886–1910), ‘al-muntair billah Tengku Petra bin al-mukhtar al-Sultan Ahmad Kelantan sanat 1322,’ ‘He who is victorious through God, Tengku Petra, son of the late Sultan Ahmad of Kelantan, the year 1322/1904 – 5’ (1575), 55 mm. IAMM 1998.1.3799

Above and right silver seal ring of Engku Besar Ahmad, son of Sultan Muhammad III of Kelantan. Engku Besar Tan Long Ahmad bin Sultan Muhammad sanat 1322/1904 – 5 (1575), 31 mm. IAMM 1998.1.4354

Right Ivory seal of Nik Muhammad Amin, probably from Kelantan or Patani. ‘al-waqif billah Nik Muhammad Amin bin Nik[M] Jumin ibn Gafni Allah mukhtar wa shahidh sanat 1355,’ ‘He who trusts in God, Nik Muhammad Amin, son of Nik[M] Jumin, may God preserve his realm and benevolence, the year 1355/1938 – 7’ (1926), 60 mm. IAMM 1998.1.4356

The seal designs of the Sultan of Bone

Sultan Ahmad al-Salih Syamsuddin ruled as the 22nd sultan of the Bugis kingdom of Bone in south Sulawesi from 1775 until his death in July 1812. An adherent of the Khulwiyyah brotherhood, Ahmad al-Salih was renowned for his religious learning, and composed two mystical texts.

Among the most important historical sources for the reign of Sultan Ahmad al-Salih are a series of royal diaries from the court of Bone, captured by British forces in 1814 and acquired by the British Museum in 1842 from John Crawford, who had led the British attack on Bone, and now held in the British Library. Some of the diaries were kept by senior court officials, but at least one volume, covering the years 1775–1796, was kept by the sultan himself. Between the pages of this diary is found a sheet of paper with some sketches of seals in sultan’s own name.

There are five seal designs on the sheet, in varying stages of completion. In the middle of the page is scrawled a date in Arabic script: hijrah 1195/1780 – 1, but four of the seals are dated 1201/1786 – 7. All bear essentially the same inscription; the most complete manifestation being found in the octagonal seal in the centre of the page (see right):


"The Sultan who is wise through God, Ahmad al-Salih, the dignity of the nation and of the faith of the city of Gowa and its people // the year 1201/1786 – 7 of the hijrah of the Prophet, bounteous blessings and pure benedictions be upon him // O God, make his life long and his body strong and his heart pure and his labours sound and his possessions ample.”

Left: The main seal used by Sultan Ahmad al-Salih of Bone, found on numerous documents from at least 1793 to 1809. It is inscribed: adana Allah Sultan Ahmad al-Salih Syamsuddin fi mulkhi wa-sultamihi Bone // Allah al-daim bila jana ‘Allah al-bagi bila zawal, ‘may God preserve Sultan Ahmad al-Salih Syamsuddin in his realm and dominion of Bone // God, the Eternal One, never ending; God, the Enduring One, never perishing’ (#412), 58 mm. Stamped in lampblack on a letter in Bugis (undated).
The seal designs of the Sultan of Bone

Syamsuddin ruled as the 22nd sultan of Bone in south Sulawesi from 1775-1812. An adherent of the Khawatiryya school, he was renowned for his religious learning and texts.

Ant-historical sources for the reign of series of royal diaries from the court of Bone in 1814 and acquired by the British Crown, who had led the British attack on British Library. Some of the diaries were but at least one volume, covering the time of the sultan himself. Between the pages of paper with some sketches of seals in

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al-Sultan al-‘urf bi-Allah Ahmad al-Salih jahat al-millat wa-al-din fi baldat Gowa wa-ahlalaha // samat 1201 hijrat al-nabi ’alayhi afdal al-nabat wa-azka al-taslim // Allahuakuma / tul ummah / wa-salih / ajdah // wa-mur / qalil / wa-thabi a/malak / wa-asfa latwaqaq // 'The Sultan who is wise through God, Ahmad al-Salih, the dignity of the nation and of the faith of the city of Gowa and its people // the year 1201/1786 - 7 of the hijrat of the Prophet, bounteous blessings and pure benedictions be upon him // O God, make his life long and his body strong and his heart pure and his labours sound and his possessions ample.'

This inscription is unusual in several respects. None of the Arabic phrases are found on any other Malay seals, indicating a degree of sophistication above that generally manifested in Islamic seal inscriptions from Southeast Asia, which tend to be conventionalised, and which use the same stock religious phrases over and over again. The word ‘urf has strong Sufi overtones implying esoteric knowledge of God, reflecting Ahmad al-Salih’s well-known mystical leanings. But most puzzling of all is the mention of Gowa, for Ahmad al-Salih was the ruler of Bone, never of the neighbouring kingdom of Gowa (see below), and the two seals which he did use up correspondence both bear the place name ‘Bone’. In order to understand these seal sketches, some historical background is therefore needed.

Ahmad al-Salih’s mother, Hamidah, was the daughter of Sultan Abdul Ranak Jalabuddin of Bone (c.1749 – 1775) and his wife Siti Habibah, granddaughter of Syahid Yusuf of Makasar, the renowned theologian who had introduced the Khawatiryya tarija to Southeast Asia (see 3.4). Ahmad al-Salih’s father, Arang Bakka, was the grandson of Sultan Syahabuddin Ismail of Gowa (c.1709 – 1711). Sultan Abdul Razak chose his grandson Ahmad as his heir to the throne of Bone partly because of his paternal royal Gowa blood, in the hope that he would one day unite the two thrones. However, in 1777 I Sangkilang, who claimed to be a former ruler of Gowa who had been exiled by the Dutch to Sri Lanka, captured Gowa and ruled it until his death in 1785. After I Sangkilang’s death, the Dutch seized the regalia

1 Rahilah 2003: 50 – 51.
of Gowa and presented it to Ahmad al-Salih. With both sets of regalia in his possession, Ahmad al-Salih began moves to unite the two kingdoms, but his plans were thwarted by the Dutch who feared that the joint kingdom would be too formidable to control.¹

Here we have a plausible explanation for the seal sketches. Ahmad al-Salih must have grown up aware of his grandfather’s desire that he would one day unite the kingdoms of Bone and Gowa, and the sketches are dated 1786/7, shortly after I Sangkila’s death, at a time when Ahmad al-Salih must have believed he was on the threshold of realising his ambition. These meticulous seal designs may therefore be regarded as a window onto Ahmad al-Salih’s personal hopes and plans, which were in fact destined never to come to fruition.

Ahmad al-Salih. With both sets of regalia thwarted by the Dutch who feared that Ahmad al-Salih's personal hopes and ined never to come to fruition.

Above: Petalled marginal ornament marking a quarter (ru`ul) of a thirtieth part (juz`) of the Qur'an, from a Qur'an manuscript copied in the reign of Sultan Ahmad al-Salih of Bone, dated 1804. Aqlo 8350 (Museum 00018)

Left: Sketches found in the diary of Sultan Ahmad al-Salih, derived from the petalled lotus design which is fundamental not only to Southeast Asian seal shapes but also to many aspects of the art of the Malay archipelago.

BG: AGA 13354, E1778 or E2014
Raja Ali Haji and his seal

Unlike the Safavid Ta’ezkirt al-muluk (see 1.3) or the Mughal Ain-i Akbari, there are no Malay manuals of chancery practice that elucidate the workings of the royal secretariat, with explanations of the different types of seals, what they were made of and how they were used. For the only known Malay description of sealing practice we are indebted to Raja Ali Haji (1809 – ca.1873), one of the greatest Malay writers and intellectuals of the nineteenth century, and author of the Tuhfat al-Nafis, “The Precious Gift” (1866), the chronicle of Johor and Riau told from the viewpoint of the Bugis Yang Dipertuan Muda or viceroys. The son of Raja Ahmad and grandson of the famous Yang Dipertuan Muda Raja Haji, who was martyred in battle with the Dutch, Raja Ali Haji was born in Selangor but spent most of his life on the island of Penang in Riau, the seat of the Bugis viceroys. Being a core member of this family, he took his position in the indigenous administration of the polity, from the 1840s onwards as a secretary of state and advisor of his cousins, the acting viceroys. In line with his duty Raja Ali Haji produced a number of works on statecraft, law, religion, history and language.

In the 1850s Raja Ali Haji began to compile a monolingual, encyclopaedic Malay dictionary entitled Kitab ponggaluan bahasa, “The Book of Linguistic Knowledge”, but due to the monumental scale of this work it was never completed. The first and only volume of 466 pages, finally published posthumously in Singapore in 1927, covers just the first six letters of the Jawi alphabet – alif, ba, ta, tha (used for Malay mya), jim and part of ca – but happily includes cap, the Malay term for ‘Seal’. The entry for cap is given in full below, in the original Malay and in English translation:

Cap, itutu nama bagi isuatu daripada perak atau tamboga atau batu atau batu atau kayu atau lainnya. Maka dosarot nama orang di situs dengan dipahatkan; kemudian apabila hendak memakainya pada surat2 perkriman, maka dilayar kepada pucak api lilin atau lainnya. Apabila sudah rata cel mirrored pindah kepada cap itu, maka baharulah dicapkan kepada kartos, nisaya sudah suratanya itu putih dan tanah cap itu hitam, itu pertandaan kebenaran surat2 daripada yang mempunyai dia. Dan terkadang ditangkap orang kepada dohbat yang blam atau merah, kemudian baharulah dicapkan adanya.1

Cap, a noun referring to an object made of silver or brass or iron or stone or wood or some other material, on which a person’s name is engraved. To use the seal on letters, it is held in the flame of a candle or something similar; when the seal face is evenly covered with lampblack it is stamped on the paper, and the inscription will appear white against a black background. It confirms the authenticity of the letter as being from the owner [of the seal]. Sometimes the seal is impressed in black or red ink and then used.

Raja Ali Haji’s own seal was a rectangular deep red stone, probably a carnelian, set into a silver ring with a notched rim. It bears his name, Haji Ali ibn Raja Ahmad Riau, and a date. Although at first glance the date appears to read 1242/1826 – 7, in fact there is a perceptible
Raja Ali Haji and his seal


CAP.

Cap, iaitu nama bagi sesuatu daripada perak atau tembogo atau besi atau batu atau kayu atau lainnya. Maka disarat nama orang di sini dengan dalil-dalil, kemudian apabila hendak memakainya pada surat2 perikiran, maka dilayar kepada pucon apii lini atau lainnya. Apabila sudah rata celaknya pernah kepada cap itu, maka baharalah dicapkan kepada kertas, niscaya tadihah suratnya itu patih dan tanah cap itu hitam, iaitu pertanda kebenaran surat2 daripada yang mempunyai dia. Dan kerana ditelukakan orang kepada dakwaan yang hitam atau merah, kemudian baharalah dicapkan adanya.

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MALAY SEALS WERE GENERALLY MADE OF SILVER OR BRASS, AND, AS WE KNOW FROM MUNSYI ABDULLAH’S ACCOUNT, WERE MADE UP BY A GOLDSMITH FROM A DESIGN PROVIDED BY A Scribe. BEING ENGRAVED ON A GEMSTONE, RAJA ALI HAJI’S SEAL DOES NOT APPEAR TO BE OF LOCAL MALAY MANUFACTURE, AND IS MOST LIKELY TO HAVE BEEN OBTAINED DURING HIS PILGRIMAGE OR EMIGRATIONAL ROUTE. IT WAS QUITE COMMON FOR PILGRIMS FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA TO HAVE SEALS MADE UP ON ARRIVAL IN THE HIJAZ (SEE 4.5); MOST OF THESE WOULD HAVE BEEN BASIC SEALS OF BRASS, WHILE RAJA ALI HAJI’S SILVER SEAL RING IS A SUPERIOR PRODUCT.

This seal is stamped on a letter to the Dutch Resident of Riau, Eliza Netscher in 1826. The letter contains Raja Ali Haji’s request for financial support to build a school and procure a printing press, while referring to a Netherlands-Indies lawbook stipulating that the local Dutch Resident was obliged to support education of the indigenous population. Despite being accompanied by a strong letter of support from the viceroy, the money was never granted. Although over a hundred other letters by Raja Ali Haji have survived, this is the only one to be sealed — with a seal made nearly forty years earlier. While the use of a seal may be seen as a reflection of the importance which Raja Ali Haji attached to this application for funds, it may also be seen as ‘the exception that proves the rule’, namely that seals in the Malay world were hardly used outside official court circles. As such, this seal is all the more important as a rare surviving example of the personal seal of a great Malay man of letters.

1 Ali Haji 1897: 448.
2 In the Johor-Riau context ‘Raja’ is a title of a member of the Bugis vice-regal family.
4 For an elaborate discussion of these letters, see Patten 2006.
Seals versus amulets

A seal is defined by an inscription engraved in negative, and to be able to read it the viewer needs to see its mirror image. The main feature of an amulet, if it bears an inscription, is that it is engraved in positive and can be read straight off. In many cases this is the only difference, for often in terms of size, material, and the content and style of the inscription seals and amulets are virtually identical. This is particularly marked with seals and amulets referring to Imam 'Ali and the Twelve Imams (4.3), and there is also the additional amuletic aspect to the texts on seals as highlighted in (4.2). Some amulets are however deliberately inscribed in reverse to make them more mysterious and magical (A). These are often engraved with strings of Arabic letters.

There are other amulet-seals made of metal where the power of the amulet is believed to become active on the paper it has been stamped on. In the brass seal (B) the inscriptions consist of verses from the Qur'an connected to healing and, in the centre, a 3 x 3 magic square known as buduh, on each side of which are the names of the Archangels Jibrîl, Mikhîl, Isrâîl and 'Arrâî. The definition of a magic square is that the sum of each horizontal, vertical and diagonal line must be the same. The earliest recording of a magic square in its simplest form is the 3 x 3 square. It is thought to have a Chinese origin and is referred to as a way of easing the pains of childbirth in writings attributed to the eighth-century alchemist Jahîr ibn Hayyân. In the centre of the 3 x 3 square is always the number 5, and the corner cells contain the even numbers 2, 4, 6 and 8. The remaining cells are filled with the odd numbers 1, 3, 7 and 9, and the lines all add up to the number 15. This square is known as buduh because of the letters that appear in the corner cells when these numbers are turned into letters using the  giảd system. The word buduh itself was even assigned magical properties.

There are many parallels between the surviving seal stones and the ink seal impressions from the Malay world, reflecting the same preoccupations and beliefs throughout Islam. One example is the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus known as asdâh al-kâhib - Deqranus, Yamiha, Makbilimia, Marrez, Dabarnos, Shadbinaus and Kafshattatûs - and their dog Qiţmîr, who were made famous by the persecution they endured at the hands of the Roman emperor Decius (c.249 - 251). The subsequent miracle of their sleep in a cave for several hundred years is told in the Qur'an (18.9 - 25), and inscribing their names was believed to help in a number of different ways, from the protection of ships on the open sea to the posting of letters. All over the Islamic world are shrines dedicated to them. In the late Ottoman era, from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, they start to appear with increasing frequency on amulets (C). Knowledge of the story spread to Southeast Asia where the account is told in various versions including in Malay, Javanese and Archehnese. On four nineteenth-century Malay seals the names of the Sleepers and their dog are combined with the names of well known 'alams from Aceh and Penang (D).

The integration of 'magical' or amuletic elements into the design of a seal, combining them therefore with people's names, is a particularly interesting feature of Islamic seals from Southeast Asia. While surviving seal matrices from the central Islamic lands will combine a name with a Qur'anic inscriptions or invocation to God or the Prophet Muhammad, in the Malay world it seems that the owners sought additional protection. In addition to the texts, the full range of the magical vocabulary is also included: magic squares of various kinds, 'Solomon's seal', phrases such as the bâsma lâm written in disconnected letters and repetitions of letters all appear.
Seals versus amulets

There are many parallels between the surviving seal stones and the ink seal impressions from the Malay world, reflecting the same preoccupations and beliefs throughout Islam. One example is the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus known as ashab al-khalīf – Drujman, Yamlīha, Makhlīma, Marrūn, Dabarnūs, Shāhshāhītūs – and their dog Qīmīr, who were made famous by the persecution they endured at the hands of the Roman emperor Decius (249 – 251). The subsequent miracle of their sleep in a cave for several hundred years is told in the Qur’an (18: 9 – 25), and inscribing their names was believed to help in a number of different ways, from the protection of ships on the high seas to the posting of letters. All over the Islamic world are shrines dedicated to them. In the late Ottoman era, from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, they start to appear with increasing frequency on amulets (C). Knowledge of the story spread to Southeast Asia where the account is told in various versions including in Malay, Javanese and Achenese. On four nineteenth-century Malay seal the names of the Sleepers and their dog are combined with the names of well known ‘alama from Aceh and Penang (D).”

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1 Kalus 1987; Porter 2010.
3 Porter 2007: Poret 1990-.

Above ‘The Seven Sleepers (ashab al-khalīf) and their dog Qīmīr asleep in the cave, Asaib al-mahālakat of Muhammad Tus’ (12th c.), a copy from Ottoman Turkey, 16th c. Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, MA, W.581, L1015v.

Last (C) Gold amulet, ca. 10th – 13th c. Engraved on both sides with the same inscriptions, Centre: ‘Qaṣīm, Yamlīha, Makhlīma, Marrūn, Dabarnūs, Shāhshāhītūs Qīmīr’. Outer circle: ‘He has provided safety and been kind to the one who came (i.e. the Prophet ﷺ). He has been kind in what He sent down’ (the Qur’an). ‘You are the strong one, deliver us from grief on the day of darkness (i.e. of judgment)’ (‘amama līf rīm nūmā nūmā nūmā nūmā nūmā nūmā nūmā nīs qab yawm al-hu‘l). 71 mm. (PA105), ZM 1964 9-25.881

Because of the letters that appear in the bars turned into letters using the alphabet was even assigned magical properties. i