Above (A) Rock crystal amulet-case, ca. 8th – 10th c. (image reversed), Strings of Arabic letters ending in 8.15 mm. (PA162). BM 1883 101410

Centre (B) Brass amulet, ca. 10th c. (image reversed), Engraved on both sides, in addition to the fear of God, in the centre the 3 x 3 magic square, and around: Jibra'il, Mika'il, Izaq' and 'Azaq'. In the margins 1. 'Basmullah. And heal the breasts of a people who believe' (Qur'an 9.14). 2. 'And a remedy for what is in [your] breasts and a guidance and a mercy for the believers' (Qur'an 10:57); 3. 'There comes forth from their bellies a drink of various colours, in which is a healing for man' (Qur'an 16:69). 4. 'We send down as part of the Recitation that which is a healing and a mercy for the believers' (Qur'an 17:42). 5. 'And who beholds me when I am sick' (Qur'an 36:80). 6. 'For those who believe it is a guidance and a healing' (Qur'an 41:44). 7. 'In that there is a sign for people who reflect' (Qur'an 16:11); a knot motif signifies the end of the verse. (Qur'an translations are from Alan Jones 2007).

Below Seal of Sultmi Nara Diraya of Kedah, with the 3 x 3 magic square in the middle: 8.16 / 9.17 / 10.18
// al-sawatih bi-amr Allah Sultmi Nara Diraya di negeri Kedah dar al-adzam sawat 1208, 'We who trust in the help of God, Sultmi Nara Diraya, in the state of Kedah, abode of security, the year 1208/1793 - 4' (2006), 30mm. On a letter to Francis Light, 18th c. School of Oriental and African Studies, CS5 4020/58, 55

Below centre an opposite Ogenrual seal of Sultan Syed al-Karsh of Pontianak (c.1808 – 1819) on the west coast of Borneo. The border inscription is written entirely in disconnected letters, and contains exhortations to God addressed by his Beautiful Name but also to Ruhad and Ma'ruf al-Karsh, a Sufi saint who died in Baghdad in 800, and whose name is used as an amulet in Southeast Asia. al-sawatih bi-amr Allah Sultmi Nara Diraya di negeri Kedah dar al-adzam sawat 1208, 'We who trust in the help of God, Sultmi Nara Diraya, in the state of Kedah, abode of security, the year 1208/1793 - 4' (2006), 30mm. On a letter to Francis Light, 18th c. School of Oriental and African Studies, CS5 4020/58, 55

Below Seal of Sultan Abdull Kadir II of Talle' (c.1781 - 1767) in south Sulawesi. This border contains the sequence of magical signs known as 'The Seven Seals of Solomon', followed by a pentagram and more repeated letters, around his name in the centre: al-mutanajif bi-al-Ruhad al-Wadul Abdull Kadir ibn Syaf bi-Allah! al-Wadul Abdull Kadir ibn Syaf bi-Allah! al-Wadul Abdull Kadir ibn Syaf bi-Allah! He who implores help from the Lord, the Very Loving One, Abdull Kadir, son of Syaf, son of Mahamud, son of the Sultan Abdulhadi (960), 48 mm. On a contract with the Dutch, 3 August 1765. Jepit National Republik Indonesia, Makasser 2174/30
Seal, 14th–15th c. Arabic letters ending in the form of a fathah.

Above (20) Silver seal of Sufi Sh. Abdul Salam of Tiou, Arab, Shahih Abdul Salam al-Tiouni 1309/1891 // Yemlikha Maktabnas Maalba Marroush Dabernouh Shadabnas Kafkatrithulshu Qimisir (F 1853).

Museum National, Jakarta, 8.315

if Kedah, with the 3 8 4 7 6 1 5 7 4 9 2 fara Dinaa di negeri. He who trusts in the 6 of the state of Kedah, 1493–4 (9206), 6th, 18th c. Sultan 1205, 6.

agional seal of : (6. 800–1819) on order inscription is letters, and contain y his Botiulh s/urf al-Kurabi, a Sufi 3, and whose name is used as an amulet in Southeast Asia, al-waatiq biillah al-Khalif al-Malik wa-ha hadu al-Sultan al-Sayid al-Sayf al-Kurabi ibn al-marhum al-Sultan al-Sayid al-Sayf al-Kahfi al-Ma pracowników al-Marhum al-Habib Husain al-Kurabi // Mas'ufu al-Kurabi ya Budah Ya Malakur Ya Hafz Ya Kafi Ya Mubin, He who trusts in God, the Creator, the Maker, and he is Your servant, the Sultan Sayid Sayf al-Kurabi, son of the late Sultan Sayid Sayf al-Kahfi al-Ma pracowników al-Marhum al-Habib Husain al-Kurabi // Mas'ufu al-Kurabi, O Budah, O Peamun, O Gaurdian, O All-Preserving One, O Sufficient One, O Comprehending One (1899), 68 mm. On a letter to T.S. Raffles in Melaka, 16 Salate 1225/12 March 1811, shown in the facing page (for letter text see About 2009, 392–5).

III.MSS.K.12/30/2, 12, 132

Below Seal of Sultan Abdul Kadir II of Talle (c.1751 – 1767) in south Sulawesi. The border contains the sequence of magical signs known as the Seven Seal of Solomon, followed by a pentagon and more repeated letters, arranged in his name in the center: al-mustansir bi al-Rabb al-Walid Abdul Kadir ibn Syafi ibn Mahmoud ibn al-Sultan Abdulah. He who implores help from the Lord, the Very Loving One, Abdul Kadir, son of Syan, son of Mahmoud, son of the Sultan Abdulah (1860), 48 mm. On a contract with the Dutch, 5 August 1761. Arab National Republic, Indonesia, Makassar 274/16.
ان يُتَضَرَّعُ شَهِيدًا مِّنَ الْأَرْضِ فَيَكُونَ لَهُ مِنَ الْجَهَّازِ يَاءَضُّ}

موضع روَابِلُ لِلْعَلِيْمِ وَالْمَهْدِيِّ مَيْجَالَ كَانَ الْغَنْمُ}

فَضِلَّ الْعَلِيْمُ جَهَّازًا وَالْمَهْدِيِّ مَيْجَالًا}

خَاسِرُ خَيْرَانِ الْمُهَابِرِينَ كَبْرُهُنَّ}

قَلْبُ الرَّحْمَانِ ابْنِ الرِّغَاحِ
Seal Impressions

The materials used for stamping Islamic seals changed over time. Arabic documents written on papyrus from the seventh century bore seals stamped in clay, and seals were also impressed in lead and bronze until around the eleventh century (1.1).

Thereafter the story of Islamic seal impressions is beset by a ‘black hole’, for several centuries separate these early sealings and the first surviving paper documents with ink impressions. What is clear is that there was a sea-change in Islamic sealing practice, for with the Mongol invasions of the Arab lands in the thirteenth century, the Chinese custom of using ink as a sealing medium spread throughout the Islamic world. Coming from a world of wax seals, early European travellers were intrigued by this custom. In the account of his voyage to the Red Sea in 1611 published in Purchas his Pilgrimes, John Satan reproduced engravings of three small Islamic seals from Mocha in Yemen, saying: ‘I have yet cause of some of the Seals to be cut, and heere added for the raritie, being not in wax but stampes of Ink[2]‘ (see Introduction). Writing in 1835, Edward Lane described the use of the seal ring in Egypt: ‘A little ink is daubed upon it with one of the fingers, and it is pressed upon the paper; the person who uses it having first touched his tongue with another finger and moistened the place in the paper which it is to be stamped.’ This was certainly the method used in certain parts of the Islamic world, because on some ink seal impressions fingerprints can still be seen.

Wax seals are also sometimes encountered, and were used especially to seal a folded letter closed or to fasten envelopes (3.3). In the Malay states of Southeast Asia, seals were traditionally stamped in lampblack (3.6). Large metal seals, made of silver or brass, were held over a candle flame until soot had collected on the surface of the seal, before being stamped on the document. Lampblack seal impressions could be very striking, with clear white writing against a black background, but could also be quite messy, and sometimes a small paper flap was attached above the seal to prevent smudging (3.8). By the early twentieth century, all over the Islamic world we see the appearance of seals stamped in purple ink, signalling the inexorable spread of the modern office inkpad.

1 Purchas 1625: I.343.
2 Lane 1896: 26.

Left Round black ink seal of Yūqib Beg (?1478 – 1490), Aq Qoyund, ruler of Iran. Ina‘ Allah yu‘mir bi al-lad wa al-shan, ‘God commands with justice and beneficence, Ya‘qub, son of Hasan, son of ‘Ali, son of ‘Uthman, impressed at the end of a long firman confirming in office the hereditary custodians of sacred shrines in Qum, dated 15 Ramadan 884/30 November 1479. Sidney Churchell collection, Bl. Or.4054/1
Ilkhanid seals: the earliest Islamic ink seal impressions

In 1258, Hulagu, brother of the Great Khan, captured Baghdad and killed the last Abbasid caliph, al-Musta‘sim, establishing the Ilkhanid empire across Iran, Iraq, the Caucasus and Anatolia. The earliest surviving Persian decree from the Ilkhanate of Iran is a document of 692/1292 written in Turkish and Persian, with the square Chinese seal of Gaykhutu (r.1291 – 1295), which he received from the Yuan emperor Qubilai Khan in Khanbalq (Beijing). The decree is a long scroll made up of several pieces of paper glued together, and the seal is printed in red ink over each join to protect against tampering or the unauthorised addition of text.¹

Later royal seals from Iran from the early fourteenth century onwards were in Arabic script, initially often in square Kufic script. The continued use of square Kufic on official Islamic seals at a time when angular script was already archaic in terms of manuscript culture may be partly due to its close visual proximity to Chinese square seal script or the square Mongolian script also used on Yuan seals.² The seal of Ujaytu (r.1304 – 1317), found on a document dated 713/1313 – 4, is a large square 105 mm high, with an inscription in three styles of Arabic script: cursive with elongated verticals; Kufic; and an extremely stylised form of square script.³ In line with Mongol practice, the Ilkhanids used various coloured inks for their seals: the supreme seal, the al tamgha was red; the gold seal, the altun tamgha was usually used for financial matters; and there are also references to a green-blue seal, kok tamgha, and a black seal, qurr tamgha.⁴

One of the most spectacular surviving Ilkhanid seal impressions is found in the albums assembled by the collector Heinrich Friedrich von Diez, who was appointed Prussian chargé d’affaires at the Sublime Porte in Istanbul between 1786 and 1790. The Diez albums, a remarkable collection which include paintings and calligraphies, are now housed in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin.⁵ In shape the seal impression is a six-petalled circle, in diameter originally slightly larger than the 165 mm illuminated square frame in which it is now presented. The seal is stamped in gold ink, across the join of two pieces of white paper, suggesting that it had been cut out from a larger scroll or document.⁶ It contains a series of inscriptions in Arabic in three different styles of script: foliated Kufic on the outer rim carved in relief in six arched segments, naskh on the inner rim and square Kufic in the centre. The outer inscription contains the date 746/1345 – 6. The naskh inscription includes the name and titles of Amurshwan Khan (r. 1344 – 1356), a puppet of the Chobanid ruler Malik Ashraf⁷ and the last of the Ilkhanids to strike coins in his name.⁸

Leef Seal, cast bronze, 14th c., Iran. Abu Ishaq al-chalabi al-murshidi, qadi, the spiritual guide may God sanctify his soul. 58 x 43, Royal Collection, acc. no. 7/1996.
Ikhanid seals: the earliest Islamic ink seal impressions

of the Great Khan, captured Baghdad ad caliph, al-Mustasim, establishing the ran, Iraq, the Caucasus and Anatolia. 1 A decree from the Ikhanid of Iran is 1itten in Turkish and Persian, with, the ran (1291 - 1295), which he received from Kay Khan in Khorasan (Beijing). 1 The first use of several pieces of paper glued ed in red ink over each join to protect the ornamented addition of text. 1

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One of the most spectacular surviving Ikhanid seal impressions is found in the albums assembled by the collector Heinrich Friedrich von Diers, who was appointed Russian chargé d'affaires at the Sublime Porte in Istanbul between 1786 and 1790. The Diers albums, a remarkable collection which include paintings and calligraphies, are now housed in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin. 1 In shape the seal impressions is a six-petalled circle, in diameter originally slightly larger than the 165 mm illuminated square frame in which it is now presented. The seal is stamped in gold ink, across the join of two pieces of white paper, suggesting that it had been cut out from a larger scroll or document. 1 It contains a series of inscriptions in Arabic in three different styles of script: foliated Kufic on the outer rim carved in relief into stepped segments, naskhi on the inner rim and square Kufic in the centre. The outer inscription contains the date 746/1345 - 6. The naskhi inscription includes the name and titles of Anushirvan Khan (r. 1344 - 1356), a puppet of the Chobanid ruler Malik Ashraf 2 3 and the last of the Ikhanids to strike coins in his name. 4

The central inscription in square Kufic consists of the Profession of Faith (shahadah) and the names of the Rightly Guided caliphs Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman and 'Ali. It also has another interesting feature: while the outer and inner inscriptions are in gold ink on white ground the naskhi inscription is in intaglio, reserved in white against the coloured ground.

The main style of script for communication at this time was naskh but this seal shows how Kufic was still used for decorative purposes or to write particular kinds of texts. Square Kufic is thought to derive from the Mongolian script Phagspa, introduced by the Tibetan lama of that name in 1269 in China, to write the many languages of the Mongol empire. It was used to great effect in Ikhanid and later architecture in Iran and Central Asia. Seal matrices in square Kufic are rare, and an important example in the David collection bears the name of the Sufi sheikh Abu Ishag (963 - 1033), founder of the Sufi order the Israqiyya. He was born in Kazarun in southwestern Iran, where his shrine, also a major centre of manuscript production was located. 5 He was believed to have spiritual powers, and Ibn Battuta, who visited Kazarun in 1347, describes how travellers from the China Sea would pledge money to the shrine, and how members of the order would collect the vows and issue a document stamped in red sealing wax with a silver seal. This bronze seal is likely therefore to have been similarly used by itinerant members of the order for stamping onto pledges or other documents while travelling. Over a century later, in a continuation of earlier regal styles, gold ink was still used for the square Kufic seals stamped on a decree in Persian dated 851/1448 from the shrine of sheikh Abu Ishag. 6

1 Sokolov 1991: 34 - 35; Rogers 1997: 388 - 9 discusses this practice and other examples. See also Blair 2006: 272 - 3.
2 Rogers 1997: 189.
3 Brown 1890: 341.
4 Derrett 1985: 768.
5 Nordberg 1993.
7 It was identified as such by Michael Rogers 1997: 189. For Anushirvan see Melville & Yazdi 1991.
8 Dier 2006: 539 - 40.
9 Blair and Bloom 2006: 100 who discuss the seal and the influence of Phagspa on the Arabic script.
11 I am grateful to Sheila Blair and Wouter Thackston for their assistance in deciphering the inscriptions on the seal.
Red ink seals of Kedah and Perlis

The Islamic practice of stamping seals in ink originated in China. While many colours have been used for seal impressions in China, red ink has been preferred over all others (see 1.7), the use of black and blue inks being associated with mourning. Traditional Chinese vermilion ink was made from cinnabar, mixed with water and honey or oils, while luxury versions included powdered coral.

The earliest Islamic ink seals on official documents were in a variety of colours. In accordance with Mongol chancery conventions, the Ilkhanids of Iran used different coloured inks for their seals. By the fifteenth century, however, almost all known Islamic seal impressions are stamped in black ink, and continue to be so for the next five hundred years. Some slight variations are encountered: a letter from the Dey of Algiers to Queen Anne in 1709 has his seal stamped in black ink mixed with glitter, reflecting the Ottoman practice of 'illuminating' certain significant portions of the text of letters through the use of glittery ink. Ink seals in more unusual colours such blue, green or grey are very occasionally encountered, but the most prominent colour of sealing ink other than black was red, particularly in parts of Southeast Asia.

Situated on the north-west coast of the Malay peninsula, the state of Kedah shares a border with Thailand, and at times in its history has been subjugated to Thai rule. Seals in Thailand and Cambodia were always stamped in red ink, deriving ultimately from Chinese practice. Thai influence is reflected in the fact that Kedah is the only Malay state where red ink was the standard sealing medium, compared to the lampblack ubiquitous in other Malay states. An explicit claim to this effect is found in a letter from the Chao Pya of Ligor in southern Thailand to the British Governor of Penang in 1829: 'From the commencement of the Kedah kingdom its rulers from generation to generation were tributary to the Siamese. The first Raja of Kedah were Siamese who used red chop (seals) and after their dynasty was finished the Malays became lords of the country and continued to use the red chop instead of a black one, contrary to the custom of all other Malay rulers.'

Perlis, long a region within Kedah, became a separate polity in the early 19th century. The daughter of Sultan Abdullah Mukarram Syah of Kedah married a Sayyid of Hadhramauti descent named Abu Bakar Harun Jamal al-Lail, who was the Penghulu or chief of Arau. Their son Sayyid Husain became Raja of Perlis in 1843, with his palace at Arau. Seals of Perlis were also always stamped in red ink.

3. EI Adl. 61:495, EJ 3v.
Red ink seals of Kedah and Perlis

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