Wax Seals

In most parts of the Islamic world where seals were normally impressed in ink, wax seals were sometimes used as 'seals of closure' on envelopes of letters. The seal could be applied directly to the folded paper letter, or to a paper envelope containing the letter. Not many such seals have survived, as they were usually broken or discarded when the letter was opened. When the sultan of Banjar in west Java sent his ambassadors to London in 1682, his letter in Arabic to Charles II was stamped with a black ink seal, but the paper envelope was closed with a small seal impressed in black wax.\(^1\)

Across a wide range of Islamic lands, from Persia to India and the Malay world, the most important royal letters were often sent in envelopes made of fine cloth such as silk or brocade. Sometimes the mouth of the pouch was tied or drawn shut with string or cord, to which a wax seal was attached. Thomas Hyde (1636 – 1703) was the official Court translator for a range of Oriental languages including Arabic, Persian and Malay, and from his remarks on a letter from Shah Sulayman to Charles II, we know that a wax seal was used on the envelope: "There is not any Date put to the Persian letter, except what is upon a little vacant place in each of the seals. Upon the seal of wax which is fixed to the mouth of the the Silk Bag, are these figures 1078, which answers to the Year of Christ 1667.\(^2\)" Hyde gives the inscription of the wax seal as ‘Shah Soleiman is the servant of Religion 1076’. The original letter of Shah Sulayman is still held in the National Archives at Kew, but the cloth envelope and wax seal have not survived.\(^3\)

Wax was the standard sealing medium for the whole of Europe from the medieval period onwards, and in some parts of the Islamic world such as Java and the Moluccas the use of wax seals can be correlated with the European presence. True sealing wax is made from beeswax, but from the late sixteenth century, so-called 'wax' seals tend to be the more brittle shellac, which is the resinous secretion of an insect (Tachardia lacca) native to Southeast Asia.\(^4\) Red shellac accounts for nearly all the wax seals encountered in an Islamic context. A notable exception is the royal seal of Banjar, on the south coast of Kalimantan (Borneo). In a unique and explicit reference to Malay tradition, in the early nineteenth century the wax seals of the reigning sultans of Banjar were yellow, the colour of Malay royalty.

\(^1\) The National Archives, CO 77/14, f.113r.
\(^2\) BL. Stowe 1082, f.4r.
\(^3\) The National Archives, SP 102/40/9.
\(^4\) New 2010: 18.
Vax Seals

Yellow wax seal of Sultan Sulaiman of Banjar (1605), 1606-1825), inscribed: al-Sultan Sulaiman al-Mutawakkil 'ala Allah, 'the Sultan Sulaiman, Whole Support is in God' (44), 36 mm, on a letter to the Dutch Governor-General in Batavia, 5 Safar 1321 (24 April 1806). 29 impressions are recorded of this seal, all stamped in yellow wax.

Leiden University Libraries, Cod.Os. 2205, I 77

In the world where seals were normally no longer in use, they were sometimes used as 'seals of letters. The seal could be applied directly on a paper envelope containing the letter. These seals were usually broken or opened when the sultan of Banjar came to London in 1682, his letter in a folded black ink seal, but the paper seal impressed in black wax.

Wax was the standard sealing medium for the whole of Europe from the medieval period onwards, and in some parts of the Islamic world such as Java and the Moluccas the use of wax seals can be correlated with the European presence. True sealing wax is made from beeswax, but from the late sixteenth century, so-called 'wax' seals tend to be the more brittle shellac, which is the resinous secretion of an insect (Tachardia laica) native to Southeast Asia. Red shellac accounts for nearly all the wax seals encountered in an Islamic context. A notable exception is the royal seal of Banjar, on the south coast of Kalimantan (Borneo). In a unique and explicit reference to Malay tradition, in the early nineteenth century the wax seals of the reigning sultans of Banjar were yellow, the colour of Malay royalty.

There are some Malay seals which are known only from red wax impressions, but which close examination reveals are streaked with black. This implies that on a previous occasion the seal matrix had been stamped in lampblack, which would accumulate in the deep crevices of the incised inscription of the seal face. Thus, when the seal was next stamped in wax, the resulting impression would be coated with the residue of lampblack. Most of the wax seals in which traces of lampblack are noticed are found on treaties with the Dutch, confirming the association of the use of wax with European influence, and the status of lampblack as the preferred indigenous sealing medium in Southeast Asia.

1 The National Archives, CO 77/14, L 13c.
2 The National Archives, SP 102/40/9.
3 BL Steene 1862, 14r.
4 Now 2010: 18.

Silk brocade envelope closed at the mouth with a wax seal, enclosing a Persian letter relating to the military operations of Vazir al-Dinleh Amir al-Mulk Mahmud Vazir Khan, 1223/1808 - 9. BL. Os. 11308

Leiden University Libraries, Cod.Os. 2205, I 77
Left: Red wax seal of the sultan of Dempsu, on the island of Sumbawa in eastern Indonesia, showing a residue of lampblack, inscribed: Sultan Abdul Karim (1891), 20 mm, impressed on a treaty with the Dutch, 30 April 1755. Arup Nasrul Republik Indonesia, Makau 1976:13a.

Below: Scene from an illustrated Javanese manuscript showing the handing over of an envelope sealed with two wax seals. Smat Puri Joyokusumo, 1992. De Mol, 1446, 3x3b.
The seal of Syaikh Yusuf of Makassar

Syaikh Yusuf of Makassar (1627 – 1699) was one of the most influential Southeast Asian religious scholars of the seventeenth century, and author of over twenty theological works in Arabic. He was born in Makassar, in south Sulawesi, and in 1644 left for Arabia, travelling via Banten in west Java and Gujarat. He spent over two decades studying in the Yemen, Mecca, Medina and Damascus, before returning to Banten where he married a daughter of Sultan Agung. When the crown prince of Banten Sultan Haji rose up against his father Sultan Agung with Dutch support, Yusuf sought in support of Sultan Agung. Yusuf was finally captured by the Dutch and exiled first to Sri Lanka and then to South Africa, where he died in 1699, and where he is today revered as a pioneer leader of the Islamic community.

A fine red wax seal impression in the name of Syaikh Yusuf is found on a treaty signed between Makassar and the Dutch in 1738, nearly four decades after Syaikh Yusuf’s death in exile in the Cape of Good Hope. It reads al-Sayyid al-Haj Yusuf al-Taj 1088/1677 – 8, and is thus dated during Syaikh Yusuf’s second sojourn in Banten, from ca.1672 until his capture in 1688. The form of his name given in the seal is consistent with historical evidence, for in his work Zubdat al-Awar, composed in Banten just a year earlier than the date on the seal, his name is given as al-Haj Yusuf al-Taj. The last element recalls his sobriquet al-Taj al-Khalwatiyya, the Crown of the Khalwatiyya, referring to the Sufi order he introduced to the Malay archipelago. The calligraphy of this seal is of the high standard associated with royal Banten seals of this period, compared to the generally less accomplished script of Sulawesi seals. Although seals in south Sulawesi are almost invariably stamped in lampblack, as are the other seals on this treaty, this seal is stamped in red wax, the most common medium for seals in Banten.

The contract on which the seal is found is an agreement between the VOC and seven Makassar chiefs, whose signatures are given on the document, and it was witnessed by three Bugis chiefs loyal to the Dutch, identified on the treaty in Malay as Datu Baringen, Kapitan Laut and Arung Semaling. Their three seals are affixed to the document, Syaikh Yusuf’s seal being imprinted alongside the name (in Bugis characters) of Kuning Sammy (i.e. Arung Semaling). Arung Semaling was a nephew of the first-named witness, the Bone prince La Temmassonge Datu Bariring, who later reigned as Sultan Juliuddin of Bone (r.1749 – 1775), and was married to Sitti Habibah, granddaughter of Syaikh Yusuf. After Syaikh Yusuf’s death in the Cape in 1699, most of his family and followers were allowed to return to Sulawesi, where his remains were sent back for burial in 1705. It is thus likely that Syaikh Yusuf’s seal was brought back to Makassar around this time, and passed down through his descendants into the hands of the royal family of Bone.
Gold seal tokens of Banjar

In November 1714, three British merchants from the East India Company ship Borneo were granted permits to trade by the sultan of Banjar, on the south coast of the island of Borneo, in present-day Indonesian Kalimantan. The issuing of trading permits was a common occurrence, but what was exceptional in this case was the form of the permit itself: a thin piece of gold stamped with the sultan's seal, with a personalised inscription naming each of the three officers. At this time the ruler of Banjar was Sultan Tahmidullah (r.1712 – 1747), and the presentation of the permits took place at his palace at Caytonger or Kayu Tangi, about a hundred miles upstream from the port of Banjarmasin. The occasion was described by Captain Daniel Beeckman in his travelogue, A voyage to the island of Borneo in the East-Indies, published in London in 1718:

'He caus'd three Gold Plates to be made of the Form and Size here mark'd, of which he gave one to me, another to Mr. Swartz, and the third to Mr. Becher; and told us, that was a Token of the Friendship, and a Chop, or Grant of Trade, having the Stamp of his Great Seal on it; that on the producing it at our return, he would not only protect us, but grant us the Liberty of Trade in any Part of his Dominions. Then he wish'd us, in a hearty manner, a good Voyage, and a speedy Return. I have here insert the Words that are on the Gold Chop, as also the English of them, as near as I can, viz.

De ca Tawon Zeib, dann ca Bohom Dulaidat, Bang Sultan Derre Negree Caytonger, des Causs ence Chop pada anacooeda Beeckman
That is,

In the Year Zeib, and the Moon Dulaidat, The Sultan of Caytonger gave this Chop to Captain Beeckman.'

None of the original tokens is known to have survived, but tucked inside a manuscript volume of miscellanies in the British Library is a document with a tracing of the token granted to Bartholomew Swarts, supercargo of the Borneo. As part of the Harleian collection, this manuscript dates from before 1753, and was therefore probably drawn up not long after the return of the Borneo from the East Indies. The piece of paper is inscribed:

The Contract with the Emperor of Borneo (in the East Indies).
Mr. . . . Swartz's Agent from the East India Comp. London.
This was an agreement to settle & Trade or Commerce with full liberty to the Subjects of England or great Britain.
(drawing of the token).
This is a gold plate, impressed by the Emperor, as thin as almost as this paper, whereby it is plainly seen on the other side.

In the middle of the paper, the outline of the original gold plate has been traced with a sharp implement, and the inscription on the seal and the token copied out in black ink. The scored outline shows that the gold plate was rectangular on the three lower sides but rounded at the top, and measured 87 mm by 49 mm. Impressed at the top of the token was the round seal of the sultan, measuring 45 mm in diameter with a triple-ruled outline, with an inscription in the middle and in a border around the edge. This drawing is doubly significant, not only as a record of a seal impressed in gold, but also because it depicts the oldest Islamic seal known from Borneo. In Malay seals, the main inscription giving the name of the seal owner is invariably located in the centre, while the border houses a secondary inscription. However, in this seal, the only logical way of reading the inscription is to proceed from the border inwards to the centre:

Sultan Tahmidullah ibn Sultan Tahmisullah ibn // al-Malik[?] Allah,
'Sultan Tahmidullah, son of Sultan Tahmisullah, son of
// al-Malikullah'
Gold seal tokens of Banjar

The British merchants from the East India were granted permits to trade by the south coast of the island of Borneo, in Sumatra. The issuing of trading permits but what was exceptional in this case is that a piece of gold stamped with an inscription naming each of the rulers of Banjar was Sultan Tahiruddin Shah. The permits took place at the Tamiang, about a hundred miles upriver from the sea. The occasion was described by Captain Chapp, a voyage of the island of Borneo in London in 1718:

"...a gold token, the size of a letter, was grated to Mr. Swartz, and the name of the ruler of Banjar, that was a Token of the Friendship and trade, having the Stamp of his Great State as it is called, he would not return without liberty of trade in any part of his land, in a hearty manner, a good Voyage, and I have inserted the Words that are in the middle of them, as near as I can, viz.:

"Booten Dulcariat, Eng Sultan Derre use een Chop pada anawaada Beeckman..."

Moore Dulcariat, The Sultan of Banjar to Captain Beeckman."

The inscription is known to have survived, but tucked up in the British Library is the piece of paper granted to Bartholomew Swartz, supercargo of the Borneo. As part of the Harlequin collection, this manuscript dates from before 1753, and was therefore probably drawn up not long after the return of the Borneo from the East Indies. The piece of paper is inscribed:

The Contract with the Emperor of Borneo (in the East Indies).
Mr. ... Swartz's Agent from the East India Comp., London.
This was an agreement to settle & Trade or Commerce with full liberty to the Subjects of England or great Britain.
(drawn up for the Emperor, as shown almost as this paper, where it is plainly seen on the other side.

In the middle of the paper, the outline of the original gold plate has been traced with a sharp implement, and the inscription on the seal and the token copied out in black ink. The scored outline shows that the gold plate was rectangular on the three lower sides but rounded at the top, and measured 87 mm by 48 mm. Impressed at the top of the token was the round seal of the sultan, measuring 45 mm in diameter with a triple-ruled outline, with an inscription in the middle and in a border around the edge. This drawing is doubtless significant, not only as a record of a seal impressed in gold, but also because it depicts the oldest Islamic seal known from Borneo. In Malay seals, the main inscription giving the name of the seal owner is invariably located in the centre, while the border houses a secondary inscription. However, in this seal, the only logical way of reading the inscription is to proceed from the border inwards to the centre:

Sultan Tahiruddin ibn Sultan Tahirullah ibn // al-Malik// Allah, 'Sultan Tahiruddin, son of Sultan Tahirullah, son of // al-Malik Allah'

Traced copy of the gold token, bearing the seal of Sultan Tahiruddin Shah of Banjar, with a presentation inscription in Malay to Bartholomew Swartz dated 1716, on a piece of Dutch paper with the 'Propatia' watermark.

It is probably significant that the only other Southeast Asian seal where the inscription should be read from the border inwards is also from Banjar.

Underneath the seal impression, the gold plate was inscribed in Malay with the date and the name of the recipient:

"Pada tahun ini pada bulan Zulkaidah hujjat al-nabi seratus enam tahun, Sultan Banjar menghadap cap kepada Batolomew Swartz. In the year Zulqadah, the year of the migration of the Prophet one thousand one hundred and six, the Sultan of Banjar gave this seal to Bartholomew Swartz.

Although the date on this copy is given as Zulkaidah 1106 (June/July 1695) it should, without doubt, read Zulkaidah 1112 (November/December 1714), which accords exactly with the dates of the ship Borneo's visit to Banjar.

Footnotes: