The Mughal genealogical seal

The Mughal emperors of India (1526 – 1857) originally came from Turkestan in Central Asia. They took great pride in their descent from Prince Timur (d.1405), and their illustrious genealogy was always inscribed on their seals of state.

Towards the end of the reign of Akbar (r.1556 – 1605), the Mughal genealogical seal was given a striking new ‘orbital’ design. In 1594 or 1595 the master seal engraver Mawlana ‘Ali Ahmad created a new seal with Akbar’s name in a central circle, surrounded by seven smaller circles containing the names of his ancestors up to Timur. This design was adopted by all later Mughal emperors, and the seals got larger and larger as each emperor added another generation to the pedigree. Thus Akbar’s son Jahangir had a seal with his name in the middle surrounded by eight smaller circles, while the seal of Jahangir’s son Shah Jahan had nine smaller circles. By the end of the Mughal empire, the seal of the last king, Bahadur Shah, had 16 small circles surrounding the central one.

The outer form could vary: Akbar’s seal was round, but his successors had both round and square seals, and from the time of Shah Alam I some of the seals bore headpieces. Whatever the external shape or number of generations, the internal arrangement remained constant: the inscription was read from the name of the reigning emperor in the middle, and then moved to the small circle positioned at one o’clock containing the name of his father preceded by the word ‘b/w’, ‘son of’, and then continued clockwise, always ending with the name of Timur in prime position at twelve o’clock. It should be noted that the Mughal seal was genealogical or linear, and not dynastic, for no ruler was included who was not a direct forebear of the reigning emperor.

The fame of the ‘orbital’ Mughal genealogical seal spread widely. It appears in various manifestations as a symbol of sovereignty in Mughal paintings, and was illustrated in many European travel accounts. It inspired the design of royal seals in other parts of India, and even as far away as the sultanate of Aceh in Indonesia (4.7).

1Gallop 1999.
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Opposite page Timur enthroned, surrounded by his descendants kneeling on the left, Babur and Akbar, and on the right, Humayun and Jahangir, painted by Hashim, ca.1650. BL.i.364, 38

Left Akbar’s genealogical seal before the ‘orbital’ design was introduced; here his pedigree is written in a continuous line in the border, and is not yet placed within a series of small circles. Jalal al-Din Muhammad Akbar Rudabah ibn Muhammad Humayun Rudabah Ghazi (1526/3/1556) // ibn Zaher al-Din Muhammad Babur Rudabah Ghazi ibn Timur Shaikh ibn Sultan Abu Sa’id ibn Sultan Muhammad ibn Miran Shah ibn Amir Timur. 48 mm. Firman, 1574.

BL.OO.16002 (1)
Opposite page, clockwise from top left

Jahangir's 'orbital' genealogical seal, with his name in the centre surrounded by the names of his ancestors up to Timur in eight smaller circles. Nur al-Din Muhammad Jahangir Padshah Ghazi / ibn Ali Padshah / ibn Bahaar Padshah / ibn Umar Shaikh Mira / ibn Sultan Abu Sa'id / ibn Sultan Muhammad Mira / ibn Miran Shah / ibn Amir Timur. 54 mm. Firmans, 1609. BL Or.14962(18)

Square seal of Averbegh (c.1658 - 1707), with his name in the centre and six smaller circles containing his pedigree, and invocations to God in the four corners, dated his 12th reign year 1669 - 70. Abu al-Zafar Muhay al-Din Muhammad Alamgir Badshah Ghazi sanah 1669/1669 - 70 sanah 12 / ibn Shah Jasur Badshah / ibn Jahangir Badshah [and thereafter as in the small circles on Jahangir's seal] / Ya Futuh / Ya Rafi / Ya Naq / Ya Wali', 'O Opener / O Exalter / O Advantageous One / O All-Embracing One'. 65 mm. BL Or.14962(28)


Square minbar seal of Shah 'Alam I (c.1707 - 1712), dated his 4th reign year 1710, with the names of his ancestors in 11 smaller circles, and Muhammad Muslim cn Abu al-Muhttre Qu∏ al-Din Shah 'Alam Bahadar Badshah Ghazi sanah 1121/1710 sanah 4 / ibn Alamgir Badshah / ibn Shah Jahan Badshah / ibn Jahangir Badshah [and thereafter as in the small circles on Jahangir's seal] / Innal Allah / huwa al-razaq / ibn al-qiwah / ad-matin. 'This is from God, He, the Provider, the Lord of Power, the Steadfast One.' 77 mm. Firmans, 1710. BL Or.3281A
The ninefold seal of Aceh

For 250 years, the design of the great 'ninefold' seal of Aceh—called cap semblan in Malay, or cab sukawung in Acehnese—was essentially unchanged: a central circle containing the name of the reigning sultan of Aceh, surrounded by eight smaller circles containing the names of their predecessors. Fourteen ninefold seals of nine rulers of Aceh have been documented, from the mid-seventeenth century until the formal end of the sultanate in 1903.

In 1906, the Dutch scholar Rouffaer was the first to deduce that the great seal of Aceh was modelled on the genealogical seal of the Mughal emperors of India (4.6). What was not fully appreciated, though, was the degree of 'local genius' involved, for the Acehnese had simply taken the design principle of the Mughal seal and adapted it to their own needs, and there are fundamental differences between the two sovereign seals. For a start, while the Mughal seal gained an extra small circle as each successive emperor added his father's name to the pedigree, the number of small circles on the Acehnese seal was fixed at eight, reflecting the deep-rooted affinity for multiples of four in the belief systems of the Malay world (3.3). The Mughal seal was lineal, in that it always gave the blood-line of the ruling emperor back to Prince Timur. The Acehnese seal, on the other hand, was both genealogical and political, its prime function being to enhance the legitimacy of the sultan by symbolically surrounding him with not just his ancestors but also other famous early rulers of Aceh, and its success can be judged from the fact that the ninefold design twice survived dynastic change in Aceh.

The earliest known ninefold seal is that of Sultanah Tajul Alam Safiatuddin Syah (r.1641 – 1675) (A), and present evidence suggests that the innovative design was introduced during her reign. Her pedigree starts with her famed father, Iskandar Muda (r.1607 – 1636), and then continues with Iskandar Muda's lineage through his mother, from the Dar al-Kamal dynasty which ruled in part of Aceh. The next earliest seal to survive is that of Sultan Jamaluddin Badruddin Munir (r.1703 – 1726) (B), the third of a dynasty of four sultans of Aceh of Hadhratismi sayyiid descent. In the small circles on his seal, after his father his descent is traced straight back to the grandson of the Prophet al-Husayn through five generations of imams, and the only other earlier Acehnese sovereigns named are Iskandar Muda and his daughter Tajul Alam. The inclusion of Tajul Alam's name is highly significant, for the Sayyiid dynasty of Aceh supplanted the rule of four queens, supposedly on the strength of a fatwa from Mecca prohibiting female rule. On the seals of the next dynasty of Acehnese sultans of Bugis descent (1755 – 1903), Tajul Alam is still frequently cited, while the only sultan to be named on every single royal seal is Iskandar Muda.

In the Acehnese ninefold seals, the great surprise is that Iskandar Muda's paternal heritage, the dynasty of Makota Alam, is completely unrepresented. There is no mention on any seal of some of the most renowned names in Acehnese history, such as Sultan Ali Mughayar Syah (d.1580), the first sultan of Aceh, or his son Alauddin Rayaat Syah al-Kahar, responsible for a great expansion of empire and for establishing direct ties with the Ottoman empire, although these are the sultans of Aceh lauded in the seventeenth-century panegyrics Hikayat Aceh and Bustan al-Salatin. The consistent emphasis instead on the lineage of the Dar al-Kamal dynasty has important implications for our understanding of the Acehnese view of the history and nature of the sultanate of Aceh through three centuries.

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