Certain basic shapes such as circles and ovals are used for seals all over the world, with no implication of causal influence from one region to the other. However, in different seal cultures, as a result of local factors there does appear to be a marked preference for some simple shapes over others, to the extent that these predilections can be regarded as significant characteristics of the sigillographic identity of a culture. For example, Chinese official seals were invariably square, while European seals were nearly always round or tall pointed ovals, the latter being the most suitable shape to accommodate the image of a standing figure.  

The most popular shape for Islamic seals throughout the centuries was a wide oval in landscape format, reflecting the essentially horizontal orientation of an inscription in Arabic script. Also favoured were circles or wide rectangles or octagons, the two latter categories sometimes overlapping, for a rectangle with slightly chamfered or flattened corners could also be described as a wide octagon. Other basic shapes were popular in certain regions and at certain times. There was a distinct proliferation of round seals from central Asia in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and circles were the favoured shape for official seals from Indo-Persian courts from the seventeenth century onwards. Teardrop and almond shapes were not uncommon. In Southeast Asia, the two most favoured shapes for Islamic seals were circles and peltated circles (5.3).

Many Islamic seals are embellished with a simple incised outline which follows the external shape of the seal. Internally, the inscription may be set within panels that either mirror the basic external shape of the seal, or take different forms.

Across this field of uniformity, there have nonetheless always been a few seals which stand apart in terms of their shape, and which could perhaps best be seen as creative expressions of individual or collective identity.

Above Oval black jasper seal, Harun bin Masu. 11 mm. (745), BM 1912.114.1567.  
Above Rectangular green crystal seal. Ahmad bin AI. 12 mm. (745), BM 1931.3-39.37.  
Above Octagonal carnelian seal....Ghulam ... - sayyid .... 18 mm. LASM 2004.1.678.  

Above Round nephrite seal, Ab-  

Next page.

Muhannad bin Haji, "He who triumphs in the King, the Independent One, Haji Muhannad, son of Haji, c. 14th - 17th c. 22 mm. LASM 2004.3.36.
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1 New 2010: 10.

Above Rectangular green plasman seal, Ahmad bin 'Ali, 12 mm. (P.05), BM 1921.3-20.27

Above Octagonal carnelian seal, ... Ghulam ... asyiyd ... 18 mm. ISMM 2004.5.73

Above Round agate seal, al-


Above Crescent seal from Archeological Museum seal, 1289, "This is the seal of the port of Tarsus Seminsal, the year 1289/1372-3" (W608); 51 mm; on a ship's pass issued to nahiha Tersi Lebdi Muda, sailing to the, 19 Zulhijjah 1291 (19 December 1874), KITLV, Leiden, OA136, 56

Above Seal of Ismail Pasha, the Harbourmaster (qaybuddar) of Banna, on the island of Sumbawa, Abdul Muhammad, (1403), 35 mm, on a decree issued by Sultan Abdul Hamid Muhammad Syah to the Daj of Roti, 15 Jumadil Awd 1198/26 April 1783, KITLV 06.1565

Above Starburst seal of 'Abd Allah, a religious scholar from Zabid in Yemen, 'Abd Allah bin Muhammad Zaid, 18 mm, On a letter to Hashim, Governor of the Hijaz, 1266/1849-50 (see 1.3), Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives, Istanbul, 1.DHL. 2011.22388
Seals with headpieces

One of the more unusual yet characteristic Islamic seal shapes is that of certain Persian seals, which had an arched headpiece resembling a mihrab, the niche in a mosque wall indicating the direction of Mecca. Rather than being a sudden innovation, the headpiece appears to have evolved slowly from teardrop-shaped seals. The first royal Iranian seal with headpiece appears to be that of Tahmasp I (1524–1576), dated 931/1524 at the start of his reign, with the inscription Allah - Muhammad - 'Ali set in a dome at the very top of the seal. This basic shape was continued by subsequent shahs of Iran. Seals with headpieces can come in a variety of shapes, with round, square or rectangular bases, and headpieces that vary from a semi-circular dome, to an ogive-shaped arched, or an acutely angled trefoil. The mihrab headpiece continued to be popular under the Qajars well into the first half of the nineteenth century, not only on sovereign seals but also on those of other princes. As the headpiece seems to have been a royal prerogative in Iran, few such surviving seal matrices are known, and this shape is mainly documented from seal impressions on official documents.

The fashion for seals with headpieces containing a religious expression was also evident in the Indian subcontinent, and in the account of Mughal chancery practice in the time of the Emperor

Above: Seal of Shah Tahmasp of Iran (c.1524–1576). Inscribed: Allah - Muhammad - 'Ali. 931/1524, dated start of reign. 38 mm. On a firman appointing Khwaja Talash to the post of Prime Minister, 1575. BL Or 4093, recto.

A characteristic Islamic seal patterned to Persian seal, which has an arched rim in a mosque at Mecca. Rather than being a sudden panic to have evolved slowly from the royal seal of the Persian house to the Islamic era.

The fashion for seals with headpieces containing a religious expression was also evident in the Indian subcontinent, and in the account of Maghul chancery practice in the time of the Emperor Akbar (c.1556 – 1605), the A'ins Akbar the term mukhrad is also used for such seals. At the Maghul court, up to the early eighteenth century a few seals bear gently-sloping headpieces generally containing the invocation to God, Huwai, He, but from the mid-eighteenth century onwards the headpiece begins to take a more exaggerated trefoil shape. The trefoil shape was also known in India – it was in use in Iran in the sixteenth century – but in an Indian context may have had a particular resonance as evoking the parasol (chhur), an ancient Indian symbol of royalty and protection. This connection is explicitly suggested by the illumination on a seal of Shah Alam II (c.1759 – 1806), where a parasol is painted extending upwards, growing organically from the headpiece of the seal. The headpiece was also popular in Afghanistan and in parts of Central Asia and Southeast Asia, notably in the kingdom of Domp on the island of Sumatra, but here the source of artistic influence is not immediately apparent.

1 Schirinene 1982: 39.
2 Blochmann 1927: 54.
3 Rabino di Borgomale 1945: 23.

Far right: Detail of firman of Shah Alam II, honouring James Rattray Elphinstone for his military achievements, and granting him the title of Nizir al-Mulk Bahadur Deover Jung, 11 June 1801. IAMM.5083.A.34