Petalled lotus seals from Southeast Asia

Petalled circles account for nearly a third of all Islamic seals documented from the Malay world, yet are only rarely encountered in other Muslim cultures. In the western part of the archipelago, encompassing Sumatra and the Malay peninsula, the proportion of petalled shapes rises to over half of all seals. The design of the petals varies greatly, from simple semicircles or triangles to stepped ogre arches, but the inspiration is undoubtedly in each case the same: the lotus blossom. The lotus flower is a symbol of purity in Hinduism and Buddhism, which were the major religions in the Malay world before the coming of Islam, and the lotus continues to be an important decorative motif in the art of the archipelago.

One aspect of the symbolism of the lotus may be of especial relevance to Malay seals. In Hindu and Buddhist art, deities are often depicted seated on a padmapitha, a 'lotus-throne' or seat, which is round and adorned with a single or double row of lotus petals, and many fine examples are known from Java and Sumatra. As a throne for the Buddha or a deity, the lotus indicates divine birth, but by extension, a lotus pedestal also served as a base for 'anything divine, holy or auspicious, be it a deity or a symbolic object.' Thus a lotus-shaped petalled-circle seal would naturally be regarded as a singularly appropriate vehicle for an inscription naming a ruler or, indeed, any dignitary, in the Malay world.

As striking as the consistency of depiction of the lotus in the shape of Malay seals is the number of petals accorded to the blossom. Over half of all Malay petalled seals have eight petals, with the next most popular number of petals being 12, and after that 16. So rigorous was this symbolism that 'one less' than the auspicious number also acquired a significance of its own. In Perak, only the sultan's seal could have 16 petals, and consequently at one time the seal of the successor to the throne had 15 petals. In Aceh, the great seal of state always had eight internal subcircles, but the sultan's medium-sized seal (pah trungoh), which was of lesser importance than the great seal, had seven petals.

The significance of this emphasis on eight and other multiples of four probably derives in the first place from the importance of the four cardinal and four mid-points in Hindu-Buddhist cosmology. It also taps into a much older substratum of the importance of four in Austronesian belief and social systems. But the survival through the centuries of the affinity for four probably owes much to what is chronologically the last in this sequence of waves of influence: the mystical Muslim belief in the fourfold unity of the universe, as summarised by the Dutch scholar of Islam, C. Snouck Hurgronje, in his study The Acehnese.
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Below Eight-petalled seal of Yang Dipertuan Muda Raju Jafar ARIR, al-wathiq billah Raju Muda ibni al-mahmud 'ja habib Allah samat 1227', 'He who trusts in God, Raju Muda, son of the late [witness] to the way of God, the year 1227/1811-12' (#133), 55 mm, from a letter to T.S. Raflie of Melaka, 12 Rabiulawal 1226/6 April 1811. BM 1811. 14180; BM 1811. 14187

Below Eight-petalled seal of Sultan Abu Bakar of Sambas (r.1790-1814), inscribed: al-wathiq billah Paduka Seri Sultan Abu Bakar Tajuddin ibni al-mahmud Sultan Umar Akamuddin cili Allah j al-Islam, 'He who trusts in God, Paduka Seri Sultan Abu Bakar Tajuddin, son of the late Sultan Umar Akamuddin, the shadow of God on earth' (#71), 67 mm, on a letter to T.S. Raflie, 2 Moharam 1228/2 February 1811. BM 1811. 14180; BM 1811. 14187
"They [i.e. mystical Muslim writers] illustrate, for example, the doctrine that every part of creation is a manifestation of the Creator's being, by pointing to the higher unity in which move harmoniously the four winds, the four elements, the four chief components of ritual prayers, the four archangels, the four righteous successors of Muhammad and the four orthodox schools of jurisprudence. Now as with man the four limbs correspond with the four great inspired books and the four sorts of quality of God, so we see how among other things the ever-recurring number four demonstrates the unity of the whole of God's creation. It is the task of mysticism to awaken in man the consciousness of this unity, so that he may identify himself alike with God and with the universal."

In many Malay sources the symbolic importance of the number four is encapsulated in the presentation of the path of the Sufi in four stages – surat, tarikat, holakat and makefikat – and its many derivatives: the equivalence between the four stages of the path, the four elements, and the four letters of the word Allah; and even the fact that the names Muhammad and Adam are also spelt with four letters. An orthodox interpretation is even proposed in one Acehnese source, where the eight subcircles surrounding the name of the ruling sultan on the great seal of Aceh are seen to symbolise the four sources of law and the four types of law in Aceh – Qur’an, Hadith, Ijma’ Ulama, Qas, Halom, Adat, Reussa, Qasim – and signify that the sultan himself was bound by the rule of law.

In attempting to identify the source of decorative motifs and shapes on Malay seals, it is of course important not to overstate connections, or to imply that the religious symbolism of the pre-Islamic period was still consciously adhered to centuries later. What is proposed, though, is that the profound significance of the lotus motif and its association with divinity and divine kingship (and later with divinely-ordained kingship), together with the earlier affinity for fourfold division cemented by its later Islamic associations, took deep root in the Malay artistic psyche, and thereafter was never absent from Malay patterns and designs, along with an amorphous awareness of its auspicious connotations.

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1 van Looszen-de Leeuw 1944: 27.
2 Heine-Geldern 1956; Winstedt 1963: 68.
3 van Ossembruggen 1983: 34.
4 Smouck Hurgonje 1906: 2.11.
6 Winstedt 1963: 75.
7 Hauny 1983: 74.
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\[1\] van Loojissen-de Leeuw 1984: 27. \[2\] Snouck Hurgrono 1906: 2.11. 
\[5\] van Oesenbruggen 1983: 34. \[6\] Hastrup 1983: 74.
Art around seals

While seals themselves constitute small but perfectly-formed canvases for the artistry of their creators, they also inspired manuscript illuminators in the palace chancery to provide a suitably illustrious setting for the royal seal on important documents. Illuminated letters and edicts with dedicated decorated frames for seals are found all over the Islamic world, from Morocco to the Mughal empire and the Malay archipelago. It was in Iran, though, that the most inventive and inspired manifestations of this art form flourished, from the time of the later Safavids (1501–1732) through to the Afsharids (1736–1795) and Qajars (1795–1924). Here we find seals provided with their own architectural constructs or nestling within a bed of petals, sitting at the heart of a golden flame or sending forth rainbow-tinted rays. Even the seals of validation by chancery officials on the reverse of Qajar documents are occasionally adorned with illumination to enhance their presence, a feature not seen elsewhere.

Above left: Seal of the Safavid Shah Husayn I (r. 1094–1098), inscribed Bismillah al-rasul al-sharif / kumartini qalbi asir al-mas'as Sultan Husain 1125, 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate, the least significant soul, commander of the faithful, Sultan Husain, 1125/1715', 24 mm, on a firman of Rajab 1130/1720.

ABove right: Seal inscribed: Husayn al-Ali al-Ghulab al-Sultan ibn al-Sultan Nasir al-din Shah Qajar 1364, 'He is God, the Highest and Dignified, the sultan son of the sultan, Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar, 1264/1847–50', on a firman of Musaffar al-Din Mirza, DMM 2012.11.9

Top right: Seal of the Afsharid ruler Nadir Shah (r. 1736–1747), inscribed Mazhar i jaf'IFI Sadi Nadir an I 1148, 'Document of the Divinely-protected Nadir 1148/1736', 16 mm, impressed diagonally upside-down on a firman of Rajab 1153/1740. DMM 40935, 183
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Husayn I (c.1694 – 1722), inscribed Bismillah al-rahab al-rahim / kamsnap-e, in 1123, 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate, the least faithful, Sultan Husain, 1123/1713, 24 mm, on a firman of Shah 1300/1718.


Right Seal of the Qajar ruler Nasir al-Din Shah (c.1848 – 1896), inscribed al-Mahall ilah a'ti'ila, 'to the Exalted belongs the kingdom. As soon as Nasir al-Din was rewarded with the kingdom, his justice was felt even be the moon and fish 1264/1847 – 8, 47 mm, on a firman of 1278/1861. LAMM 2012, 1.37


Below: Seal of Mirza Agha Khan Sadr Azam, inscribed: Sadr-ı Azam-i Dowlah-i 'Aliyak-i Isma'il-i-n-nasir-i'n-raj-i Timad al-Dowlah Mirza Agha Khan Nuri 1266. "The prime minister of great governor of Iran; the seeker of assistance, the supplicant, Timad al-Dowlah Mirza Agha Khan Nuri, 1268/1851 – 2, on the back of a firman of 1268/1851 – 2. 1757. 64.1953.14."
Pictorial brass seals from Iran

It will have been observed that the designs on the vast majority of the seals illustrated in this book are calligraphic. This is true for Islamic seals as a whole, for as objects which in broad terms had a public or official function, they needed to adhere to the proscription against figurative representation in the same way as did coins. The coinage reform of the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik in 77/696–7 had established that the key messages on the coins henceforth were to take the form of calligraphy rather than images. Before this, early Islamic coins were inspired by those of the pre-Islamic rulers – the Byzantines in the west, and the Sassanians in the east – and generally bore representations of these rulers on the face of the coin.1 In the early Islamic era we know that the seals attached to Arabic papyri were engraved with figural designs, for example the seal of the commander of the Muslim army of Egypt Amr ibn al-As had the image of a bull on it.2 After the late seventh century this was to change, and figural representation on seals becomes extremely rare.3

This section highlights a fascinating group of seals with designs of people and animals produced in Iran during the nineteenth century. The seals form a coherent group; they are all made of brass, are almost all carved in intaglio, and generally bear dates.4 They appear for the most part to be personal seals, and combine an image of an animal or a person with a personal name. One seal in the group illustrated bears the image of a seated lion with the sun behind (B). The motif of lion and sun has a long history in the Middle East, being principally a zodiacal symbol associated with Leo. In nineteenth-century Iran it became the national symbol of the Qajar rulers, appearing on a diverse range of objects (see also 5.10).

3 For further examples see Porter 2011: 111–117.