Royal animal seals from Jambi

Jambi is situated in east Sumatra on the banks of the Batanghari, the longest river on the island, which rises in the Minangkabau highlands to the west. Jambi has been identified as the site of Malayu, initially part of the great Buddhist empire of Sriwijaya which flourished from the seventh to the eleventh centuries, and in the fourteenth century ruled by king Adityawarman, an adherent of tantric Buddhism. In the late sixteenth century, the rulers of Jambi converted to Islam and, according to the local myth of origin, were descended from a nobleman from Rum, Turkey. In the early seventeenth century, thanks to the pepper trade, Jambi was the richest state on the east coast of Sumatra, but its fortunes waned as its neighbour and rival Palembang grew in stature and wealth.

The earliest documented Islamic seals from Jambi dating from the seventeenth century are notable for their exquisite decorated borders, but from the mid-eighteenth century onwards the sovereign seals of Jambi took a more unusual form, flouting the usual Islamic avoidance of the depiction of living creatures in an official context. For the next century and a half, the royal seal always took the same basic shape of a lotus-shaped eight-petalled circle, of which four petals enclose images of animals, while the other four alternate petals contain the name of the ruler referred to by his Javanese titles.

In the three earliest-known such seals – of Sultan Ahmad Zainuddin (r.1743 – 1770), Sultan Massad Badruddin (r.1777 – ca.1790) and Sultan Mahmud Muhsudin (r.1812) – the four animals are well-formed and quite distinct from each other. Although difficult to identify precisely, each seal has an elephant and three other animals that may variously resemble a deer, tiger, lion, wolf or buffalo. However, in the later seals of Sultan Muhammad Faqiruddin (r.1821 – 1841), Sultan Taha Saiuddin (r.1855 – 1904) and the Dutch-installed
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Sultan Ahmad Nasiruddin (r.1858–81), the animals are represented in a more conventionalised way with little distinction between them, and only two variants can be identified: a hybrid creature with the trunk of an elephant and the tail of a mouse, and a striped beast presumably recalling a tiger. By the end of the nineteenth century the animals have vanished, for the seal of Sultan Ahmad Zainuddin (r.1885–1899) is round rather than petalled, although the concept of the placing of the reign name in the four petals is preserved through its sitting in four cartouches in the border.

The significance of the individual animals is not clear, but one possibility is that they represented the guardians of the four cardinal points of Buddhist cosmology. If this was indeed the case, the evolutionary process described above illustrates how awareness of the significance of each animal degenerated over the course of time in the Islamic kingdom of Jambi.
Dhu al-faqqar is the name of the famous sword obtained by the Prophet Muhammad as war booty in the battle of Badr in 624. The Prophet later gave the sword to his son-in-law Ali. In Muslim iconography Dhu al-Faqar (named after the notches, faqar, on the sword) is portrayed with two points, said to have been used to put out the eyes of an enemy. As a visual symbol Dhu al-Faqar is prominent in Ottoman war banners of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries promoting the ideal of the ghazi, religious warrior, and the inscription la sata illa 'Ali, la sayf illa Dhu al-faqar, 'there is no true heroic young man but Ali, and there is no sword but Dhu al-faqar' is often found on weapons. In Southeast Asia too Dhu al-Faqar (in Malay Zulfiqar) is often portrayed on the accoutrements of war: on cannons from Brunei and on flags and banners from Aceh, Sulawesi and Sulu, where it is usually depicted as a sword with two blades joined at the hilt.

Dhu al-Faqar is also one of the few artefacts depicted on some Islamic seals, and three such Ottoman seals were published in 1850 by the Austrian scholar von Hammer-Purgstall. Dhu al-Faqar is also found on the eighteenth-century seal of Pangiran Sata Wijaya of Jambi in Sumatra, combined with two small circles and a crescent in a decidedly anthropomorphic guise.

Perhaps most striking of all are the seals of the rulers of the Bugis kingdom of Tanete, on the western coast of south Sulawesi, which actually took the shape of a double-bladed weapon with a cross-piece and triple-banded handle, unmistakably evoking Dhu al-Faqar. Five such seals have been documented of successive rulers of the kingdom, impressed in lampblack on letters written in either Bugis or Malay to Dutch officials, and dating from 1775 to 1821. The seals are amongst the largest seals recorded from Southeast Asia, measuring a maximum of 124 mm in height and 83 mm in width. The royal Tanete seal is always imprinted in an upright fashion by the start of the first line, and is therefore placed in the left-hand margin on letters written in Bugis (which reads from left to right), and in the right-hand margin in letters written in Malay in Arabic script. Although inscribed in Bugis...
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2 Hammer-Purgstall 1850: 40; Bd. 1, nos. 12, 13 and 52.


Left: Seal of Pangiran Suta Wijaya of Jambi, inscribed 'Datap Pangiran Suta Wijaya,' 'This is the seal of Pangiran Suta Wijaya' (1900), 57 mm. The artefacts assembled in the middle give the impression of a human face, with Dhu al-Faqar as the nose, two circles (shields) as the eyes, and a crescent as the mouth. Impressed on a contract with the Dutch East India Company, 16 October 1763, Army National Republic Indonesia, Room 66/7.

The ‘crowned arms’ of Gowa

The earliest known dated Islamic seal from Southeast Asia, which bears the date 1056/1645 - 6, is from the kingdom of Gowa in Makassar, south Sulawesi. It is inscribed in Arabic, al-sultan al-hamid wabbi mamlikat Gowa bi-fadl Allah al-Rahman sanat 1055. "The glorious Sultan, lord of the kingdom of Gowa, by the grace of God, the Merciful One, the year 1055, and was probably made for Sultan Muhammad Said (r.1639 - 1653). The seal has a most unusual shape, with a squat body on a canted base and a domed headpiece topped with a bulb-like finial.

A search for possible sources for the shape of the Gowa seal initially draws a blank. Only ten other Malay seals are documented from before 1650, all of which—save for one oval seal—are round, including that of Muhammad Said’s father Sultan Alauddin (r.1593 - 1639), the first Muslim ruler of Gowa. No direct models be found in the broader Islamic world, nor are even any European seals of such shape known.

It is only when the constituent parts of the seal are analysed separately that the key is found in the iconographic vocabulary of European heraldry. The lower half of the seal can be recognized as a scutiform panel in the shape characteristic of sixteenth-century shields found on European coats-of-arms. The main source of influence on the Gowa seal can now be identified, for all the major European powers present in Southeast Asia in the early seventeenth century, only the Portuguese royal arms were similar in displaying a central motif within such a prominent border. The Spanish and English royal arms bore several quarterings (divisions into four) whilst the arms of Holland (United Provinces) comprised a single crowned lion rampant holding a sword and sheaf of arrows.

Heraldic shields were adorned with pictorial emblems known as ‘charges’ which identified the owners, sometimes through symbolic association or even wordplay. The charges on the Portuguese royal arms were five small blue shields or ‘escutcheons’ each containing five roundels or ‘bezants’, on a ground of silver, around which was a red border with seven gold castles. Known as the Quinas, the five shields were said to allude to the five Moorish kings defeated by Alphonso I, whilst the five roundels on each escutcheon were said to represent the five wounds of Christ. In accordance with the aniconic principles of Islamic sigillography, the ‘charges’ at the centre of the Gowa seal eschew pictorial symbolism and take the form of a five-line inscription in Arabic directly identifying the sealholder. Artistic influence from the broader Islamic world can be discerned in the delicate pattern of foliate tendrils woven around the inscription, for while common on Mughal, Safavid or Ottoman seals such surface decoration across the seal face is rarely found on seals from the Malay world. But it is possible to discern further European influence in the composition of part of the inscription itself. The Arabic phrase bi-fadl Allah, ‘by the grace of God’, is very unusual in the context of Islamic seals. In Southeast Asia, it is found on only one slightly later but related seal, that of Sultan Harun al-Rasyid of Tallo, a neighbouring
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The Islamic seal from Southeast Asia, 1055/1645 – 6, is from the kingdom of Sulawesi. It is inscribed in Arabic, ‘al-Gowah bi-fadd Allah al-Rahman’, the seal of the kingdom of Gowa, by the grace of God, the Merciful One, the year 1055/1645 – 6. The seal has a red border with seven gold cantons. Known as the Quinhas, the five shields were said to allude to the five Moors who defeated the Moors at Alphonso I, whilst the five roundels on each escutcheon were said to represent the five wounds of Christ. In accordance with the aniconic principles of Islamic sigillography, the ‘charges’ at the centre of the Gowa seal eschew pictorial symbolism and take the form of a five-line inscription in Arabic directly identifying the sealholder. Artistic influence from the broader Islamic world can be discerned in the delicate pattern of foliate tendrils woven around the inscription, for while common in Mughal, Safavid or Ottoman seals such surface decoration across the seal face is rarely found on seals from the Malay world. But it is possible to descry further European influence in the composition of part of the inscription itself. The Arabic phrase ‘bi-fadd Allah, by the grace of God’, is very unusual in the context of Islamic seals. In Southeast Asia it is found on only one slightly later but related seal, that of Sultan Harun al-Rasyid of Tallo, a neighbouring kingdom in Sulawesi, dated 1074/1663 – 4. Yet this expression appears to be a direct translation of the Latin Deo Gratias, a standard element in forms of address of European monarchs of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, who were usually styled ‘so-and-so, by the grace of God, king of such-and-such’.

The upper half of the seal is more enigmatic, but can also be at least partially deciphered by reference to the crowned arms of Portugal. The thin stylized floral band between the lower and upper halves is derived from the Portuguese crown, with the three fleurs-de-lys still visible on the base of the headpiece of the Gowa seal. The domed outline, however, resists interpretation until we turn away from Portugal back to Asia: the gold Sullus crown, part of the Gowa regalia, has a similar semi-circular dome-like shape and bulbous finish.

This royal Gowa seal can therefore be seen as an ingenious Makassar interpretation of the European concept of ‘crowned arms’. It is a cogent local response to the influx of foreign ideas and modes of practice, through an appropriation of selected elements of European heraldry, and their translation into both a local and an international Islamic idiom.

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1. Lledo & Maraglan 1983: 428; with thanks to Adrian Alts for clarifications.
Ship seals of the viceroys of Johor and Riau

In 1722 the Malay sultan of Johor and Riau, who had been ousted from his kingdom by a rival Minangkabau prince from Sumatra, was forced to seek help from Bugis warriors from south Sulawesi. The price exacted was a share in the kingdom, with the Bugis accorded the posts of viceroy and senior minister. Thus the kingdom of Johor and Riau became a state with three titular sultans and two seats of power: the Malay Sultan or Yang Dipertuan Besar, ‘Great Lord’, with his palace on the island of Lingga, while the small island of Penyengat was the Bugis base for the Yang Dipertuan Muda, ‘Junior Lord’, or viceroy, with the honoriific regnal name of Sultan Alauddin Syah, and the Yang Dipertuan Tua, ‘Elder Lord’, a post which carried with it the honoriific title of Sultan Ibrahim Syah.

Most Islamic seals from Johor and Riau are of conventional composition, but in the eighteenth century the Bugis lords of Riau appear to have used a most unusual design of seal, with a European-style sailing ship in the middle. According to the Dutch official and historian of Johor Eliza Netter, the seals of both the first viceroy, Daeng Masraw (c.1721—1728), and the third, Daeng Kemboja (c.1745—1777), depicted a sailing ship. The first viceroyal seal of which an impression is known is that of the fourth Yang Dipertuan Muda of Johor, the great Bugis warrior Raja Haji, who died in battle with the Dutch at Tohak Ketapang off the coast of Selangor in 1784. In the middle of his seal is a three-masted sailing ship, facing to the left, with the inscription in the border: ‘Sultan Alauddin Syah, son of Opu (A). Opu is a noble Bugis title, and so too Opu can also be translated more broadly as ‘Descended from the line of Opu’, indicating noble descent. The very similar seal of the Yang Dipertuan Tua bears a ship in the middle and the inscription around the edge: ‘He who trusts in God; Seri Sultan Ibrahim Syah, son of the ruler of Lampaku’ (B).

According to the chronicle of Riau, Tuhfat al-Nafis, written by Raja Haji’s grandson Raja Ali Haji (2.9), the first incumbent of this post was Daeng Menampak (d.1733), son of the regent of Lampaku, in the kingdom of Soppeng in Sulawesi.2

Of the source for this image there is no doubt: the sailing ship that was the symbol of the Dutch East India Company, the VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie). The seal of the Dutch Governor-General and the Raad van Indië, ‘Council of the Indies’, in Batavia, used on correspondence with Indonesian rulers and nobles, depicted a three-masted ship under full sail facing to the right, with the inscription D.O.C., standing for ‘De Oude Compagnie’, as the first Amsterdam Company was known (C). Why was this image adopted on the Bugis seals? In Sulawesi, to a greater extent than in the rest of the Malay archipelago, there appear to have been few compunctions about incorporating into their own seals, without prejudice, certain European emblems (5.8). The adoption by the Bugis in Johor in 1722 of the VOC emblem found on the Dutch Governor-General’s own seal may not necessarily have carried any implications of patronage or admiration or even an implied challenge, but perhaps simply reflected a view about what type of image was appropriate for a seal of authority. Was it Raja Haji’s death in a naval battle with the Dutch that killed off the Bugis taste for this symbol? In any event, the sailing ship never reappeared on the seals of any Bugis officials in the nineteenth century.

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1 Andries 1979: 288, n.68.
2 All Haji 1984: 82.
3 de Humanis 1935: G.1.