

4-30-2021

Annabel Teh Gallop, *Malay seals from the Islamic world of Southeast Asia*

Dick van der Meij

Digital Repository of Endangered and Affected Manuscripts in Southeast Asia (DREAMSEA),
dickvandermeij2012@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/wacana>



Part of the [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Meij, Dick van der (2021) "Annabel Teh Gallop, *Malay seals from the Islamic world of Southeast Asia*," *Wacana, Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia*: Vol. 22: No. 1, Article 12.

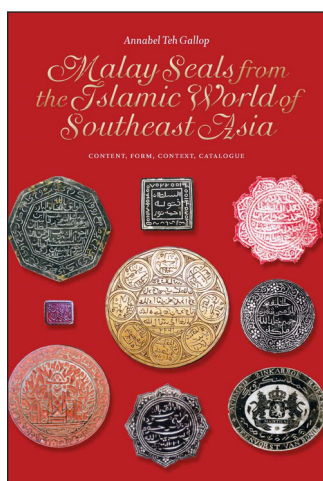
DOI: 10.17510/wacana.v22i1.1041

Available at: <https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/wacana/vol22/iss1/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty of Humanities at UI Scholars Hub. It has been accepted for inclusion in Wacana, Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia by an authorized editor of UI Scholars Hub.

Book review

Annabel Teh Gallop, *Malay seals from the Islamic world of Southeast Asia*. Jakarta / Singapore: Yayasan Lontar in cooperation with the British Library, NUS Press Singapore in association with the British Library, 2019 + 852 pp. ISBN 978-981-3250-4. Price: SGD 145.00 (hardcover).



Dick van der Meij

DREAMSEA/Digital Repository of Endangered
and Affected Manuscripts in Southeast Asia
dickvandermeij2012@gmail.com

It will be good to begin this review with a quote from this book in which Annabel Teh Gallop herself sums up the importance of her work most succinctly. She says “As small but highly visible and symbolic emblems of their users, Malay seals were designed to portray the image of the self that the seal holder wished to project, but they were also no less strongly shaped by the prevailing cultural, religious, and artistic norms of their time. It is these multiple layers of identity, both consciously and subconsciously revealed in seals, that this book attempts to record, explore, and interpret” (p. 3). In all this is what she does in her book and what should remain with the readers and users is precisely what Annabel says in this quote. The seals are multi-layered and should be seen and understood in the context of the time, place and the social sub-strata in which they originated. Hence, one of the key functions of Malay seals is “to specify the position of the seal holder within the hierarchy of the society of which he was part, at the apex of which sat the ruler” (p. 11). This could be expressed by the holder’s personal title but also his position in relation to his overlord.

The book’s main objective is to present seals “from Southeast Asia or used by Southeast Asians, with inscriptions at least partially in the Arabic script” (p. vii). Southeast Asia here means Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore (together representing the bulk of the seals), Brunei (45 seals), the Philippines (73 seals), and the southern parts of Cambodia and Thailand (together 15 seals, 7 from Patani). Arabic script is taken as point of reference because on these seals, it “is the focus on writing, in the sacred Arabic script, that links seals from all parts of

the Islamic world, from the Maghrib to the Malay archipelago" (p. 5). The seals presented in the book date from the second half of the sixteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century. The oldest come from letters from Ternate to the king of Portugal in 1560 and the latest hail from the mid-twentieth century when the use of these seals in Malay kingdoms in the new era of nation-states slowly drew to a close. This means that we are talking about a long period and a vast area and it comes as no surprise that the number of seals is impressive, not to say enormous. The book contains no fewer than 785 large pages and is, in one word, amazing. For the first time it records, presents, translates, and explains the astonishing large number of 2,168 seals. Before holding this hefty book in my hands, I had absolutely no idea that so many seals were in use in the area during that period. Apparently, they were and locating them must have been in itself a tremendous task. They are hidden among a large number of treaties and other official documents and letters, and manuscripts in a very large number of collections (57) preserved all over the world. I am aware that I use the words "large number" extensively but this is to express my admiration for the task Annabel Teh Gallop set herself to do when she embarked on this undertaking for her doctoral study. Imagine having to decipher all the texts in Arabic scripts on these seals used for Arabic and Malay (sometimes barely legible as can be seen from the photographs in the catalogue), but also for words in Acehnese and Maguindano, and having to translate them one by one into English. Also imagine that other scripts also formed part of the texts on these seals, including Latin (reflecting European influence), Javanese, Balinese, Batak, Bugis-Makassar, and Lampung which also had to be deciphered, understood, Romanized, and translated. Imagine the enormous correspondence with all the institutions in which these seals are housed seeking permission to consult their collections and to ensure that their materials could be used in this book. Therefore, the word "laudatory" is not enough to express my admiration that Annabel has been willing to devote so much of her time over the last couple of years to turning her research findings and materials into the present publication, which is indeed a feat in itself.

The book begins with a short chapter called "Setting the scene: sources and studies" and explains the nature of the material Annabel found for her study and her wise remark about the care scholars should take when making pronouncements or drawing conclusions on the basis of the material at hand, as it might only partially reflect what these seals were or were thought to represent. The history of the study of seals, told in a few sentences, clearly shows that the importance of this book cannot be overestimated.

The following three chapters present the following aspects of this study: their content (pp. 4-23), their form, materiality, and iconography (pp. 24-36), and finally their context (pp. 37-46). In the chapter on their content, Annabel makes a very important point, also with reference to what William Marsden wrote in 1812, which is that the inscriptions "exhibit a remarkable similarity across all parts of the Malay world" (p. 5). This is important as I have the same impression of the manuscripts with an Islamic motif we find in the Malay

world but also in other parts of the Islamic world. Like the seals, not only texts, but also the way they are presented, needs to be immediately recognizable from one Muslim to the next. This postulation might explain why texts with an Islamic content but not written in Arabic or Arabic-derived scripts are not immediately recognizable for what they are and also account for why so few texts in non-Arabic scripts are found in the seals. In short, apparently in the Malay world, and probably also elsewhere in the Muslim world, Arabic script and Islam are two sides of the same coin.

Table 1 presents the constituent elements of Malay seal inscriptions which are: Name, Title, Pedigree, Place name, Date, Religious legend, Relationship of patronage, Talismanic element, and Introductory formulae. The sequence of these elements in the table is no coincidence as it follows the importance of these elements to both the seal owner and seal interpreter. This chapter clearly shows the extent of Annabel's knowledge about matters Malay throughout the entire Malay world and reading this carefully is a must in order to understand the many seals presented later in the book. The difference in the use of honorifics and other titles by the various seal holders from different ethnic backgrounds in the area is especially fascinating. Equally important and showing a different attitude to the various other European peoples in the area towards the culture in which they worked is the fact that British officials had no compunction about using Malay seals on their official letters, an idea which never seems to have penetrated the minds of Dutch officials, as no seal in the present collection shows evidence that they ever did.

The chapter presents many different aspects of the seals, revealed in the titles of the sub-headings in the chapter: ("Sovereign titles"), "Non-sovereign titles", "Religious titles", "Ties of fealty", "Pedigrees", "Place names", "Religious expressions", "Talismanic elements", "Introductory formulae", and "Typology of Malay seal inscriptions". The chapter also includes various illustrations of the documents on which the seals were found which is very useful as it gives an idea of the position of the seals on the documents and how they relate to the documents themselves.

The chapter on forms commences with informative illustrations of the matrices of the seals which were made from silver, gold, or ivory; brass and stone; seals with wooden handles and signet rings. Other illustrations include those demonstrating shape; script, calligraphy, and engraving; and decorations. It also includes illustrations of the impressions of the seals on the paper which were made with the use of lampblack, ink, and wax, or could be embossed; pseudo-seals were also used. The chapter's sub-headings are "Seal matrices", "Seal impressions", "Shapes", "Layout and calligraphy", "Pictorial elements", "Floral decorations: the ever-present lotus", and "The importance of multiples of four".

The third chapter is entitled "Context: users, uses, and usage" and contains the sub-headings: "The users of Malay seals", "Sources of Malay seals", "Letters", "Treaties", "Edicts and decrees", "Officials and legal documents", "Other uses of Malay seals", "Usage of Malay seals", and "Presences and absences". Illustrations of seals in books and seals on silverware are also included.

A final, short chapter explores the evolution and development of the Malay sealing tradition. This precedes the main part of the book which begins with a section/chapter entitled "A catalogue of Malay seals", commencing with the editorial principles and the structure of the catalogue entries. The catalogue is organized according to the origins of the seals commencing with Aceh and ends with fourteen "miscellaneous" seals the origin of which cannot be firmly located but are thought to come from Southeast Asia or were used by Southeast Asians. All the 2,168 seals are illustrated in clear photographs and are documented for date, shape and size, number of impressions found, impression owner, image source, and data. The book ends with seven indexes on seal matrices, seal impressions, names and titles, place names, dates, Qur'an quotations, and finally concordance of database numbers and catalogue number.

CONCLUSION

No book on seals from Southeast Asia has been published ever before and this amazing work has established itself in one go as THE reference work on these objects which, in my view, will undoubtedly never be attempted again. Indeed, with this book an important part of the information found in letters and other written documents can now be accessed and studied in even more detail than the data Annabel has already presented in the various chapters of her book. Frequent browsing through the catalogue by scholars from different backgrounds in Southeast Asian manuscripts and documents studies will yield more notions about this fascinating part of the history of Southeast Asian documents. For me, what initially looked like details in manuscripts has changed into a fascinating part of so-far hidden materials.