

*Arabic and Persian Seals and Amulets in the British Museum*

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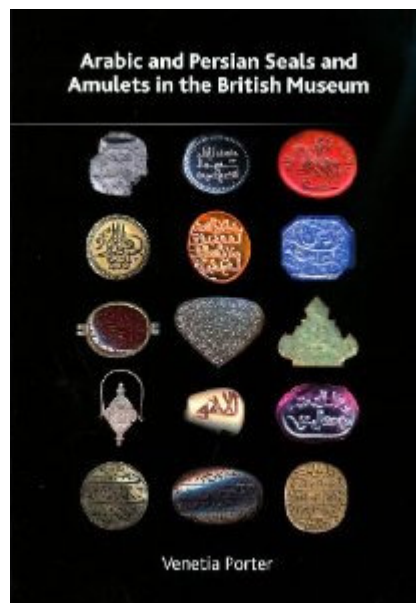
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This is a catalogue of the British Museum's extensive collection of Arabic and Persian seals and amulets, as the title makes clear. This understates the scope of the study. The wider field of material in other collections and of earlier studies on seals and sealings is included in a detailed introduction of twenty-six pages. The topics covered include the influence of Byzantine and Sasanian practices on the development of seals and sealings in the Islamic world (pp. 1-3), followed by a discussion of early Islamic sealing practice (pp. 3-7), and a discussion of the Sefavid (pp. 7-9) and Indo-Muslim seals of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries (pp. 9-10). These comments illustrate the broad scope of the material covered in this book. Other sections of the introduction include script styles, seal shapes, the names and the phrases encountered on seals, and how some of these features evolved during the course of time. The development of the British Museum's collection is also described. Epigraphic styles, ornamentation and seal shapes are illustrated by the plates on pages 23 to 26.

The main body of the work is the catalogue of 634 seals (nos. 1-634) and 170 amulets (nos. A1-A170) in the British Museum's collection. The catalogue commences with a small number of early sealings (seal impressions) made in clay and in lead (nos. 1-31), among which the Dulafid lead sealings (bullae) are noteworthy. The majority of pieces in the collection are the seals, themselves (nos. 32-634). The seals are most commonly engraved semi-precious stones. They have their inscriptions engraved in reverse. This means that the derivative sealings can be read from right to left in the normal way. All the seals are illustrated in colour, and their images have been reversed in order to make them easier to read. In each catalogue entry, the illustration is followed by a description of the nature of its material, and its shape. The inscription is first presented in Arabic script. This is followed by an English translation. The entry ends with the dimensions of the seal and its provenance. Sections two to five (nos. 32-375) are concerned with seals of the Islamic classical period, the seventh to thirteenth centuries. The general progression in the catalogue is from seals bearing names to seals bearing phrases. Also included are a few re-used pre-Islamic pictorial seals that have been re-engraved with Arabic inscriptions. Sections six to eight (nos. 376-634) are concerned with seals of the fourteenth century and later, including Indo-Muslim seals.

The collection is particularly rich in material from Iran and surrounding regions. It is less well endowed with items from more westerly parts of the Islamic world, particularly North Africa. The early lead sealings, noted above, are also fairly few in number. This is not surprising, because Islamic sealings are rarely preserved by contrast with the large numbers of extant Byzantine lead sealings (bullae). When Byzantium was progressively expelled from mainland Turkey, some successors used lead sealings (bullae) with Arabic inscriptions. These are not represented in the collection, but the field is covered in the introduction and appropriate references are given. The wide scope of the introduction has already been noted, and this is another example.

The amulets (A1-A170) are commonly engraved with religious texts (some are more magical). They were worn to provide protection. Whereas seals have their inscriptions engraved in reverse, the amulets normally have their inscriptions engraved from right to left, so that they can be read directly. The catalogue of amulets progresses from those citing the names of God to those citing the Bismillah and the Shahada (Kalima). It continues with more numerous specimens citing verses from the Quran. These are followed by amulets bearing a range of religious inscriptions, both Orthodox and Shia. The section ends with amulets bearing letters, symbols, numbers and magical squares, as well as miscellaneous pieces, some of which have pseudo-inscriptions.



The book is well written and the illustrations are clear. There is a clear system of classification, which applies to both the seals and the amulets.

After the catalogue, there is a section on identification of the materials of the seals and amulets, written by Sylvia Humphrey and Janet Ambers. This is followed by a section on methods of engraving, written by Margaret Sax and Nigel Meeks. The study ends with a detailed bibliography and a list of concordances.

A few silly mistakes have crept in. There is a group of amulets bearing Shia inscriptions, which commence "Call upon 'Ali who makes wonders appear (nad 'aliah mazhar)". They are numbers A75 to A83. The inscription has varied endings. The Arabic text entries reflect what is written on the amulets, but a few of the English translations have incorrect endings. On A75, the ending of the Arabic text entry can be translated as "through your prophethood, O Muhammad, through your friendship, O 'Ali". The incorrect English translation given below it ends without making reference to Muhammad and reads "through your friendship, O 'Ali, O 'Ali, O 'Ali". The reverse kind of error occurs on A79, where the ending of the Arabic text entry reads, in translation, "through your friendship, O 'Ali, O 'Ali, O 'Ali". The ending of the English translation that follows is "through your friendship, O 'Ali". I have described these as silly mistakes. This is because such mistakes are easy to make when cutting and pasting. However, they should have been picked up during proof reading. The few errors do not detract from the overall merit of the work.

This book has been well researched and it manifests a high standard of scholarship. A reviewer is obliged to notice the occasional lapses. I have found this book a reliable and very informative work. It fills a gap in the available literature and it will be useful both to students of sigillography and also to numismatists who may have a few seals or amulets in their collections. I am pleased to recommend this book.

Michael Mitchiner