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1066年から1400年の英国における証印銘文の言語と内容について

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Introduction

The field of sigillography is one of the least explored areas of medieval studies. It is astonishing that a corpus numbering hundreds of thousands of medieval texts produced by individuals of the most disparate times, locations, and social classes should remain virtually unexplored as a historical, linguistic and literary source. Although seals have excited considerable antiquarian interest for centuries and the first major catalogue was published over one hundred years ago,¹ they continue to represent a sadly neglected area of great potential. Recent publications have begun to rectify this, but much work remains to be done.² This need is especially obvious in regards to catalogues; until a larger and more representative sample of seals has been catalogued, little scholarship of lasting value can be produced. Although part of the vast collections of seals in the British Library and the Public Record Office has been published,³ little else had been done apart from isolated catalogues of smaller regional collections.⁴ This regional bias is aggravated by the understandable tendency to emphasize the more artistically pleasing seals of the upper levels of society. It is therefore difficult to escape the regional and social limitations of the published portions of the overall body of surviving seals, and most studies reflect this situation to a greater or lesser extent.⁵ This dearth of secondary material is particularly unusual and surprising in light of the many potential applications of such research for studies of medieval administrative practices, literacy, and conceptions of self-expression.

1 Birch (1887-1900).

2 See especially Harvey and McGuinness (1996), the list of legends on pages 113-19 is particularly useful; Clanchy (1993), pp. 308-17; and Heslop (1980).

3 Birch (1887-1900); and Ellis (1978-81).

4 Most notably Blair (1911-13), which is the most comprehensive catalogue of any one collection published thus far.

5 This paper is no exception, and will focus on the above-mentioned catalogue published by Blair (1911-13), which includes nearly 3000 examples drawn from the Durham Cathedral Muniments. It has the advantage of including seals from a wide range of social strata, which helps to offset the limitations of its regional bias.

This paper focuses on the written texts of seals – their legends – because of their potential for elucidating how medieval people chose to represent themselves in this highly specialized context, and determining the limits placed on that representation. More broadly, it also touches on some of the ways in which the legends of seals can help scholars understand both changes in attitudes towards seal usage and in language itself, whether English, French or Latin. The chronological limits of 1066 and 1400 can be justified by the almost complete lack of surviving seals and impressions from the Anglo-Saxon period at one extreme, and the widespread and essentially static nature of seal usage in the late middle ages at the other. The intervening years saw the greatest changes in seal designs and modes of usage, and are perhaps thus of the greatest interest to scholars today.

Seal legends can be used to divide all surviving impressions and matrices into three basic categories. Until the end of the fourteenth century, the most common comprised those with legends that explicitly named their intended user. The earliest English seals were of this type, and it remained popular throughout the Middle Ages. Less numerous are seals that make no direct reference to a particular user. These anonymous seals often contain personal information about their users, but not in a way that would have been generally recognizable to anyone outside a given user's immediate social circle. Still less common are seals with no legend at all, many of which are in fact antique gems later pressed into service as signets. These legend-less seals were rare until the fourteenth century and did not become popular until the mid fifteenth century, for reasons which will be discussed below. To take a single local example, such seals make up less than five percent of those in C. H. Hunter Blair's catalogue of more than 2,700 medieval personal seals in the Durham Cathedral Muniments.⁶ However, legend-less seals are outside the scope of this study, which is restricted to examining the care that was taken in choosing a seal's wording, the opportunities for personal expression that seals afforded, and the factors that lay behind the increasing popularity of anonymous seals in the fourteenth century.

Official seals and the dictates of custom and regulation

Before the reign of Edward the Confessor, seals had been used primarily to validate messages, and they could accomplish this goal in two ways. An impression separate from any document or missive could be sent with a messenger as a token of the authenticity of his written or spoken communication. Alternatively a seal could be used to physically

⁶ This figure may be a little high as some of the seals Blair described as legend-less are actually seals with legends that have been destroyed.

close a letter, which served both to authenticate and conceal its contents.⁷ In either case the impression was unlikely to survive due to its ephemeral value and the destructive process of breaking the impression to open the letter.

Edward the Confessor's 'revolution in the use of seals'⁸ was that he sealed his most important documents open, so that the seal could remain attached and intact to serve as continuing evidence of the document's authenticity.⁹ The seal thus became an item of lasting significance, and as such the wording of the legend was of vital importance. This new permanence also meant that seals could serve as instruments of propaganda. William I was quick to realize this, and his seal contains a legend in two hexameters, one on each side:

obv: + HOC NORMANNORUM WILLELMUM NOSCE PATRONUM SI

rev: + HOC ANGLIS REGEM SIGNO FATEARIS EUNDEM.¹⁰

This verse legend not only displays his good poetic taste, it also conveys a complex political message. On the ducal side William is depicted as a mounted warrior, showing in no uncertain terms his right to military authority as Duke of Normandy. On the regnal side he is enthroned as dispenser of justice, in keeping with his role as King of the English, and conspicuously similar to the seal of Edward the Confessor. The interrelationship between legend and design on William's seal is thus an elaborate attempt to emphasize his military might, his right to the throne as Edward's legitimate successor, and his courtly sophistication as a patron of Latin poetry.

William II made only slight changes in the design of his seal, but greatly altered the legend, which read + WILHELMUS DI GRA REX ANGLORUM¹¹ on both sides. This was to be the standard form until the time of Henry II, who maintained essentially the same design as his predecessors as well as the standard legend on the obverse, but included his additional titles on the reverse: HENR:DEI:GRA:DUX:NORM: [...] ET.AQVIT:ET COM:ANDEG.¹² Although the design of subsequent Great Seals would remain relatively consistent until the reign of Henry VIII, the legend continued to change to match the ebb and flow of the king's political power. The texts of royal seals thus demonstrated greater flexibility than their imagery.

By the reign of John, the king also had a minor seal used for authenticating documents

⁷ Heslop (1980), pp. 9, 14-16.

⁸ Heslop (1980), p. 9.

⁹ Clanchy (1993), p. 310.

¹⁰ 'By this, recognise William, defender of the Normans or / by the same seal acknowledge the king of the English';

Heslop (1980), p. 10; Birch (1907), p. 29.

¹¹ 'William, by the grace of God king of the English'.

¹² 'Henry, by the grace of God duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, and count of Anjou'; Bloom (1906), pp. 60-3.

connected with the Chamber and could also occasionally be used as a substitute for the Great Seal.¹³ This ‘secret’ or ‘privy’ seal typically featured a simple legend such as the one adopted by Edward III in 1388: SECRETUM EDWARDI REGIS ANGLIE.¹⁴ However, this smaller seal was also altered to keep up with political events, and it was replaced in 1340 with a new one that read SECRETUM EDWARDI REGIS FRANCIE ET ANGLIE.¹⁵ In both cases the king ‘published’ the new seal by sending impressions of it to all sheriffs, justices, and lords of the more important franchises.¹⁶

Royal seals were not the only official seals with tightly controlled legends. In 1388 the Statute of Cambridge ordered that all migrant labourers should be issued a pass sealed by local justices of the peace. Special seals designed for this purpose were to have the name of county along the edge and the name of the hundred, wapentake, or town across the centre.¹⁷

The Cistercian order, with its commitment to the central authority of the Chapter General, also felt the need to regulate the seals of individual officials and institutions. The statutes of 1200 forbade Cistercian houses from using any seal other than that of the abbot, and described acceptable seal designs in detail. A charter of the abbot of Cîteaux from 1228 adds that none of these seals were to be inscribed with the abbot’s name. The codification of 1257 acknowledges the use of counterseals, and stipulates that they are to carry a legend consisting of CONTRASIGILLUM and the name of the house. However, these regulations were superseded in 1335 by Pope Benedict XII’s reforms, which decreed that each Cistercian house should have a conventual seal, and that each abbot should have his own seal with his name included in the legend.¹⁸

Other classes of seal, though not subject to official regulation, were bound by custom and a commitment to established formulae.¹⁹ The legends of episcopal seals of dignity underwent little variation from the beginning of the twelfth century to the beginning of the thirteenth, during which time they took one of two forms illustrated by the following examples: + HVGO DEI GRATIA DVNELMENSIS EPISCOPVS or + SIGILLVM WILLELMI DEI GRATIA ELIENSIS EPISCOPI.²⁰ The later form predominated after 1300, though there were slight variations during the fourteenth century, most notably the tendency

¹³ Maxwell-Lyte (1926), p. 20.

¹⁴ ‘Privy seal of Edward, king of England’.

¹⁵ ‘Privy seal of Edward, king of England and France’.

¹⁶ Tout (1930), p. 137-8; Maxwell-Lyte (1926), p. 43.

¹⁷ Harvey and McGuinness (1996), p. 41; Tonnochy (1952), p. liv.

¹⁸ Clay (1928), pp. 2-4; Heslop (1986), p. 266, 272, 282-3.

¹⁹ Heslop (1986), p. 281.

²⁰ ‘Hugh, by the grace of God bishop of Durham’, and ‘Seal of William, by the grace of God bishop of Ely’.

after the 1360's to include the bishop's surname.²¹ Deputed episcopal seals show the same preponderance of set forms. Episcopal seals *ad causas* generally featured legends along the lines of SIGILLVM RICHARDI DVNELMENSIS EPI AD CAUSAS, until well into the fifteenth century.²² The seals of secular magnates show a similar adherence to particular forms, typical examples of which include + SIGILLUM ROBERTI DOMINI BELLOMONTIS and + SIGILLUM HUGONIS COMITIS CESTRIEAE.²³

The political and religious elite must have felt more freedom in choosing their lesser seals, because these often show greater variety in legend and design. Thus the counterseal of Hugh, Earl of Chester is in the shape of a human head and shoulders, and features the legend AMOR VINCIT OMNIA,²⁴ while that of Walter Giffard, Archbishop of York from 1266, has the legend WALTERVM DOTANT QVOS DVO NOTANT.²⁵

Many lower-class signatories also adhered to standard forms, and surely the most common legend found on medieval seals must be some variation on the theme: SIGILLUM IOHANNI. Other seals volunteered additional information such as the parentage, profession, or origin of the user, but most named seals remained fairly close to this simple formula.

Private seals

Although the legends of some seals were strictly regulated by politics, ideology, and custom, others were open to more freedom of expression. Aristocratic and ecclesiastical privy seals and counterseals, as well as the personal seals of members of the lower levels of society, show considerable variation and creativity. As 'the personal choice of the individual who owned them, not images and words imposed by an outside authority,'²⁶ seals can reveal much about popular taste and concepts of seal usage.

The form of a seal's legend can be illuminating independent of its relationship to its content and design. However, the interplay between these three elements can be very interesting, and they reveal most information when considered together. Although this relationship is often quite predictable – seals with the legend ECCE AGNUS DEI²⁷ often feature the Lamb of God as their design²⁸ – other times it is not. Many personal seals feature overtly religious, humorous, and even sexual designs that are accompanied by

21 St. John Hope (1886-7), pp. 288-9.

22 'Seal *ad causas* of Richard, bishop of Durham'; St. John Hope (1886-7), pp. 298-302.

23 'Seal of Robert, lord of Belmont' and 'Seal of Hugh, count of Chester'; Bloom (1906), p. 144.

24 'Love conquers all'; Heslop (1991), p. 189.

25 'Walter endows that which two [seals] record'; St. John Hope (1886-7), p. 291.

26 New (2002), p. 61.

27 'Behold the Lamb of God'.

28 New (2002), p. 50.

simple naming clauses as legends, and it seems that seal owners felt more freedom in choosing an original design than an unconventional legend.

In the largely trilingual society of medieval England, even the choice of a legend's language could be an important form of expression. Throughout the period, Latin legends were the norm, but in the late thirteenth century French and English started to become popular.²⁹ Although they make up less than three percent of personal seals in Blair's catalogue, vernacular legends cover a wide variety of subjects. Each language seems to have been considered especially suited to certain themes, roughly following the conventions of contemporary literature. One of the earliest examples, from a document dated 1291x2, reads IE.SV.SEL.D'.AM.LEL, and French was most commonly used for legends with amorous themes.³⁰ This romantic emphasis is understandable considering the popularity of courtly French literature at the time. English was occasionally used for amorous legends,³¹ but was more common on seals with moralistic, humorous, and religious themes. The seal of Peter of Kellawe from a document dated to 1292x5, is an early example. The innermost ring of its uniquely double legend reads MOR NO LESSE BOT APE OVLE ASSE. This has been interpreted to be either a satire on the hunt, or a commentary on human vanity, although it could simply be a reinforcement of the unusual design, which features an ape riding an ass with an owl perched on its arm.³² A famous fourteenth-century matrix in the British Museum shows a man and woman facing each other with the legend BI THE RODE WIMEN AR WODE,³³ and reveals that English legends were considered a suitable medium to express a seal owner's sense of humour, even if such displays might not have appealed to all tastes. English could also be used for religious legends, as in HELPE MODER OF MERCY and PETER AND PAWIL PRAI FOR MI SAWL,³⁴ although Latin remained the most popular language for expressing such sentiment. Some religious legends such as AVE MARIA GRACIA PLENA³⁵ are lifted straight from the liturgy, and the use of Latin is therefore not surprising.³⁶

Verse legends illustrate another way in which the form of a seal's text could become a vehicle for personal expression. In many cases it would seem that such legends were intended to show off their owner's good taste and sophistication. William I's seal with two

29 Tonnochy (1952), p. xxvi.

30 'I am the seal of faithful love'; Blair (1911-13), no. 1603.

31 E.g. LOVE ME AND I THE (Tonnochy (1952), no. 739)

32 Blair (1911-13), no. 1478; see McGuinness (1993), pp. 174-5.

33 Tonnochy (1952), no. 762.

34 Blair (1911-13), nos. 711 and 1117, and 2718 respectively.

35 'Hail Mary full of grace'.

36 Blair (1911-13), nos. 597, 823, 2625; Ellis (1978-81), nos. 77, 230, 1136; Tonnochy (1952), nos. 907, 908; see New (2002), p. 50.

Latin hexameters is a good example from the pinnacle of society, but humbler seals show that a similar taste for verse legends was found at all social levels and was applicable to almost any theme: from the amorous JE SU SEL DE AMOUR LEL;³⁷ the pious MATER DEI MEMENTO MEI,³⁸ the catchy FRANGE LEGE TEGE,³⁹ and the frankly bizarre ICI DORT LE LIOUN FORT.⁴⁰ Although those legends are fairly formulaic, others could be quite personal, as in LE SEEL INGELARD QVI DIEV GARD owned by Ingelard of Warley,⁴¹ and MARIA FILIA ANNE ORA PRO JOHANNE.⁴²

Although language and verse defined a seal's mode of expression, the actual content of the legend may have been of more immediate personal significance to the user. However, it is important to keep in mind that form and content were often inextricably linked to create a single personal statement.

As mentioned above, French was the language of choice for amorous seals, and there are many examples from the fourteenth century. Legends such as JU SUY DAMURS,⁴³ and LA DAMOISEL EST BON LEAL,⁴⁴ are typical and need no explanation. The popular design featuring a hawk taking its prey with the legend ALAS JE SU PRIS⁴⁵ may have been intended as an amorous theme, but it could almost equally well be a reference to the hunt. Latin also appears in the form of the ubiquitous AMOR VINCIT OMNIA,⁴⁶ and more than one seal describes itself as SIGILLUM AMORIS.⁴⁷ English amorous legends range from the prosaic LOVE ME AND LIVE,⁴⁸ to the popular but bizarre I CRAKE NOTIS, which is often accompanied by a squirrel, and is probably a reference to sexual conquest.⁴⁹ There are many variations on this last theme and it has been suggested that seals of this type were mass-produced to appeal to the 'Jack-the-lad market, for the would-be-man-of-the-medieval-world who fancied himself a bit of a Don Juan, or at least, was not averse to others thinking that he was!'⁵⁰ This jocular example may have only

37 'I am the seal of faithful love'; Blair (1911-13), nos. 174, 360, 1603, 1972, 2124, 2208, 2426; Ellis (1978-81), no. 1629; Tonnochy (1952), nos., 718, 712.

38 'Mother of God remember me'; Blair (1911-13), nos. 311, 806, 1689, 2159, 2457; Ellis (1978-81), nos. 472, 590, 1232.

39 'Break, read and conceal'; Blair (1911-13), nos. 552, 575, 10005, 1578, 2183, 2435, 3003; Ellis (1978-81), nos. 1309, 1385; Tonnochy (1952), no. 359.

40 'The strong lion sleeps here'; Blair (1911-13), nos. 114, 830, 890, 1088, 1375.

41 'The seal of Ingelard, whom God protects'; Ellis (1978-81), no. 2214.

42 'Mary daughter of Anna, pray for John'; Blair (1911-13), no. 2009.

43 'I am [the seal] of love'; Tonnochy (1952), no. 720.

44 'The lady is faithful and true'; Blair (1911-13), no. 213.

45 'Alas, I am caught!'; Blair (1911-13), nos. 650, 1297, 1343, 1637, 1756, 2602, 2693; Ellis (1978-81), nos. 890, 1176, 2040; Tonnochy (1952), no. 748.

46 'Love conquers all'; Ellis (1978-81), no. 1370.

47 'Seal of love'; Blair (1911-13), no. 2808; Ellis (1978-81), nos. 985, 2249; Tonnochy (1952), no. 717.

48 Blair (1911-13), no. 2320; Ellis (1978-81), no. 203.

49 Blair (1911-13), nos. 39, 2462; Jones (1991), pp. 200-1.

50 Jones (1991), p. 201.

been intended as an idle boast, but it is conceivable that the more intimate amorous seals were primarily intended to secure personal correspondence.

In addition to boasting about sexual prowess, social pretension is another form of display that lent itself quite well to seal designs and legends. Early in the twelfth century, seals were status symbols in themselves, and in the 1160's the chief justicar of England could bemoan the fact that 'every petty knight' now owned a seal.⁵¹ In the fourteenth century, after seals became widespread, their owners found new ways to express this pretension. Pseudo-heraldic seals depicting the owner's profession became popular, as the seal of a Durham butcher illustrates: it depicts a bull's head on a shield with an axe above it.⁵² The hunt was another aristocratic privilege appropriated by more humble seal owners. There are many seals featuring game with hunting cries as a legend. One ingenious seal manages to infringe on both rights by combining the hunt with a pseudo-heraldic motif. This shield-shaped seal shows a hare with a hawk on its arm riding a hound, with the hunting cry SOHOV above it.⁵³

This last seal's appropriation of two distinctly aristocratic devices can also be seen as a form of parody, a theme more clearly illustrated by other examples. One seal owned by a Durham chaplain shows a hare blowing a horn and riding a hound with the legend I RIDE ALONE A REVERE. This bilingual text suggests a reversal of the natural order of things at the expense of the nobility.⁵⁴ Animals provide many opportunities for humour, as in one seal that depicts an ape with the legend HAYL APE HAYL,⁵⁵ and another with a dog and hare gaming with the legend HASARD PIN HOD IS MIN.⁵⁶ It is difficult to know exactly what was meant by such seals, but is possible that they are a humorous and somewhat flippant reaction against the solemnity of written documentation.

Closely related to these humorous seals are those that use animals in a moralizing fashion emphasizing the vanity and transience of human affairs. A fourteenth-century matrix depicts a hare with the legend ALAK SO US,⁵⁷ thus turning mankind into the unfortunate object of the hunt. Peter of Kellawe's seal already mentioned, with its ape, owl and ass, invites a similar interpretation. Like the humorous legends above, these moralistic seals may result from a consciousness of the frailty of mankind in the face of the immutable memory of written record.

51 Harvey and McGuinness (1996), p. 77.

52 McGuinness (1993), pp. 170-1.

53 Blair (1911-13), no. 1219.

54 McGuinness (1993), pp. 174-5.

55 Blair (1911-13), no. 994.

56 Harvey (1991), p. 122.

57 Tonnochy (1952), no. 755, but see Harvey and McGuinness (1996), p. 113 for this reading.

Other seals in a similar vein take a more overtly religious tone. Their owners call for the intercession of the saints: ORO PRO OY SANCTE ANDRE,⁵⁸ MATER DEI MEMENTO MEI;⁵⁹ express their devotion: JESUS EST AMOR MEUS;⁶⁰ and exhort others to greater religious fervour: TIMETE DEUM.⁶¹ Religious legends can be found on more than six percent of the personal seals in Blair's catalogue, and there are at least as many seals with a simple name as the legend accompanied by a religious design. There seem to be many reasons for this relative popularity. Some legends invoking particular saints are simply a pious way of stating the seal owner's name. HOC SIGNUM PRO ME THOMA DAT PASSIO THOME on a seal owned by Thomas de Nova Haya⁶² is a good example, as is one with AQUILA JOHANNIS owned by John Cock.⁶³ However, many seals with religious themes may have held more profound significance for their owners. Elizabeth New argues that the replication of holy images in the form of seals was considered a form of prayer, and that Latin legends were viewed as being especially effective.⁶⁴ Not only was the act of impressing a seal imbued with supernatural power, the matrix itself could become talismanic.⁶⁵ Many matrices were designed to be worn as jewellery, and religious seals, particularly those with christological legends, are likely to have served as talismans.⁶⁶

Matrices made from antique gems form another class of seals with magical significance. Such seals gems were among the first used on the continent, and remained fashionable until the mid fourteenth century.⁶⁷ Although they may have been intended to display their owner's refined taste, gems were believed to possess powers of healing, and this may be the principal reason for their popularity.⁶⁸ As many of these gems contained pagan motifs, it was often considered necessary to place them in a context that would Christianise them in some way. Thus many were set in metal mounts engraved with religious legends. The earliest seal of the cathedral community of Durham featured the head of Jupiter Serapis, but the addition of a Christian gloss turned it into a representation of one of the community's most holy relics: CAPUT SANCTI OSWALDI.⁶⁹

58 'Saint Andrew pray for me'; Blair (1911-13), no. 22.

59 'Mother of God remember me'; Blair (1911-13), nos. 311, 806, 1689, 2159, 2457; Ellis (1978-81), nos. 472, 1232.

60 'Jesus is my love'; Ellis (1978-81), no. 948; Tonnochy (1952), nos. 897-9.

61 'Fear God'; Blair (1911-13), nos. 615, 1050, 1822; Ellis (1978-81), no. 2240.

62 'The passion of Thomas dedicates this seal to me, Thomas'; Blair (1911-13), no. 1909; see Harvey and McGuinness (1996), p. 115.

63 'The eagle of John'; Ellis (1978-81), no. 1212. Blair (1911-13), no. 1000 features the same legend, although it was used (but not owned) by a man named Thomas of Fishburn.

64 New (2002), pp. 50, 59-61.

65 New (2002), p. 61; Clanchy (1993), p. 316-17; Dalton (1992), p. 23.

66 Tonnochy (1952), p. xviii-xix, xxiv; Maxwell-Lyte (1926), p. 45; New (2002), p. 60.

67 Tonnochy (1952), pp. xviii-xxi.

68 Henderson (1978), p. 27.

69 'The head of Saint Oswald'.

This example is typical of many, in which a Christian legend was evidently considered powerful enough to offset a pagan design.⁷⁰

A smaller number of seals have no pretension to supernatural power, and seem content to emphasize their veracity. CREDE MICHI⁷¹ and JE SU LEEL⁷² are common in many variants. These seals underscore their important role as a means to authenticate documents, and plead their case to ‘all seeing or hearing’ the texts they verified.

Other seals are equally clear about their purpose, however ephemeral in nature. In addition to FRANGE LEGE TEGE mentioned above, LECTA CELA NEC REVELA,⁷³ HEYL HEYL HEYL,⁷⁴ IGNOTA NOTO,⁷⁵ and the seal of Thor Longus with the legend THOR ME MITTIT AMICO,⁷⁶ emphasize the role of the seal as a means to secure the integrity of missives. Such specifically ‘missive’ legends are found as early as 1138, when the canons of Waltham used a seal that read SIGNO STIGMA CRUCIS GUALTHAM MITTIT AMICIS, and they became quite popular by the late thirteenth century.⁷⁷ Impressions used in this manner would have been discarded as a matter of course, and it is only in the rare cases that they are used to authenticate open documents that some have managed to survive. The fact that they do so in such numbers (roughly one percent of the personal seals in Blair’s catalogue) reveals that people seemed to have had little reservation in using them for more formal purposes. These seals provide a glimpse of another sphere of seal use that may have been much more visible at the time, but has since left little trace.

Anonymity

Many of the seals described above make no reference to a particular owner, and what personal information they do contain is expressed in such an obscure yet formulaic fashion that they are not likely to have had any significance outside the owner’s immediate social circle. Such seals may have been full of meaning for their owners, but they do not provide any unequivocal form of identification, and can thus be called anonymous.

It is difficult to determine the date at which seal owners no longer felt it necessary to include some concrete form of identification in their seal legends, because we must rely

70 Henderson (1978), pp. 26-7; Tonnochy (1952), pp. xviii-xx; New (2002), p. 57.

71 ‘Trust me’; Blair (1911-13), nos. 392, 1709, 2967; Ellis (1978-81), no. 2306; Tonnochy (1952), nos. 711-14.

72 ‘I am faithful’; Ellis (1978-81), no. 1403; Tonnochy (1952), no. 724.

73 ‘Conceal what is read and do not reveal it’; Ellis (1978-81), no. 910.

74 Blair (1911-13), no. 2036.

75 ‘The unknown is known’; Tonnochy (1952), no. 765.

76 ‘Thor sends me to his friend’; Blair (1911-13), no. 3002; Heslop (1980), pp. 15-16.

77 ‘Waltham sends the seal of the sign of the cross to its friends’; Heslop (1980), pp. 15-16.

solely on whatever matrices and impressions have happened to survive. The earliest datable example in Blair's catalogue is not surprisingly an antique gem featuring a male head from a document dated 1239.⁷⁸ P. D. A. Harvey cites two documents, one dated 1217x32 with fifty seals each bearing the name of one of the grantors, and another dated 1274 with eight seals intact, six of which are anonymous.⁷⁹ Recently, Professor Harvey surveyed the seals in the Duchy of Lancaster Ancient Deeds Classes D25 and D26, and found that although anonymous seals only comprised eight percent of seals from 1201-1300, that figure rose to forty-two percent in the following century. This compares well with McGuinness' work on seals from Durham and Newcastle, of which six percent from 1201-1300, and forty-five percent from 1301-1400 were anonymous.⁸⁰ It thus seems that anonymous seals in the form of signets and counterseals, often with the inscription *SIGILLUM SECRETI*, began to appear in the middle of the thirteenth century, and had become commonplace by about 1280.⁸¹

The above examples show that anonymous and named seals were used concurrently, often on the same document. This is vividly reinforced by the existence of seven unusual fourteenth-century matrices that effectively belong to both types. Each of them features a heraldic design in the centre and a standard legend giving the name of the owner. However, in each case the central heraldic device is mounted on a screw, and it is possible to unscrew the centre, allowing it to be raised slightly above the legend. Thus each matrix is able to produce an impression with or without the legend. The owners of these matrices obviously felt it necessary to possess both types of seal, and used this convenient device to make two distinct impressions with one matrix.⁸²

The existence of such a large number of anonymous seals in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries seems to indicate that, for many people, the seal's role as an instrument to authenticate documents in an unequivocal manner was not their sole or even primary concern in choosing their seals' legends. Personal expression, piety, and the need to secure correspondence had in many cases taken precedence over what might be considered the seal's official function.

The popularity of seals with specifically missive legends in the thirteenth century may be a sign of a revival of the original role of seals as a means to secure private communications. However, this practice seems never to have completely died out at the

78 Blair (1911-13), no. 1073.

79 Harvey (1991), p. 120.

80 Harvey (1991), p. 120; McGuinness (1993), p. 175.

81 McGuinness (1993), p. 174.

82 Kingsford (1924), pp. 249-56. An eighth seal in this collection is constructed in the same manner, but features a floral border in place of a legend. In this case the size of the impression may have been the sole concern.

royal court, and it may have continued at lower levels of society. Seals used to close letters would have been broken as a matter of course, and no medieval English epistle is known to have survived unopened. Alternatively, unattached impressions used to authenticate messengers may have been discarded to ensure the integrity of future impressions. It is therefore possible that missive seals were common from the earliest times, though few have survived. Early counterseals with some variation on the legend SIGILLUM SECRETI, may be all the evidence we have of the use of missive seals during this period. This in itself is not surprising, but it is interesting that seals of this nature were later affixed to documents as their owner's legal seal.

Amorous seals are also surprising to find appended to legal transactions without any overtly romantic content. Again such seals may have been intended to secure private correspondence or even to serve as tokens of affection, but their presence on formal documents is puzzling.

In the same way, seals with religious legends often have little relation to the documents to which they are affixed, and show that the desire for a particularly efficacious matrix may have led seal users to overlook the need for clear identifying features in design or legend. Thus the supernatural properties of the matrix may have overshadowed the official significance of the impression.

The fact that, by the end of the thirteenth century, seals of these types were considered acceptable for use on formal documents is very revealing, and seems to indicate that the content of a given seal was no longer of any great importance for official purposes. This is obviously not the case with the seals of kings and great magnates; the fourteenth century would see frequent changes in the legend of the Great Seal as the king's titles came and went during the Hundred Years' War. However, for the average seal user of more humble origins, it no longer mattered whether his seal revealed his name, his affiliation with the cult of a particular saint, or even his sexual prowess.⁸³

Conclusion

Legends were an important element of seal design throughout the period 1066-1400. They were taken very seriously by kings and magnates who used their seals as propaganda and modified them to fit shifting political reality. They were also regarded as an important part of the life of a religious house and were often deemed worthy of

⁸³ This official ambivalence to seal legends and design suggests that the importance of the seal as a symbol was eroding, or had at least reached a new level in its development. Clanchy ((1993), pp. 254-60) argues that seals helped non-literates come to grips with written records by bridging the gap between written and pre-literate forms of conveyance. However, by the beginning of the fourteenth century, most official transactions were conducted by means of written documentation. Although seals continued to be necessary as evidence of the owner's participation in the creation of a document, the focus had shifted to the text itself.

strict regulation. However, by the late thirteenth century, it was no longer considered necessary for the average seal user's name to be explicitly stated in the legend. This gave seals the freedom to become potent and highly personal expressions of love, faith, and humour, ironically losing their identification with a particular owner in the process. In the same way, seals originally intended for other purposes now met the increasingly loose criteria demanded of them as instruments used to authenticate documents. The seal at the bottom of the document was already on its way to becoming a mere formality.

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