Annabel Teh Gallop, *Malay Seals from the Islamic World of Southeast Asia: Content, Form, Context, Catalogue*. Singapore: NUS Press [in association with The British Library], 2019, xxii + 785 pp. ISBN: 9789813250864, price: SGD 145.00 (hardcover).

This highly specialized and beautifully illustrated book is a landmark in the study of Muslim societies in Southeast Asia. It reproduces and comments upon a corpus of 2168 seals from Southeast Asia with inscriptions in Arabic script, mostly in Malay and Arabic. The seals are mainly seal impressions on various types of documents, but also images of some 300 matrices are included. The period covered in the book is from the end of the sixteenth century until roughly the beginning of the twentieth century, while the seals listed originate from the present-day territories of Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Indonesia, southern Thailand, Cambodia and the Philippines.

It is not mentioned precisely how this corpus came about, but it seems that Dr. Gallop has gathered all seals which she has encountered during her long career as Curator for Maritime Southeast Asia at the British Library from 1986 onwards in the collections of the British Library, Leiden University Library and in other collections worldwide, as well as in publications which reproduce seals. The author is fully aware of the arbitrariness of the composition of the corpus (which of course holds true for any corpus of historical objects) and explicitly leaves the possibility open that new unrecorded seals may appear (p. 3). Fortunately, the present book does not limit itself to just cataloguing the seals available to the compiler, but also indicates patterns in the collected seals and draws conclusions on the corpus as a whole. This is done in such a meticulous and erudite way that a very convincing reconstruction of the sigillographic landscape of the Muslim Malay world is given.

After the short introduction ("Setting the scene: sources and studies"), this landscape is sketched in three sections. The first section is entitled "Content: inscriptions" (pp. 5–23) and analyzes the seals according to their constituent elements: names; titles (sovereign; non-sovereign; religious); relationships of patronage; pedigrees; place names; dates; religious expressions; talismanic elements; introductory formulas; and ends in a typology of the seal inscriptions. It concludes that the seals follow partly the sigillographic vocabulary, which is common in other parts of the Muslim world, like depicting the seal holder in Arabic-Islamic terms and including quotes from the Qur'an and phrases in Arabic, while also containing specific Malay and other local titles and phrases.

The next section is entitled "Form: materiality and iconography" (pp. 24–36) and comments on the outward appearance of the seals. Consecutively, the following topics are dealt with: seal matrices and their production (mostly inscribed in intaglio), seal impressions (mainly in lampblack), shape, layout

BIJDRAGEN TOT DE TAAL-, LAND- EN VOLKENKUNDE

© NICO J.G. KAPTEIN, 2021 | DOI:10.1163/22134379-17702007

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 license.

Downloaded from Brill.com04/26/2023 10:15:37AM
via free access

and (inconsistent) calligraphy, pictorial elements, floral decorations (the lotus!) and, finally, the depiction of blossom by petals in multiples of four, a number, according to the author, which might refer to Islamic and/or pre-Islamic symbolism.

The penultimate section is entitled “Context: users, uses, and usage” (pp. 37–46). It appears that in traditional Malay societies most seals in one way or another were related to the different royal courts and state authorities, with the noticeable exception of seals which were owned by men of religion. Seals were used on letters, treaties, contracts and the like to authenticate the accompanying text. In addition to this, other usages are known, including the indication of the ownership of a particular text, which, however, is rare in the Malay world compared to many other Islamic cultures.

The final section (pp. 47–52) sketches “the evolution and development of the Malay sealing tradition” with Dr. Gallop’s habitual sophistication, gives a periodization of the use of seals, and points to similarities and differences of Malay seals with seals from other parts of the Muslim world.

After these opening sections the remainder of the book consists of the catalogue which forms the *pièce de résistance* (pp. 55–722) and which documents the evidence on which the preceding sections are based. The catalogue records 2168 seals and is organized in 27 chapters according to region of origin, moving from Sumatra and the Malay peninsula in the west via Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Nusa Tenggara, to Maluku and the southern Philippines in the east, and ending in Banten (ch. 25), Java, Madura, and Bali (ch. 26). Actually, from Java only 20 examples have been recorded. Most seals from Java fall outside the scope of this book (with the exception of Banten), because they rarely have inscriptions in Arabic script, but mainly use the Javanese script. Chapter 27 lists the final category of seals, namely those of unknown origin. Each chapter gives an introduction to the region and its sigillographic culture and presents high quality pictures of all seals, followed by a meticulous description of each seal. These descriptions present the inscription of each separate seal in Arabic script, its transliteration in Roman script, its translation, and other relevant information, and in many cases form a piece of exemplary scholarship in themselves. The content of the catalogue is so rich that I think there is something for everyone. Personally, I was thrilled to see the seal (nr. 462) of the object of my current research, the Mecca based scholar Ahmad Khatib al-Minangkabawi (1860–1916), which I had never seen before.

The book concludes with a bibliography and seven useful indices (e.g. location of the holdings of the original, names and titles, place names and dates) which contribute to a further accessibility of the presented seals. Moreover, a number of useful maps are included.

In publishing these seals, Dr. Gallop has made available in a systematic manner an important set of authentic historical sources, many of them for the first time. It should go without saying that these sources are authentic and have not been counterfeited nor modified over time. The book therefore forms a most welcome tool for supplementing and expanding our knowledge on the history of Muslim societies in Southeast Asia. Moreover, this book shows that the Malay seals from the Islamic world of Southeast Asia, similar to those of other parts of the Muslim world, are first and foremost characterized by their Islamic identity. As such, this monumental book is an important step forward in the further integration of the study of Islam in Southeast Asia into the study of the Islamic world at large.

Nico J.G. Kaptein

Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands

n.j.g.kaptein@hum.leidenuniv.nl