In Search of a Semiotic Paradigm: The Matter of Sealing in Medieval Thought and Praxis (1050–1400)
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 Historians fish in the vast sea of the medieval past. As they troll and reel in, they wish to comprehend, not only the catch but the sea itself, and yet when they pull in the net, the sea slips through the webbing. So we are left with artefacts deprived of their context, which we then attempt to restore. Such is the case with seals. Medieval scholars have considered them as authoritative means of documentary validation, as markers of identity, and as loci of artistic, spiritual, and ritual activities. This understanding of medieval seals and sealing practices assumes a general grammar instrumental in generating seal form, performance, and meaning. In this sense, the ‘realism’ of seals is construed as inhering in the adequacy of their fit to paradigmatic cultural models.

Medieval seals, however, did not merely reflect the organizing principles of medieval culture and society nor did they simply represent reality; they were involved in creating a reality, that is, veritas, truth. Seal legends not infrequently themselves declared that the seal was veritas. It was explicit that the accuracy and truthfulness which inhered in a sealed charter was a verity produced by the seal. In medieval culture, truth was a fundamental value which could not be dissociated from the real: truth was reality.

I wish here to examine seals and sealing practices beyond their determinative function, to consider the mechanisms by which seals served both as makers and markers of reality, to analyze seals both as material and as conceptual entities which between 1050 and 1400 formed the matter of diverse discourses, relationships, and images. My analysis will focus on a few specific cases which permit a survey of the manner and the implications of sealing performance. I will argue that in acting as formative models of truth and of experienced reality, seals and sealing exposed contemporary tensions in such realms as metaphysics, law, and semiotics. At the core of these tensions lay the fact that there was no possible appeal to existing guarantees which could verify the application of seals and assure the success of their operations. I therefore intend to propose that, as axiomatically-defined objects of social control and identity, seals benefited from the affirmative support of rules which had their sanction in supernatural stipulation; they gained their sanction by means of their performance within the fields of theology and devotional literature.

The first case is based upon my analysis of several hundred charters given in northern France between 1050 and 1300. This bracket of dates in fact covers two periods: 1050 to 1180, and 1180 to 1300, which may be distinguished along two axes. The first axis is sociological, and is well known to historians. Between 1050 and 1180, sealing practices were newly extended to non-royal elites, mostly bishops, abbots, nobles, and major cities. After 1180, sealing occurred more generally throughout medieval society, though it was not necessarily practised by all individuals. In fact, deputed royal seals and seals of jurisdiction were responsible for the vast majority of sealed documents from the late 13th century onward. A second criterion for distinguishing the two periods concerns the particulars of diplomatic discourse, specifically the final textual clauses of charters in which the attachment of the seal was announced. After some flux during the early 11th century, the formulae became virtually standardised in stating that the author of the charter had confirmed it with the impression of his seal: ‘que concessio, ut rata et inviolabilis in futuro permaneat, sigilli mei impressione corrobari volui.’ By the early 13th century, however, imprinting (impressione) began to be supplemented by specific references to the gesture of appending, as stated typically in a validating clause: ‘quod ut ratum sit firmiterque in posterum teneatur, ipsam compositionem litteris tradi fecimus et sigillorum nostrorum appensione muniri.’ By the mid-13th century, the clause of validation tended to include a newer generic formula which asserted that the seal was appended as an attestation: ‘In cujus rei testimonium, ... sigillum meum feci apponi.’

The progression of these trends—the formulas overlap and the examples cited do not exhaust the full lexicon of terms used in validating clauses—cannot be explained simply as reflecting contemporary sealing techniques. True, the earliest western seals were applied directly to their documents and the wax was stamped after it had already been laid on the parchment. Applied seals, however, gave way to pendant seals from the mid-11th century onward. In such regions as Flanders, Brabant, Hainaut, the pendant seal had totally replaced the applied seal by 1110. Of course, even after the introduction of pendant seals, imprinting, that is, the impression of a matrix upon the soft wax or metal, persisted. Nor had appending totally displaced imprinting as the specific act which defined and completed the process of sealing, since the final stamping of the wax seal necessarily occurred only after its attachments had been inserted into the document itself. An entire century elapsed between the first appearance of pendant seals and the time that textual clauses declaring their pendency became standard within the document itself.

We therefore have to address the fact that, during the initial century of their diffusion, seals were experienced as, and acted as, impressions. Attention to the validating formulae reveals the following points. Some formulae indicate that the charter itself had been impressed impregnated) with the seal, ‘mea carta sigillo impressa confirmavi’. In other clauses, the term impressio is qualified or complemented by a range of additional terms. Thus, we often read that authors have confirmed their charters with the authority and impression of their seals, ‘litteras memoriales ... auctoritate et sigilli nostri impressione corroboravimus’, or that their charter has been confirmed with an authentic impression of their seal: ‘impressione autentica nostri sigilli corroboravi curavimus’. Yet other
validating clauses combine impressio with the Latin word character as in ‘siggili nostri impresso caractere fecimus confirmari’ (we have confirmed with the impressed character of our seal).

Finally, and significantly, impressio is often associated with the term imago: ‘Et ne aliquis contra hanc donationem venire presumat, imaginis nostre impressione eam corroborari precepi’ (so that no one will presume to challenge this donation, I ordered it to be confirmed with the imprint of my image). This lexicon – imago, character, and auctoritas – began to disappear from the closing formulae after 1200, as did the term impressio itself. How might an analysis of this group of words foster our understanding of the operation and agency of 12th-century seals?

Such contemporary insistence on the seal as imprint highlights its indexical nature as the trace of an actual contact, not only between the matrix and the wax, but also between the seal and its user. The wax applied to the seal user’s matrix embodied his person as the true originator of the act in question – his presence often rendered even more tangible by the inclusion of bodily marks in the seal, such as finger prints, bite marks, or actual hairs plucked from his beard. The early 15th-century chronicle of the monastery of St Augustine of Canterbury relates that, after the Norman invasion of England, kings and magnates added to their charters thin sheets of wax onto which they imprinted the sign of the cross, leaving as signs for posterity bits of hair and beard also inserted into the wax. The chronicler Thomas of Elmham (d. 1420), asserts that such personalised items could then be found in the many monasteries that had been created after the Conquest, and provides two specific examples. The first reference is to the Cluniac priory of St Pancras of Lewes (Sussex), in which a charter given by William, first Count of Warenne (d. 1088), still contained, at the time Thomas was writing, some of the Count’s hair. The second example refers to a charter of the Cluniac house of Castle Acre (Norfolk), in which the Count of Lincoln concluded in the following fashion: ‘In hujus rei evidentiam sigillum dentibus meis impressi, teste Muriele uxorre mea’. Once again, Thomas noted that the traces of teeth, implanted as a seal, could still be seen in the wax. Thus, the seal impression, whether of a matrix and, or, made by parts of the body, was initially appreciated as a relic of the sealer’s physical contact and participation. The diplomatic trope of the imprint was, therefore, concerned with origin and presence. That the authorship and authority of the seal depended on the person and the personal participation of its owner is well expressed by the textual combination of impressio and auctoritas, where auctoritas re-enforces the emphasis on personal origin. In fact, early diplomatic discourse, in using the terms authentic (authentica) and authoritative (auctoritate) interchangeably to characterise the seal impression, testifies to the contemporary semantic synergy between an actor and an author, both of which terms referred to the person who originated and caused an act to be. Remarkably, the document in which I found mention of an authentic impression dates from 1114, well before canon law had introduced the concept of the sigillum authenticum, the authentic seal, to which we shall later return.

The association of the Latin terms impressio and character locates the seal more specifically within the sphere of graphic and onomastic symbols. In earlier diplomatic discourse, the word character referred primarily to the sign of the cross typically inscribed by authors of charters and their witnesses. Character was also the term for a monogram, an arrangement of the letters of a person’s name into a single figural motif, which was inscribed as a validating sign on royal acts as well as on some aristocratic and episcopal charters. As the use of seals spread, the term character came to indicate yet other of the seal’s graphic elements, in particular heraldic emblems. It seems that the term character in 12th-century diplomatic discourse was particularly associated with the motif of the name, whether linguistically or emblematically. Names and heraldic coats on seals are indeed what give personal seals their character, their distinction. Canting seals, on which the image or heraldic emblem alludes to the sealer’s name, vividly demonstrates the dialogue between names and arms, equally termed character. As early as 1127, on the seal of Hugh III of Candavène, Count of St Pol, a candavène, that is, a ‘field of oats’, had become part of the identifying iconography. Character, with its strong onomastic and graphological connotations, thus brings the seal closer to the signature. Signing and imprinting are both bodily gestures whose efficacy depends upon an ability to re-iterate a sign. They direct attention to an action by the physical operator; the significance of his representative sign, on the other hand, inheres primarily in its ability to verify, through sameness, that it emanates from the proper signatory. In the case of sealing, the task of graphic re-iteration is transferred from the human hand to a mechanical tool, the matrix. As the individual operator impressed the document with the sealer’s approval, this may help to explain why seals, even though named to a particular person, could also be borrowed and used by another. An example is the donation to the hospital of St John of Bruxelles (in 1232) by two brothers; the younger brother states, in the charter’s final clause, that he is jointly using the seal of his elder brother – since he does not himself have a seal. The Latin text is worth quoting: ‘quia sigillum non habeo, coutor sigillo domini et fratris mei in hac parte’; the two brothers may well have jointly applied the matrix to the wax. Thus, viewers of sealed charters might be expected to discount a seal’s appearance, its image and even its name, in comprehending the seal’s essential quality as mark of intentional and actual participation which the writing of the deed by an anonymous scribe alone had been unable to achieve.

In light of what has just been argued about the seal as a marker of real authorship, the 12th-century conflation of imprint with imago becomes particularly interesting. The 12th-century seal, after all, bore the icon of its owner; it registered social status and might even be realistic with respect to emblems and function. Yet, the images on seals are stereotypic. They sort and classify by socio-functional categories, by kindred, demonstrating the extent to which the formulation of identity involves the imposition of categories. So questions arise about the nature of this image which the authors of the charters proclaimed textually as ‘my image’. One should not interpret the realism of 12th-century seals without considering the resonance of the vocabulary of sealing within the contemporary intellectual lexicon. The topos of the imago impressa, the imprinted image was ubiquitous in prescholastic writings. Over the years I have identified an extensive array of seal metaphors the great majority of which...
were coined in the 12th century and were associated with schoolmen who engaged in anthropological theology and focused their exegesis on the biblical text (Genesis 1:26–27) according to which man was created in the image and resemblance of God.27 Such metaphors assert that man is a seal impression, imprinted by God's image, that is, by Christ. However, man degraded by original sin could not himself be an image of God but was a being whose matter has been marked by and thus only partially retained the stamp of God's creative touch. Consonant with the imprint of God's creation of man was the revivifying imprinting conferred by the salvific seal of baptism. This is where the use of the term character in 12th-century diplomatic discourse acquired additional significance.28 Since patristic times, character had meant a seal (a signaculum) which labeled a thing with its programmatic purpose, as a coin is identified by its character as suitable for transactions, or a soldier in late imperial Rome was marked in his flesh so as to be linked to a specific military unit.29 It was, however, only during the 12th century that the term character entered the field of sacramental theology, to designate the foundational imprint made on the Christian by baptism, and by those other sacraments — confirmation and ordination — which, once applied to an individual, marked him indelibly for the service of God. Character, in this sense, once impressed, was an absolute certainty.30

By contrast, it appears that the term figura was only rarely, if ever, substituted for that of imago or character. This may be significant, though an argument from absence is not easily reconcilable. The semantic range of figura, broad and often blurry, oscillated between two poles that are not easily reconcilable. Figura was the visible appearance of a creature or of an object, which prompted an understanding of the form not apparent to the eye itself. The figural mode of thinking, so fundamental to Christian thought, was therefore profoundly alien to the vocabulary of iconographic representation. For to 'figure' something was in fact to avoid figuring it in its own physical aspect.31 Figura expressed dualism, that is the difference between itself and its real subject, while imago privileged immanence, that is the very manner (contact), and indeed the matter by means of which representation occurred.

In 12th-century culture, therefore, the impressed image, imago impressa, signaled that the true portrait of the sealer on his seal resided not so much in the image as form but in the image as marked matter. Imprinting rendered tangible an action by an agent, whereby the agent left something of itself within the matter. The power of the seal was thus derived and affirmed through its analogy with the god-sanctioned act of imprinting, which incorporated presence and transmitted properties. Central to the seal's efficacy, then, was the traceable action and presence of its user.

As mentioned earlier, toward the end of the 12th century, the diplomatic vocabulary of sealing, through not the technique of imprinting, underwent modification.32 Concomitantly, reports of events involving seals seem to indicate that the earlier incarnational model was giving way as increased attention was being directed to the seal's appearance. A second case will illustrate this point. In his Course of the Exchequer (written between 1170–83), Richard Fitz Nigel repeatedly attempted to explain the independent royal seal for the Exchequer, and to relate this seal to the King's Great Seal, which he called the itinerant seal of the King's court ('deambulatorio curig sigillo'). After insisting that the royal seal of the Exchequer was used only for royal mandates as they pertained to the Exchequer, Richard in effect tried to erase the distinction between the two seals by noting that: '[the royal seal for the Exchequer] has the same “image and inscription” as the itinerant seal of the King's court in order that the two seals may be recognised as of equal authority in commanding [...] and those [are] equally guilty who disobey either of them'. The Latin is important: ‘expressam autem habet imaginem et inscriptionem cum deimbulatorio curig sigillo, ut par cognoscatur utroque jubentis auctoritas’.

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Three remarks are in order here. First, when describing the seal’s graphic elements with the words ‘imago et inscriptio’, Richard was quoting verbatim the passage of Luke’s Gospel in which, asked whether it was right to pay taxes, Jesus asked in turn: whose image and name is on the coin? Upon hearing that the coin bore the name and image of Caesar, Jesus enjoined that what is Caesar’s should be given to Caesar.33 Clearly, this biblical precedent was invoked by Richard to buttress the royal seals’ authority, in a rhetorical allusion which parallels the semantic range mapped by the imago impressa. Second, however, for Richard (as for the author of the gospel), it was the combination of legend and image which signified authority. And third, it was the duplication of legend and image which made the two royal seals equivalent; this identity enabled the royal seals to function properly as signs and agents of sovereign power.

The following story further addresses the relationship between epigraphy, iconography, and authority, and focuses on the signifying role of appearance on seals. In his Exordio, the tract that Symeon of Durham wrote during the second half of the 12th century on the ‘Origins and Progress of the Church of Durham’, he relates that when Ranulf Flambard,34 then Chaplain and Keeper of King William Rufus’s seal under Maurice the Chancellor, was kidnapped on a barque in the Thames by plotters jealous of his position at court, ‘he took the ring which he wore on his finger, and his notary took the King's seal, and they threw them into the middle of the river, so that their enemies should not be able to circulate deceitfully forged writs (simulata precepta) throughout England where the ring and the seal were known (cognita).35 This story brings to the fore two interrelated matters, seal forgery and seal recognition. What concerns us here are the techniques canon lawyers explicitly set in place from the late 12th century onward to identify, and wherever possible to prevent, the forgery of seals. The most comprehensive statements on forgery were issued by Pope Innocent III (d. 1216), who built upon precedent to elaborate a complex system which not only addressed the issue of forgery but also attempted to define a category of seal whose exeuctory power would be axiomatic.36 Early 13th-century canon law, somewhat frustratingly for the modern scholar, entangled the concepts of authenticity and authority.37 The term sigillum authenticum had been invented by Pope Alexander III (d. 1181) in the course of an effort to insert the then novel class of non-royal/non-papal seals within the existing operative logic of public documents invested with manifest credibility. The authentic seal was held to be the equivalent of the notarial manus publica, but Pope Alexander

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did not specify within his decrees those qualities which would render a particular seal authentic. Nevertheless, each movement whereby the nature of the seal and of its competence was to become an object of theory and no longer a mere practice as it had been until then. Succeeding popes and lawyers took up the question of seal agency. In a decretal of 1199, Pope Innocent III evaluated a privilege granted by the Emperor Henry VI on which half of the seal was missing, so that it was no longer possible to discern if the legend named Ludovicus or Henricus. Innocent III concluded that the imperial privilege lacked an authentic seal and therefore had no credibility. Crucially, Innocent’s analysis rested upon a careful, visual, inspection of the seal and its legend, and located authenticity within both the visual integrity of the seal and the personality of the seal owner. A *sigillum authenticum* thus was a seal that was intact (material condition) and identifiable (social condition). This may explain why the medieval concept of authenticity engaged two distinctive concerns. The first, related to the seal’s physicality, was further developed in the context of apprehension about forgery. The second, focused on the seal’s capacity for signification, was further elaborated in a context of concern for authority and performance. Remarkably, despite many attempts, a legal algorithm for the reliable detection of seal forgery was never achieved. The following case may contribute to an explanation of this conundrum.

Joinville, in his *Life of Louis IX* (d. 1270), relates that [the King’s love for fair and open dealing may be gathered from his behavior in the case of a certain Renaud de Trit (ie. Trie). This man had brought the King a charter stating that he [the King] had granted the county of Dammartin en Gouelle to the heirs of the late Countess de Boulogne. However, the seal of the charter was broken, so that nothing remained of it except half the legs of the figure representing the King, and the stool on which his feet were resting. The King showed the seal to all of us who were members of his council, and asked us to help him come to a decision. We all unanimously expressed the opinion that he was not bound to put the charter into effect. Then he told Jean Sarrasin, his chamberlain, to hand him another charter he had been asked to draw up. As soon as this was in his hands the King said to us: ‘My lords, here is the seal I used before I went overseas, and you can clearly tell from looking at it that the impression on the broken seal corresponds exactly with that of the one that is whole. Therefore I could not, with a clear conscience, retain this land’. So the King sent for Renaud de Trit and said to him: ‘I restore your county to you’. Of interest here, is the comparative method which King Louis, like many in his position, used to identify a seal. This behavior underscores the extent to which the seal image was, by the 13th century, operating as a replica. The adequacy of seal impressions was no longer to be verified by reference to its originating agent, the seal matrix or the seal owner himself. Rather, since the technique of mechanical reproduction assured that all impressions of a given seal matrix were identical copies, they were all considered to function as originals generating their own accuracy, truth, and validity. This understanding, coupled with the very centrality and potency of sealed documents, led to considerable medieval confusion and concern about the nature of forgery. For forgery is but an extreme form of replication, and replicability had become the main criterion used to certify the authenticity of seal impressions.

Was canon law successful, generally speaking, in its attempt to anchor seal efficacy within the structural order of society? In this body of legislation the seal was considered to be the official sign of an authorised person acting with an authority defined by... well, that was the problem. The seals of the high-ranking clergy, emperors, and of their jurisdictions, were axiomatically deemed to be authentic and authoritative. In the terms of a somewhat circular reasoning, authentic seals were legitimate tools of validation precisely because the personal authority of their owners was at the same time the institutional authority which underlay any legitimate delegation of authority. A decretal of 1207, *Cum Dilectus*, in dealing with the royal seal of Scotland, makes it clear that canon law was reluctant to extend such a socio-political notion of authenticity even to sovereigns:

*Consuetudo loci facit instrumentum authenticum... Si consuetudo illius patriae obtinet approbatione, ut instrumentum illius regis fides adhibeatur in talibus, vos ea secure poteritis admittere, praesertim quum supradictis rex tantae fuerit honostatis, quod ipsius instrumenta maximea auctoritas sint in partibus Scoticanici.*

In 13th-century ordinary glosses to Gregory IX’s *Decretals*, the glossator asked rhetorically: what is a *sigillum authenticum*? He answered: ecclesiastical seals are *sigilla authentica*, to which he adds: ‘the seal of a secular prince, to which the custom grants credence’. By the second half of the 13th century, Conrad of Mure (d. 1281), in his *Summa de arte prosandi*, declared that lawyers had held various and contradictory discourses on the matter of what constituted an authentic seal, based upon which the following conclusion might be drawn: an authentic seal is a seal that is *bene cognitum and famosum* (well known and famous). Such was the situation described by Symeon of Durham, which we reviewed earlier, in which the royal seal was cast overboard precisely because it was so well known that it carried its own authority, and therefore carried the risk of functioning even independently of its royal owner’s intention. Such seals came thus to be conceived as producing a disposition toward their own recognition and acceptance which enabled them, or not, to function as valid and effective signs. Well-known seals elicited the collaboration of those they affected, interacting with and dependent upon the social scaffolding which upheld this complicity.

Thirteenth-century and later theorisation about documentary sealing was largely prescriptive, and failed to account for seal agency since the only explanations provided tend to be axiomatic or circular. Furthermore, by the 14th century, one of the favorite equations of legal discourse, that between authentic seals and notarial marks, had been undermined. In southern France, for instance, notaries continued their tradition of signature to render documents official, and then additionally sealed them with their personal seals, to signify that they were also committing their persons. I wish therefore to consider two final cases, to attempt to circumscribe the actual capacity of seals to impact reality as effective conveyors of personal volition, intention, and decision. Both instances involve English texts. We are now in the second half of the 14th century, during the Peasants Revolt which brought rebellious villagers to the gate of the monastery of St Albans, demanding that a new charter of their liberties be drawn up. According to the chronicler Thomas Walsingham,
who recorded the event, the Abbot capitulated, and as the charter was drafted, the villagers, (mis)behaving like lords, were parading in the chapel and in the abbot’s chamber, intruding upon the drafting, dictating what should be written, and watching the sealing of the charter with curiosity. It was then that a miracle occurred, for it required three attempts to extract the seal-matrix of the convent, which bore the *imago* of the glorious protomartyr Alban, from the wax it was impressing. For Thomas Walsingham, there could be no doubt: the Saint wished to continue to exercise over these villagers the lordship he had always maintained. 36 However apocryphal and tendentious, this story ascribes to seals a power which derives from the order of divine justice. The miracle was wrought by the seal of the Saint, a device apparently capable of mobilising the sanctified status of Alban and of processing the power of intercession that was integral to his image. That it was not the seal of the Abbot which served as a conduit for the miracle underscored his failure, as a person, to stop the rebellion; his seal embodied only his limited competence.

Again in England, vernacular lyrics called the Charters of Christ were circulated in the form of pictorial sealed charters from the 1350s onward. 37 In this genre, Christ grants a charter which secures for mankind its heavenly heritage. The metaphor, however, extends to the physical charter itself, which consists of the crucified body of Christ. The parchment is made of his skin, which has been stretched on the cross; his blood is the ink (or the sealing wax); the scourges of his enemies are the pens; his wounds, the letters; his heart or his pierced flank, the seal. 38 The text ends with the statement that a copy of the charter, equated with the Eucharist, was left ‘with the priest so that future generations would remember and benefit from his sacrifice’. 39 The devotional content of these ‘charters’ should not obscure the insight they provide about the contemporary operation of sealing and documentation. Scholars have legitimately noted and enthusiastically interpreted the migration of documentary formats into lyrics and devotional literature, seeing in such a movement evidence for a broadly-based familiarity with charters and a deep appreciation of their formative impact on daily life; the rebellious villagers of St Albans being a case in point. This scholarship has considered those features of diplomatic praxis and discourse that rendered the charter a useful conceptual tool with which to reflect on the meaning and limits of lyric and allegory, or to define the relationship between textual authority and spiritual community. 40 It also seems relevant to consider the charter from the perspective of its format once ensconced within pious lyrics where it deviates from the standard diplomatic prototype. The literary charter exaggerates incarnational logic, as textual embodiment – the Eucharist which, in the course of the 12th century, had acquired its doctrinal status as a self-signifying entity. Though absolute only with specific reference to the Eucharist, this radical conflation of sign and referent realigned medieval theories concerned with the operations of material signs, such as seals and images, recurrently imparting to them a presentencing effect. 41

In summary, I would like to in to draw together the themes of sealing praxis just reviewed. During the first century of seal diffusion, between 1050–1200, there was in diplomatic and theological discourses an intense focus on the mechanism of seal production, the act of imprinting. Imprinting was a process impelled by an originating cause of which the imprint retains a trace. Thus, the initial organizing principles of seal effectiveness were contact and presence, which provided a reliable articulation between the seals and their agents. The efficacy of sealing inhered in the seal itself.

By the 13th century, however, documentary seals seem to have operated less as imprints than as replicas, deriving their contemporary validity primarily from a referential axis based upon their place within a series of other seals. In legal contexts, the linkage between the owner of the seal and its force was an effect of convention or custom. Seal authority was made to derive from externals, from rules and social networks. Judging by the continuing confusion of medieval legal discourse about seals and sealing, it appears that contemporary theories lacked coherence and definitive explanatory power.

There is evidence, from late-medieval texts, that it was in hagiographic and christological discourse that documentary seals were still performing, or yet again had come to perform, as instrumental signs which incorporated properties of their agents. Seals then operated on a triangular axis: from the seal user to the imprint to be sure, but also via a supernatural referentiality which sanctioned seal agency. The growing presence of pious and christic images on late medieval seals provides additional evidence of such a shift. 42 In the second half of the 15th century, when the Italian jurist Matteo d’Afflitto (1448–1528) undertook to review the role of the seal in the imperial chancery of Frederic II (1194–1250), he concluded: ‘sigillum est substantiale litere regie’ (the seal is the essence of the royal letter). 43 Irrespective of their mutable theoretical justifications for potency, medieval seals retained their capacity as makers and markers of an essential substantiality.

**Notes**

1 I have borrowed this metaphor from Didi-Huberman 1990, 204. The approach to seals developed in this paper owes much to this work, in particular its chapter 4: ‘L’image comme déchirure et la mort du Dieu incarné’ (Ibid., 169–260).

2 Realism is not an easy word to use. Medieval realism is sometimes called idealism since it affirmed the reality of abstract ideas which alone were held to constitute a single transcendent order of authentic reality, in contrast to the world of multiple appearances and human artifacts, having neither truth nor reality. For the modern man and woman of science, realism is a metaphysics of certitude, positing an observer-independent reality made up of its own inherent, and discoverable, components. In art, realism denotes the extent to which an object or an image conforms to a sense of reality as seen by the eye. Artistic realism thus engages a claim of mimesis, assuming that representations are isomorphic with what they represent (Munuit 1992, 27; Tilley et al. 2006, 15).

3 Final clauses in documents also sometimes mention the role of seals in testifying to truth ‘quorum sigilla in testimonium veritatis presentibus sunt appensa’ (*Cartulaire de l’hôpital Saint Jean*, no.
82, 120 (1230).”

4 Sources consulted for this paper include: Cartulaire de l’hôpital Saint Jean; Cartulaire de l’abbaye de Sainte Corinthe; Historia et Cartularium monasterii sancti Petri Gloucestrae; Cartulaire des Vaux-de-Cernay; Recueil des chartes et documents de Saint Martin des Champs, tome II.

5 Studies focusing on the initial spread of medieval seal usage beyond imperial, papal, and royal chanceries include Bautier 1984–9 and 1995; Chassel 1994 and Chassel 1997, which deals with a few seals from Burgundy; Heslop 1980; Bedos-Rezak 1993, especially chapters II, IV, VI, VIII; Clanchy 1993, especially chapter 9; Harvey and McGuiness 1996.

6 This situation principally characterises the continent where, in addition to deputy seals and seals of jurisdiction, notarised documents increasingly became available to those who wished authenticated copies of their transactions. Baunach 1997 and 1986. In England, the absence both of notaries and of seals of jurisdictions resulted in a profusion of personal sealing. By the late 13th century, however, commoners tended no longer to use their own seals but rather seals made available to them by the scriveners in charge of scripting transactions (Harvey 1991).

7 ‘In order that this concession remain firm and intact in the future, I wished it to be strengthened with the impression of my seal,’ Cartulaire de l’abbaye Sainte Corinthe, no. 53, 105 (c. 1140).

8 (1230) and no. 42, 67 (1233), where the younger brother borrows seals, but not from his brother; coutour seems to be reserved to the borrowing of his brother’s seal.

9 ‘In testimony of which, I had my seal apposed’ (Cartulaire de l’hôpital Saint Jean, no. 68, 99 (1247).

10 Laurent 1993, 1/1, 70.

11 Historia et Cartularium monasterii sancti Petri Gloucestrae, 51, no. DVIII (1149–83), donation by Robert to the church of Sts Gabriel and Michael.

12 For later examples of the use of this specific formula, see Bateson 1902, 293; creation, in c. 1246–71, of the borough of Warton (‘in presenti carta mea sigillo meo impressa confirmai’). For other examples from the second half of the 12th century, see Bautier 1995, 207, 372 (1203).

13 ‘In testimony of which, I had my seal apposed’ (Cartulaire de l’hôpital Saint Jean, no. 68, 99 (1247).

14 In his work on the chancery of Henry the Liberal, Count of Champagne (1152–81), Wight 1998 notes that: ‘...in presenti carta mea sigillo meo impressa confirmai’.

15 See n. 15 above.

16 The 1444 cartulary of the Cluniac Priory of St Pancras of Lewes has been partially translated by Salzman. It has not been possible to identify the charter described by Thomas in this work.

17 Chenu 1925 and 1927; Guenée 1981; Bedos-Rezak 1994, 327–8; Bedos-Rezak 2001, 49. See n. 38 below for the extent of this semantic overlap, which has determined the concepts of author, authority, and authenticity.

18 See reference to this document in n. 13 above. See n. 39 below for a further discussion of the sigillum authenticum.

19 Grévin and Véronése 2004, 356–7. On the vast semantic range of the term character throughout the western Middle Ages, see Häring 1995 and 1996. See n. 30 below for the 12th-century meaning of character as seal or character.

20 Nieus 2006. For a general survey of the relationship between names, heraldic emblems, and canting arms, see Pastoureau 1997, 91–7. Suggestive reflections on the scripting of names are found in Christin 1998. I profited enormously from Christin’s well-informed and subtle analysis of the implications of names and naming even if I do not quite concur with the manner in which she distinguishes sealing from signature.

21 A standard and most stimulating work on the signature is Franckel 1992.

22 Cartulaire de l’hôpital Saint Jean, no. 40, 65 (1232), and no. 37, 61 (1230) and no. 42, 67 (1233), where the younger brother borrows seals, but not from his brother; coutour seems to be reserved to the borrowing of his brother’s seal.


24 See n. 15 above.

25 The fundamental work on the creation of man in the image of God is by Javele 1997. For additional insights see Bell 1984; Ladner 1965; and Sullivan 1963. The texts of medieval seal metaphors are given and analysed in Bedos-Rezak 2000 and in her essays cited above in notes 16 and 19.

26 Above, n. 21.

27 Häring 1952, passim.


29 Didi-Huberman 1995, 96–7, 231–6. On p. 233 he gives the example of Paul commenting, in I Corinthians 10:4, upon the biblical episode when Moses caused water to spring from a rock (Numbers 20:10–12). Paul said: ‘That rock was Christ.’ Christ, in turn, is the figure of the incarnation. Great mysteries of the faith could only be figurable.

30 See above, n. 7–9. Seal metaphors and the related theme of the imprinted image as an agent of contact and presence remained strong motifs in mystical literature throughout the later Middle Ages, see Bynum 1988; Hamburger 2002, chapters 4 and 7; and Park 1998. On St Francis’ stigmata, see Davidson 1998 and Ruth Wolff’s contribution in this volume. On the currency of the vocabulary of seals and sealing in natural philosophy from the early 13th century onward see: Daston 1998 and Weill-Parot 2002.

31 Above, n. 15.

32 See above, n. 7–9. Seal metaphors and the related theme of the imprinted image as an agent of contact and presence remained strong motifs in mystical literature throughout the later Middle Ages, see Bynum 1988; Hamburger 2002, chapters 4 and 7; and Park 1998. On St Francis’ stigmata, see Davidson 1998 and Ruth Wolff’s contribution in this volume. On the currency of the vocabulary of seals and sealing in natural philosophy from the early 13th century onward see: Daston 1998 and Weill-Parot 2002.

33 Above, n. 15.

34 Richard Fitz Nigel, Dialogus, 62, where both English and Latin versions are given.


36 Symeon of Durham, Libellus, 267.

37 Symeon of Durham, Libellus, 268–9; the event took place only in the Continuation, which was written in the second half of the 12th century.

38 See Innocent III’s decreals on seal forgery, inserted within Gregory IX’s Decretals. X. 6, 20, 4–5 Corpus iuris canonici, cols 346–49, 818–20. The most comprehensive work on seals in canon law to date is by Welber 1984, 93–228.

39 See n. 19 above for the semantic triangle created in the conceptual vocabulary of the central Middle Ages between author, authority,
and authenticity. See n. 44 below for the decretal Cum Dilectis (1207) in which an attempt is made to define a seal’s authority.

39 ‘Scripta vero authentica, si testes inscripti decesserint, nisi per manum [idest per notarium] publicam facta fuerint, ita quod appareant publica, aut authenticum sigillum habuerint, per quod possint probari, non videtur nobis aliter significat esse’ (X. 2,22,2, Corpus juris canonici, col. 344).

40 ‘Sed ipsum Henrici privilegium ad fidem instruendam non videbatur sufficiere, quia nec erat publica manu confectum, nec sigillum habebat authenticum, eo, quod erat ex media fere parte consumptum, nec plus de nomine proprio, nisi ultima medietas, videlicet “icus”, nec de ceteris literis, nisi haec adjectio: “Dei gratia apparebat”, ita, quod ex literis ipsis non magis poterat comprobari fuisse sigillum Henrici, quam Lodovoci...’ (X. 2,22,6, Corpus juris canonici, col. 348).


43 Bourdieu (1991, 111) calls this ‘social magic,’ but, as I wish to demonstrate here, this particular ‘magic’ was not so successful in the Middle Ages.

44 X. 2,22,9, Corpus juris canonici, col. 350. See n. 19 and 38.

45 Cited in Welber 1984, 144. The author of the glossa ordinaria on Gregory IX’s Decretals is Bernardus de Botone Parmiensis, or Bernard of Parme (d. 1263).

46 Cited in Welber 1984, 205; see also von Mure 1968.

47 I am here very much in agreement with Bourdieu 1991, 113.

48 Bonnau 1997, 246–8. The dichotomy expressed in this practice between the public and the private person, and between the official mark and the personal seal, deserves further study. It highlights the ways in which a private seal, in the Middle Ages, could be in-authentic yet genuine and well known. In any case, a seal remained a preferred mode for expressing personal commitment throughout the Middle Ages.

49 The literature on the Peasants Revolt is abundant. Relevant here for its attention to the attitudes of the rebellious toward seals and documents is the study by Justice 1994.

50 ‘Ipsi [villani] autem in his omnibus non tanquam subditii, sed velut domini, in camera Abbatis, in Capella, in penticio, pro libito deambulabat, et interfuerunt scripturae, ipsi dictantes hoc quod scribendum fuerat, et sigillationi curiosius intendentes; nam pro
Seals were, and perhaps still are, peculiarly personal and intimate objects. They could say much about their owner, not least repeating his or her name and formal description in the seal legend. As King of England and Duke of Normandy, William I adopted a striking new image for his Great Seal. On the reverse he repeated the Christ-like image of a king in majesty as used by his Saxon predecessor, but on the obverse, he adopted another design – a portrait of himself as a fully armed and mounted knight: the military leader and feudal suzerain ready for battle and prepared to defend his lands. Magnates such as Stephen, Count of Aumale, quickly followed, adopting the same equestrian design on their single-sided seals, and, in turn, they were followed early in the next century by men of baronial and knightly rank.1

By the mid-12th century even so-called milituli or ‘middling knights’ were using seals of a similar nature.2 Initially these equestrian figures were shown carrying a spear topped with a small flag, a pennant or ‘gonfanon’, as a sign of military leadership.3 From the 1120s the lance and flag started to give way to the sword as men of lesser status began to use seals (Fig. 1).4 Occasionally a double-sided equestrian seal would depict its owner on one side with gonfanon and on the other with sword. Examples include Walera, as Count of Meulan on one side with sword, and as Earl of Worcester on the other with sword. The earliest known may be that of Reginald II, Count of St Walery, who from possibly 1144 used a small counterseal bearing a lion passant reguardant on the back of his equestrian seal. He later became Henry II’s justiciar for Normandy, when the family almost certainly bore two lions passant as its arms.5 In 1162 Anselm Campdaveine, Count of St Pol, included a wheatsheaf in the design of his counterseal. This backed on to his armorial

knights’ new alter ego – a symbolic personification of the seal’s owner that was to stand in the place of his own portrait. Why and when did this change happen?

Heraldry had appeared in northwest France in the late 1120s and 1130s. Before this period, and overlapping with it, what now might be termed proto-heraldic devices – emblems used consistently by a family through several generations – had been regularly used on coins and seals for several decades, but not, as far as we know, on shields or banners. Examples include the wheatsheaf device of the Campdaveines (literally field of oats), who were Counts of St Pol, and the pike or luce of the Lucys; both were later incorporated into the family arms. Although at first confined only to a few, heraldry, like seal ownership, moved swiftly down the social ladder during the course of the 12th century.6

It also became clear early on that heraldry could act as a medium not only to identify the owner of a particular shield but also to identify him with a family or clan. Arms also spoke of an increasingly potent concept among the nobility and knighthood – that of lineage and veneration of one’s ancestors. By inheriting and displaying his father’s arms, a noble or knight openly proclaimed that not only had he come into his rightful inheritance (usually a hereditary fief or honour) but also, through the medium of blood, had taken on the physical and moral qualities of his antecessores, his forefathers.7 By slightly altering or ‘differencing’ a coat of arms collateral members of the same family could proclaim to the outside world that they shared the same blood – a not insignificant factor for those seeking advancement in this world and who often relied on their kin-group to provide it. One of the best ways for those wishing to display their new arms was on that personal possession, the seal. Thus, from the 1120s and 30s, we find arms displayed on the shields, gonfanons, surcoats, and saddle cloths depicted on the equestrian seals of men from certain comital houses such as the Clareys, Earls of Hertford and Pembroke.

From at least the 1150s, if not earlier, men started to impress the back of their equestrian seals with a second smaller seal to provide a greater degree of personal authentication. Many of the first ‘counterseals’ were antique intaglio gems depicting scenes from Classical life or mythology, but from the mid-12th century we witness an embryonic form of the later armorial seal when devices borrowed from the family arms, but not yet shown on a shield, were used to decorate these small seals. The earliest known may be that of Reginald II, Count of St Walery, who from possibly 1144 used a small counterseal bearing a lion passant reguardant on the back of his equestrian seal. He later became Henry II’s justiciar for Normandy, when the family almost certainly bore two lions passant as its arms.8 In 1162 Anselm Campdaveine, Count of St Pol, included a wheatsheaf in the design of his counterseal. This backed on to his armorial

Figure 1 Equestrian seal (77mm) of William de Roumare (mid-12th century). TNA DL 27/256
within a space of 10 to 20 years these devices stamped into the reverse of equestrian seals gave way to a new type of seal depicting much the same devices but this time portrayed on a shield – the armorial seal had been born, though not yet in its own right, but only as a counterseal. The first known example belongs to that most courtly and chivalric of European aristocratic figures, Philip d’Alsace, Count of Flanders. In 1170 he countersealed his magnificent equestrian seal with a simple shield depicting his arms of a single lion rampant. Both sides of Philip’s seal were used as models for the equestrian seal and armorial counterseal of Conan de Nesle, Count of Soissons, in 1178. In 1181 Bernard IV, Count of St Walery and son or brother of Reginald II, sealed likewise. He was kept as a hostage in the negotiations between Philip d’Alsace and Henry II. Bernard’s arms, two lions passant, were almost certainly based on those of the English king and are shown on the small secretum (1181) that backs his equestrian seal. Later examples of armorial counterseals backing equestrian seals include those of the crusaders, Robert, Earl of Leicester (c. 1195) (Figs 2 and 3), and Baldwin de Bethune, Count of Aumale (1200).

In the late 1190s a new phenomenon appears. In England, men of noticeably lesser rank start to use single-sided seals depicting a shield of arms alone, very similar in design to the counterseals and Privy Seals of their superiors. C.H. Hunter Blair brought a number of these together in his seminal work on armorials upon English seals published in 1943. Examples include the seals of Robert of Pinkney, Robert FitzMeldred and his brother, Gilbert Hansard, and John, son of Michael. These were men of local power and authority – probably mesne tenants and sub-vassals rather than grand feudatories, although Robert FitzMeldred did marry a Neville heiress. It may be that such men were reluctant to use large equestrian seals depicting themselves as trained and fully equipped mounted knights ready to do battle or enter tournay. The likelihood is that none had been on crusade or fought on active campaign. During the second half of the 12th century more and more knights were becoming involved in civilian affairs and undertaking various social obligations such as acting as justices or sheriffs. All this was far removed from the battlefield. The Dialogue of the Exchequer, written by 1179, distinguishes between those knights with horses and those without. Some may have chosen to commute their military service by paying scutage (shield money), or a fine (a fixed sum of money). By the early 13th century commutation was undertaken on such a large scale that the feudal levy of knights had ceased to become an effective force. This occurred at the very time that armorial seals were beginning to replace the equestrian variety.

Contemporaries clearly perceived differences within the ranks of those who considered themselves to be knights. Some were defined as more ‘law-worthy’, others were still middling knights (milituli), many were rustic knights (milites gregarii or rustici), and some, of course, remained the noble and courtly variety. Well might Nigel de Longchamps complain at the beginning of Richard’s reign: “there are many knights without skill and practice in arms, who for that reason are called “Holy Mary’s knight” by the others”. Even entry into the tournay – by far the most common occasion for knights to don armour and display their heraldry – now made a financial distinction between different grades of knights.

These perceptions of differences and the increasing number of those who rarely fought may well have found further expression in the armorial seal. A shield of arms still closely linked a man with his knightly rank, but it did not go so far as to depict him donned in full armour riding into battle or tournaments. Instead it highlighted his increasingly civilian role and status by reminding onlookers of his family and lineage and possibly also his feudal and tenurial alliances. Pinkney’s coat, for example, is possibly the earliest surviving English example of the heraldic system of marcelling, since it appears to depict two separate arms conjoined or ‘impaled’ on the one shield, presumably to denote a marriage, and thereby the joining together of two armigerous families. Maybe for these men such shields of arms spoke of their local social dominance and responsibilities. The knights who compounded for their military obligations found themselves fully occupied in the administrative work of their counties. For such knights who were laying aside their arms and armour and who (to quote A.L. Poole), ‘took to the life of country gentlemen’, armorial seals may have constituted a kind of re-branding exercise. Certainly for some the arts of local government were taking over from the arts of war. Whatever the case, as far as seals were concerned, coats of arms were beginning to speak louder than stylised portraits and the message they conveyed, for some at least, was clearer, more accurate, and more personal; the knight’s symbolic alter ego – his shield of arms – was taking over.

Those of comital and baronial rank were, not surprisingly, reluctant to discard their grand equestrian seals and all they stood for. However, as arms were invested with a new role as symbols of family pride and social importance and, as in the case of Pinkney, marshalling was able to represent important alliances, so even magnates started to take this new phenomenon of heraldry much more seriously. William de Forz I, Count of Aumale, was the first of comital rank known in England to adopt an armorial seal alone displaying no more than a shield of arms. He was a Poitevin of obscure birth, renowned for his military skill and a crusading companion of Richard I; he died in 1195.

Forz was probably exceptional for someone of his status in late 12th-century England, since, as already noted, it appears to
have been men of lower social status who first adopted the armorial seal in its own right. Nevertheless, about 1200, Ranulph de Blundeville, Earl of Chester, went one further by discarding his equestrian seal in favour of an armorial seal (Fig. 4). This was possibly the first time in England that the familiar equestrian figure of a mounted knight, which Earl Ranulph had used for at least 10 years and possibly since 1181, had been replaced by a shield of arms. The reason for his change of matrix may well have been the necessity to alter the seal legend to take into account the loss of his titles as Duke of Brittany and Earl of Richmond. Maybe he needed a very different looking seal to differentiate this new version from his previous equestrian seals.

The change from equestrian to armorial seal did not take place overnight and there was much indecision. After 1217 Ranulph, for example, having been created Earl of Lincoln, needed to change his seal again and this time he dropped his armorial lion seal and returned to an equestrian seal backed by an armorial counterseal (Figs 5 and 6). Gradually, however, the armorial seal on its own won through. One reason for its eventual success among high and low might lie in the fact that the family coat of arms was now simply too significant to be relegated to the back of the seal or lost in an equestrian design. Richard de Warenne or FitzRoy, the illegitimate son of King John, was clearly making a deliberate visual statement by adopting an armorial seal depicting the two lions coat used by his father before he became king – this important pictorial distinction was too meaningful to be placed anywhere else on the seal.

Another reason might lie in the fact that, as two or more separate coats were marshalled together to denote marriage or inheritance, so it became easier to depict such a composite coat on a single shield filling the entire face of the seal. This would have been preferable to incorporating it into a miniature equestrian portrait in which the shield was often shown only in profile. Alternatively, the change from equestrian to armorial seal may have been due to the introduction of the face guard and barrel helm on seals in the 1180s and 90s. This completely obscured the face of the seal owner and thus rendered him even more anonymous than his already stereotyped equestrian image. In short, heraldic arms on a shield alone could send out several important messages denied to the equestrian image.

Another reason for the adoption of an armorial design rather than an equestrian portrait has been suggested by Brigitte Bedos-Rezak. She has shown that from 1200 in France younger sons and brothers of great feudatories deliberately adopted armorial seals to distinguish their owners from the heads of their families using equestrian seals, although this was by no means a rigid distinction. Perhaps the same may have been true in England. The Vavasour family, for example, held lands in Yorkshire from the time of Domesday Book. In the mid-12th century the fee was held by William le Vavasour, a justice of the king; he died sometime shortly before 29 June 1191. Not surprisingly for a man of his rank, he used a single-sided equestrian seal. He had two sons, Robert, born about 1160, and Mauger, who died in 1219. Robert, the elder son and heir, used an equestrian seal before his death in about 1225 (Fig. 7). His younger brother Mauger, on the other hand, used an armorial seal countersealed with a yet smaller armorial seal (Fig. 8). Here then the younger brother may well have deliberately avoided an equestrian design to distinguish his seal from that of his brother and father. In turn Mauger’s own son and heir, Robert le Vavasour, Sheriff of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire in 1237 and 1247, like many heads of baronial and knightly families by this time, likewise opted not for an equestrian seal but for the more fashionable armorial seal. In 1240 Hugh de Polstead used an armorial seal, presumably to distinguish it from the equestrian seal of his namesake and father, who was a knight. Much more research needs to be done on this sigillographic practice. What we do know is that by the mid-13th century the process of the armorial seal replacing the equestrian was well developed not only for cadet lines but also for the lords themselves. Certainly the equestrian seal displaying a gonfanon or banner disappears about this date.
It is possible that the changing roles and civil responsibilities of the knight in the last half of the 12th and first half of the 13th centuries were reflected in their growing adoption of the armorial seal over the more warlike equestrian variety. Moreover, personal arms depicted on a shield that covered the entire face of the seal could often say much more than a stylised military portrait and could also help to distinguish cadet lines and father and son. Magnates, reluctant to give up their warrior image, initially chose to use both types of seal in tandem, countersealing their large equestrian seals with a smaller armorial seal. During the course of the 13th century many adopted double-sided seals with an equestrian obverse and an armorial reverse, the two-sides being of equal dimensions. By the end of the Middle Ages, however, the armorial seal had virtually extinguished the equestrian seal portrait of the knight just as it had the standing portrait of women on their seals. They were, therefore, used to replace his equestrian and majesty portraits on several departmental and deputed great seals. In 2000 it was discovered that the double-sided Great Seal of the United Kingdom, produced at the beginning of the present queen’s reign, needed replacing. Its obverse and reverse, like virtually every English Great Seal for almost a millennium, mirrored those of the Conqueror, namely the sovereign depicted on one side seated in majesty and on the other riding a horse. However, since Her Majesty now rarely rides in public and never in uniform, it was decided to replace her equestrian image with something else, something equally, if not more, symbolic of her status and authority — not surprisingly her equestrian portrait was replaced by a depiction of the Royal Arms.

Notes
1. For the seals of Edward the Confessor and William I see Bedos-Rezak 1993, IV:53–88; Bates 2004, 171–2; and Clanchy 1993, 310–12. The earliest English example is that of Count Stephen of Aumale (1090s) though there may be earlier examples (Crouch 1992, 242–3; English 1979, 16, pl. 2).
2. Searle 1980, 214. As Crouch (1992, 138–9) points out, the militulus mentioned in the chronicle, Gilbert de Baillieul, in fact answered for three knights’ service.
3. Wace (see Crouch 1992, 114–15) states that at Hastings (but referring to the practices of his own mid-12th century) the barons carried gonfanons and the knights had pennons. For banners also see Crouch 1992, 114–15.
5. Waleran seal (c. 1130): Marks and Payne 1978, 16, and Bony 2002, figs 40, 41; Geoffrey seal (c. 1170): ibid, figs 188 and 189. Cf the similar seal (1194) of Ranulf de Blundeville as Duke of Brittany and Earl of Richmond and Chester (Heslop 1991, 192 and pls IX–X).
6. For Classical influence on the equestrian figure see Bedos-Rezak 1993, VI, 6–7.
10. Ibid., 26; Bony 2002, 26, fig. 65.
13. Demay 1873, no. 300; Bony 2002, 48, fig. 199. Raoul, Count of Soissons also used an equestrian seal and armorial counterseal in 1183 (Demay 1873, no. 302 and Demay 1875–7, no. 33). For further continental examples see Bedos-Rezak 1993, VII, 23–41 (27).
15. Ellis 1978–81, P 295 and 296; Birch 1887–1900, no. 5674; Douet d’Arcq 1863–8, nos 10150 and 10161; Crouch 1986, 212; English 1979, fig. 6; Cockayne 1900–59, 1, 354 note c; Douet d’Arcq 1863–8, no. 932. For another late 12th-century seal and counterseal: William Count of Clermont, son of Dauphin, Count of Auvergne 1199 (Birch 1887–1900, no. 19413; Douet d’Arcq 1863–8, no. 383). For continental examples see Bony 2002, 62.
17. For what follows see Littledale and Hunter Blair 1921, 211–17. Robert used two versions of his armorial seal.
20. Poole 1946, 56.
21. Seal depicted in English 1979, pl. 5.
24. Hunter Blair 1943, pl. VI (m) where it is incorrectly dated c. 1195; Birch 1887–1900, no. 14270; T.D. Tremlett and London 1967, 130.
25. See for example, the seals of Renaud de Dammartin Count of Boulogne in 1187 and Robert II Count of Dreux in 1188 (Bony 2002, figs. 281 and 282).
26. Bedos-Rezak 1993, II, 721–36 (728). An early English version of this differentiation may be seen in about 1200 when Richard de Lyons used an equestrian seal whilst his son sealed with a boar running to the right; the animal was not shown on a shield but the difference between seal of father and son was clearly shown (Ellis 1978–81, P 499 and P 500).
30. Seal in Collc. Top. et Gen. 1840, vi, 129; Farrer 1914–65, vii, 236 for Robert. We do not have the seal of his younger brother William (Baildon 1912–27, 1, 550). Bony (2002, 83–4) notes that it was about 1230 that the heraldic seal replaced the equestrian, not only for cadet branches but also for heads of families.
31. Ellis 1978–81, P 635 (where incorrectly dated to temp. Edward I) and P 634.
34. Ailes 2000, 218–34.
This survey will consider the representation of power that lies at the heart of the theme of this publication. It will concentrate on English kings, and will consider how their administrative power was represented through the use of heraldry, the portrayal of the king, and finally the use of inscriptions.

**The royal Great Seals and the appearance of the royal arms**

The first appearance of the equestrian figure in England is on the seal of William I. His Great Seal has an equestrian figure on the front with a legend referring to him as the ruler of Normandy, while on the back, as King of England, the King is shown crowned and seated in majesty. This double seal was made from wax impressed between two matrices of equal size. In form, William was copying the Great Seal of Edward the Confessor, which shows the seated ruler on each side with two different inscriptions.¹

Edward the Confessor’s double seal showing the seated ruler may have been derived from the Ottonian emperors of Germany, who used this motif from the late 10th century, or the kings of France who used it from 1031. The double seal, with the seated monarch on one side and an equestrian figure on the other, continues in use until the first Great Seal of our present Queen. However, now the equestrian side has been replaced by heraldry. In the early 13th century the equestrian seal was popular for knights, some of whom used it with a smaller counter seal, often armorial, and some greater barons also used a seal with the equestrian figure on the front and their shield of arms on the back. Notable examples are William of Warenne’s seal of 1202 and that of Gilbert of Clare of 1218.²

The double seal was used for the ‘deputed’ royal administrative seals but the royal arms appear on the reverse. The earliest surviving example of a ‘deputed’ seal for the king’s courts is that for the Exchequer of Edward I (Fig. 1). The style of the equestrian figure suggests that the matrix was originally engraved for Henry III, possibly at the time of Exchequer reforms of Peter de Rivaux of the 1230s. In the reign of Henry III the shield had replaced the majesty portrait on Henry’s double-sided seal for Gascony. Here the use of the double-sided seal with the arms on one side indicated overlordship.³ The use of arms on the reverse of a seal also occurs in the reign of Henry III on the remarkable golden bulla of Edmund Crouchback, Henry’s brother, which shows Edmund in majesty, on the front as King of Sicily (which he was offered after the deposition of the Emperor Frederick II in 1245) and the royal arms (undifferenced) on the back (Figs 2 and 3). It is most likely to have been made in England in the 1250s.⁴ Such heraldic display on seals may be French in origin.⁵ The French great seals from Philippe Auguste (1180–1223) to Louis IX (1226–70) showed the king in majesty with a smaller counterseal of fleur-de-lis. Louis IX provided a seal for the regents in France when he departed on the last crusade in 1270. The front has a crown with three fleurs-de-lis, and the smaller is a shield of many fleurs-de-lis – the ancient royal arms of France. Therefore the sceau de régence is copying the Great Seal in form but not in image.⁶ The royal arms were also used in France for provincial administrative seals, such as the Seneschal of the Saintonge of 1273, where the form, although not the image, copies the Great Seal of the kings of France.⁷ The royal arms were also used by Edward I on his seal for Scotland. Scottish kings’ seals, from Alexander I (1107–24), are two-sided, with the seated king on the front and the equestrian king on the back, similar to the English Great Seal. When Edward ruled Scotland from 1296 to 1307, his seal for Scotland showed the King enthroned, and the arms of England on the back (Figs 4, 5). This emphasised that Scotland was not a separate kingdom, but a deputed department of English government.⁸

**Figures 2 and 3** Golden bulla, reverse and obverse. Photo John Cherry

**Figures 4 and 5** Edward I for Scotland, obverse and reverse (diam. 87mm). Society of Antiquaries of London impression. Photo John Cherry

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*Figures 1, 4, and 5* Edward I, Exchequer, obverse and reverse; Edward I for Scotland, obverse and reverse. Society of Antiquaries of London impression. Photo John Cherry

**Figure 1** Edward I Exchequer, obverse and reverse (diam. 75mm). Society of Antiquaries of London impression. Photo John Cherry

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1. See John Cherry, *Heads, Arms and Badges: Royal Representation on Seals*.
2. See John Cherry, *Heads, Arms and Badges: Royal Representation on Seals*.
3. See John Cherry, *Heads, Arms and Badges: Royal Representation on Seals*.
4. See John Cherry, *Heads, Arms and Badges: Royal Representation on Seals*.
5. See John Cherry, *Heads, Arms and Badges: Royal Representation on Seals*.
6. See John Cherry, *Heads, Arms and Badges: Royal Representation on Seals*.
7. See John Cherry, *Heads, Arms and Badges: Royal Representation on Seals*.
8. See John Cherry, *Heads, Arms and Badges: Royal Representation on Seals*.
9. See John Cherry, *Heads, Arms and Badges: Royal Representation on Seals*.
The Customs seals

Although the Customs seals were instituted in 1275, most examples date from after 1302.

The Customs seal for York has, on the front (Fig. 6), the royal arms in a shield with the inscription ‘Seal of Edward, King of England, for York’ and on the back the same arms, without shield, and the inscription ‘Seal of the ancient and new custom’. This seal, since it refers to both the ancient and new customs, probably dates from after 1303. The double-sided form (with two equal sides) reflects the Great Seal, but neither the seated nor equestrian figure of the king is present. Customs seals rely purely on heraldry. In this they may have been copying the use of arms by barons in the late 12th century, or, more likely, adapting earlier use of the royal arms. The royal arms, (gules three lions passant gardant or) first appear in the reign of Richard I.

A sub-group of Customs seals for the delivery of wool and hides have the same armorial arrangement as the double-sided seal for York mentioned above. All are of bronze, in two pieces for use in a press. This group consists of six seals for Carmarthen (Fig. 7), Kings Lynn, Lincoln, Norwich, Shoreham and Winchester. Although uniform in design, three towns are differentiated by the use of different ‘supporters’ beside the main shield. Lincoln has a hawk (Fig. 8), Norwich has an oak tree above a three-towered castle (Fig. 9), and Winchester a wyvern. The later arms of Norwich certainly included a castle, but the reasons behind the use of the oak tree with Norwich, the hawk with Lincoln and the wyvern with Winchester are not clear.

The royal arms were widely used in the reign of Henry III. They were painted on shutters at the Tower of London in the 1240s. The use of shields to decorate the nave of Westminster Abbey may have been derived from the use of the French royal arms in a similar decorative scheme by Louis IX. When Henry III visited Paris in 1254, he dined with Louis IX in the great hall of the Old Temple, in which, according to Matthew Paris, were hung up as many shields as the wall could hold. Continued use of arms is shown by the silver seal for the port of London (Fig. 11), curiously placed on a lozenge-shaped shield. Usually assigned to the reign of Edward I, there are four swords, presumably referring to the sword of St Paul on the city arms. Although the Customs seals were initially double seals for use in a press, later they were single seals. This change is illustrated by Carmarthen (Fig. 10), among other places, in the early 14th century. A simple progression from double to single seals does not appear to fit with the seal matrix in the Victoria and Albert Museum which, if genuine, may be half of a double Customs seal dating (from the heraldry) to the reign of Edward III.

The King’s head

The seals for the recognition of debts or Statute Merchant seals show the bust of the King rather than heraldry. They started two years earlier than the Customs seals, with the Ordinances of Acton Burnell in 1283. These provided that a creditor or debtor could appear before the mayors of London, York, or Bristol to acknowledge a debt and have it enrolled. The creditor was given the debtor’s bond which bore a special royal seal (kept by the mayor for this sole purpose) as well as the debtor’s seal. The Statute of Merchants of 1285 produced a revised scheme, in which instead of the three registries of Acton Burnell, provided for the King to appoint a number of towns. There was also a change in the sealing arrangements. The king’s seal was henceforth to be of two pieces, one kept by the mayor and the other by the clerk. (It is thought that there had been some sort of scandal.)

Edward I is represented on the seals of seven towns, which received seals during his reign. The Ordinances of Edward II in 1311 attempted to confine the administration of the Statute...
Merchant to 12 towns. The sealing of the Statute Merchant documents on both sides of the wax differed from the double seals of the Customs, where the two matrices were of equal size. Here the King’s seal was the larger, and the clerk’s seal acted as a smaller counter seal. The iconography is very uniform. The head and shoulders of the King are shown, usually, but not always, flanked by castles. The seal for York (Fig. 12) is of the standard type, though this matrix has the unusual feature that one of the castles could be removed and replaced, presumably with another design, though with what is uncertain.

The use of the head as a symbol may recall the seated king in majesty. The use of the head alone goes back to the Merovingians, who preferred a frontal pose, and to the Carolingians who preferred a profile deriving from the use of the portrait on Greek and Roman coins. The iconography of the head in the Middle Ages needs further work. There are clearly different strands: the use of the bust as on head reliquaries such as St Thomas; the use of the classically derived profile bust as on the coins of Frederick II; the use of the profile head on cameos. Here we have a full-frontal bust. The second point is the variation within the design. The bust of the king is very uniform. Usually there are two castles, one at each side, and the lion on the front of the bust. It has been said that the triple tower is derived from the arms of Castile or of Eleanor of Castile, but there is no reason why the Queen’s arms should appear here. The seal for Gloucester (Fig. 13) varies the theme by replacing the castles by horseshoes and nails, presumably referring to the iron-working of the Forest of Dean. Southampton is unique in that it reverses the lion and castles.

Interesting information is given about the supply of the Statute Merchant seal to a fair in 1287, where two were elected men of London to whom, in full court, was delivered one of the two seals sent to the Keepers of the fair enclosed under the seal of the Lord the King and opened in the presence of the merchants; and the other seal was delivered to one of the Keepers of the fair. The seal was sent in a box. This suggests that both the king’s seal and the clerk’s seal were produced in London, despatched to the place of use and received and initiated with some ceremony.

There is greater local reference in later seals, where Statute Merchant status was granted in the reign of Edward III, such as to Salisbury, with the spire, and Hull, with a large single-masted ship. Those without castles on each side of the King’s head but with other symbols include Coventry (rose), Gloucester (horseshoes) and Preston (crescent and star). Towns added later included Wigan, which received a charter in 1350. The bust in the Wigan seal is bearded and presumably represents Edward III. However in 1351 when the Salisbury seal was granted, the older pattern with the beardless head was used. The Statute Merchant type occurs on the seal of the Receipt of the Exchequer (Fig. 14), dating from the second half of the 14th century, if not later. There must have been earlier seals of the receipt, and the similarity of image to the Statute Merchant presumably derives from their both being related to debts. Keys also occur on the seal of the Great Wardrobe of 1313 (Fig. 15). The King’s head appears on the subsidy for cloth seals. The comparison between the subsidy seal (for an unspecified area) (Fig. 16), and the seal for Southampton, (Fig. 17), with a crowned head and on each side of the head a feather with a label across it, is instructive. The first is closer to the coin types of the long cross pennies of Edward I started in 1279, and may have been engraved by a goldsmith who was working for the mint in London. A recent find of a similar matrix at Edwinstowe (Nottinghamshire), may belong to the same group. The Southampton seal is cruder in execution and design. It may have been produced locally, or, if it was engraved in London, indicates that the goldsmiths were capable of less good work.
Aulnagers were officials who marked the measure and quality of cloth. Seals exist both for the office of the Aulnager and for the Subsidy on cloth. Apart from the King’s head, the Aulnage and Subsidy seals show a much greater variety of imagery. They use the crown and fleur-de-lis, lion’s head, and heraldry alone. The reason for this variety (chronological or local) is not clear. It may be that the King’s head alone is the earliest and the later combinations of the leopard’s head and the fleur-de-lis date to the reign of Edward III. The use of the fleur-de-lis relates to post-1340 quartering of the royal arms, well shown on the London wool Subsidy seal, which has the royal arms with France ancient, above which is a head and sword (St Paul). This must date from 1340–1405, although it is a unique survival. The royal arms appears later in the Subsidy series with the Salisbury seal for the Subsidy (Fig. 18), which belongs to a reorganisation of the late 15th century. The rose and sun on each side of the royal arms indicate a date between 1461 and 1485.

The Crown
The crown was used on St Louis’s seal (see above). The crown was a royal badge of Edward III, and continued to be used as a badge by Richard II. Seals for the Subsidy, indicating the area, exist for Kent, which has a crown over a fleur-de-lis, and Lincolnshire with a crown alone. Subsidy seals were manufactured by Peter de Hiltoft, ‘a king’s engraver residing within the Tower of London’ who was paid £5 ‘for the workmanship and engraving of 16 brass seals, with crowns and letters engraved around them for the sealing of cloth sold, deposited in the county of Essex’, and other seals. Subsidy seals therefore have an interesting variety of images from the king’s head, to the crown, to the royal arms.

Lion’s head with fleur-de-lis
The lion’s head with the fleur-de-lis, placed either beneath or at the side forms another type, in the series of subsidy seals. For the Aulnager, there is a seal for Dorset, with a lion’s head. The seals for Winchester, and Kent, showing a lion’s head with a fleur-de-lis beneath, repeat this. The same combination occurs on the Staple seal for Southampton, as well as the seal of the Mayor of the Staple for Westminster for the Statute of Merchants. Caroline Shenton has analysed Edward’s III use of leopard imagery, and his possession of actual leopards. By 1340 leopards were part of the Great Seal and in 1344 a newly minted coin was referred to as the leopard. Adrian Ailes has shown that Edward III used the French lilies with great enthusiasm in the 1340s on both coins and documents.

Staple seals
The Staple seals have considerable variety. The seven Staple towns were established by the Act of 1353, which ordered that the seal of the Mayor be affixed to each sack and sarpler of wool coming to the Staple. The seals for the office of the Staple of Southampton and the earliest seal for the Mayor of the Wool Staple at Westminster both have lion’s heads with fleur-de-lis around. While the seal of the Mayor of the Bristol Staple (leopard’s head with fleurs-de-lis) reflects those of Southampton and Westminster, other staples and their mayors show different images. The Ipswich Staple had two different seals, one with the lamb in a boat and the other with lion with an arrow through its neck, while the later seal of the Office of the Mayor of the Westminster Staple (Fig. 19), which dates to 1393, has crossed keys with wool sack, a characteristic feature of the Staple seals. The seal of the Staple of Lincoln shows a combination of lions affronted over a fleur-de-lis and a wool sack underneath.

Inscriptions
Inscriptions indicating their area rather than heraldic images distinguish the series of seals for Labourer’s Passes, which were for the sealing of passes to enable travelling workers to show that they were not vagrants. Their design is indicated by the Statute of Cambridge of September 1388. ‘Around the said seal there shall be written the name of the County and across the said seal the name of the Hundred, rape, wapentake, city or borough.’ Only 15 (with Norwich) seal matrices of this group exist, out of many hundreds, rapes, wapentakes, cities and boroughs.

Fourteen keep to the formula set out by the Act. These have the inscription alone. The standard of engraving varies. The best have the crown above the inscription. There are four of this type (South Erpyngham, Norfolk; Wangford, Suffolk (Fig. 20); South Greenhoe, Norfolk; Lothingland, Suffolk). One
For William’s seal see Bishop and Chaplais 1957, xix–xxiii, pls xiv, in 1377 adopted the legend in two lines ‘Le treizième du vin de Rouen’. Delay occurred in carrying out the intentions of the Statute. A writ was sent to the sheriff of Wiltshire on 10 March 1391 to tell him to provide the appropriate seals. This indicates that while the design was centrally determined, and indeed specified by an Act of Parliament, the actual provision of the matrices was the responsibility of the local sheriff.

**Conclusion**

Whatever may have been their origin, the design of the seal for Labourers Passes was worked out before the Act was passed. It was the responsibility of the sheriff to provide the seals. This contrasts with the Customs and Statute Merchant seals earlier, where it is doubtful if any design was laid down in an Act, and the seals were provided centrally, probably by engravers working for the Mint.

The form of the Customs seals, using the double seal in a press, follows the development of the deputed royal seals such as that for the Exchequer and stems from the Great Seal. The double seal was found to be unsatisfactory and later administrative seals were single seals, while the double seal continued in use for major courts such as the Exchequer, Kings Bench, Common Pleas, and others.

The 1280s were a major period of administrative and legal reform. It may be that Robert Burnell, Chancellor and Bishop of Bath and Wells, had some influence in the new Customs and Statute Merchant seals. As for the images, the representation of the King by the royal arms was the flavour of the late 13th century. While the Great Seal continued to present the King seated in judgement and as an equestrian leader, these images were avoided for lesser seals. The Statute Merchant seals are very uniform. An attempt to give a local flavour to both series and how this happened in some cases, and not others, is unclear. The reign of Edward III saw a much greater diversity of imagery. The subsidy and Staple seals show a considerable variety – the crown, fleur-de-lis, and the lion’s head. However, the 16 seals for Essex were all provided centrally from London, showing that central provision still applied, at least in counties nearest to London. The seals for Labourers’ Passes with their repetitive form and inscriptions, are the forerunners of dull drapery on the mounted figure compared with Wyon 1887, pl. VII, no. 444. For the Gascon seal of Henry III, see Jenkinson 1936, pl. lxxix and pl. lxxxix (1, 2). For Gascony see also Vale 1970, 70–1, 107–8. Beaufort 1991, 203 provides an excellent survey of the origin and use of the French royal arms.

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**Notes**

1 In the preparation of this paper I am grateful to Adrian Ailes of The National Archives for help and advice. His forthcoming paper in Harlaxton Medieval Studies for 2006, provides another view of the same subject.

2 For William’s seal see Bishop and Chaplais 1957, xix–xxiii, pls xiv, xxiv, xxx, xxxiv, xxxv, xxxvi, xxvii, xxxi. For the seated king see Bedos-Rezak 1993, 53–88. The original article was published in Rosenthal (ed.) 1986.

3 BM Seals, nos 42524 and 5834.

4 For the Exchequer seal see Jenkinson 1936, 293–340. Note the
By the end of Monday 24 June 1314, the English army of Edward II had been annihilated by the forces of King Robert the Bruce of Scotland at the Battle of Bannockburn. Among the many crushing blows suffered by the English was one small but significant loss. Edward II's Privy Seal was captured, along with the clerks responsible for it, and a considerable number of records and books relating to the royal administration.1 On 27 June 1314, Edward II addressed letters close to the English sheriffs, warning them not to execute any orders under his captured Privy Seal. These letters, with others sent out during the following month, were all sealed and authenticated with the Privy Seal of Edward’s French wife, Queen Isabella.2

Sealing with another’s seal in the Middle Ages was by no means unknown, even for kings. In 1335 and 1336, Edward III issued letters under the seal of William de Montagu (created Earl of Salisbury in 1337), because, as the King explained on the second occasion, he did not have his seal with him.3 However, sealing royal administrative documents with the Queen’s seal was very unusual indeed. The fact that this was done in June and July 1314 demonstrates the authority attributed to the queen’s seal at this military and political crisis.

Relatively little work has as yet been undertaken on the subject of women’s seals in England in the Middle Ages: indeed, women’s seals have warranted only brief mentions in textbooks on sigillography.4 England still lacks the equivalent of a corpus of work such as that of Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, whose important research on social and quantitative sigillography in France has added so much to our knowledge of the subject.5 One of the main reasons for the lack of scholarly research on women’s seals in England is the fact that seals of all women, royal, aristocratic and non-noble, were far less common than those of men, and those seals which existed were less frequently used. With certain notable exceptions, women had far less power and owned less land than men and therefore had less reason to use seals. A recent study on Queen Eleanor of Castile (1241–90), the first wife of King Henry I, identifies 44 ‘surviving acts’ of Eleanor, but fewer than 10 of these are likely to have been sealed with the Queen’s seal.6 These are tiny numbers compared to surviving examples of documents authenticated with her husband’s seals. Mary de St Pol, Countess of Pembroke (c. 1304–77), founder of Denny Abbey and Pembroke College, Cambridge, created many records in her own lifetime: the early muniments of Pembroke College were even kept ‘en la garde madame’, but very few of these original records are now extant.7 However, in spite of the relatively small numbers of surviving examples of women’s seals, their importance as indicators of wealth, power and authority as well as their sociocultural significance is underlined in recent important studies on the Anglo-Norman aristocracy and on women’s seals in The National Archives.8 This short paper will study some aspects of the seals of secular royal and noble women in medieval England: important and influential though these could be, there is no space here to investigate such women who became members of religious communities.

The earliest surviving seals of women in post-conquest England date from the 12th century and are almost all in the shape of a pointed oval known as a ‘vesica’. The earliest example known is the seal of Queen Matilda (d. 1118), the first wife of King Henry I. Her seal (Fig. 1) on an undated grant of the church of Carham (Northumberland) to the monks of Durham, shows her standing, crowned, sceptre in her right hand and orb in her left.9 The design of Matilda’s seal is similar to that of Henry I’s sister, Cecilia, Abbess of Gaen, and both may be based on a now lost common prototype, possibly the seal of William the Conqueror’s wife, Matilda of Flanders (d. 1083), the mother of both Cecilia and of Henry I. The legend of Matilda of Scotland’s seal is: sigillum mathildis secundae dei gracia reginae anglie. The reference to her as ‘Matilda the second’ may well have been devised to distinguish her from her namesake and mother-in-law. The ‘vesica’ (pointed oval or ogival) shape was not only used for women’s seals, but for those of bishops, corporate ecclesiastical bodies including priories, and by some laymen, including merchants. Corporate bodies and laymen also used round seals; however, for women in the 12th and 13th centuries, round seals are relatively rare. Susan Johns’ survey of the surviving seals of 12th-century Anglo-Norman noblewomen revealed only 13% of the seals to be round: all the rest are vesica or oval in shape.10 It is argued that the vesica shape was used because it is much the best for displaying the standing figure, as women (and some senior clerics, including bishops) were usually portrayed: whether there may have been other reasons for the use of the vesica shape for women’s seals is not clear.
The employment of a round seal, such as that of Matilda the Empress, the only surviving legitimate child of Henry I, is exceptional (Fig. 2). This Matilda (1102–67), married as her first husband the future Emperor Henry V and as her second, Geoffrey, Count of Anjou, by whom she was the mother of King Henry II of England. Her seal has several unusual features: its round shape, the representation of Matilda, and the legend. Her seal shows Matilda both seated and crowned, holding a sceptre. An enthroned, crowned woman on seals after 1100 in England, as in France, almost invariably represented not an earthly sovereign, but the Virgin Mary. The image on Matilda’s seal is rare in the extreme in English usage, although wives of later Holy Roman Emperors employed round seals. The legend of Matilda’s seal reads: + MATILDIS DEI GRATIA ROMANORUM REGINA, a title she used until the end of her life. It does not reproduce Matilda’s style and title, as written on surviving documents which postdate the death of the Emperor Henry V in 1125, but are authenticated by her seal. Her style and title on all save two of her surviving Anglo-Norman charters are ‘Matildis imperatrix regis Henrici filia’ with the addition, after 7 or 8 April 1141, of the words ‘et Anglorum Domina’.

Matilda is portrayed on her seal crowned and holding a sceptre. The use of a sceptre to denote majesty – both of Mary in heaven and rulers on earth – was common in medieval art. In the 13th and 14th centuries, queens consort in England were frequently portrayed standing and holding a sceptre, as in the Great Seals of Eleanor of Castile, first wife of Edward I and of Margaret of France (1279–1318), Edward’s second wife (Fig. 3). The sceptre was frequently represented as ending in leaves or a stylised fleur-de-lis. It has been convincingly argued that the flowering rod emphasises the queen’s role as intercessor to the king, petitioning him to exercise the royal prerogatives of mercy, grace and generosity. Richard of St Laurence, wrote that the Virgin, who is often shown holding a floriated sceptre or rod, *is herself* the rod, mediating between humanity at the base and her Son, the flower at the top. There is no doubt that successive queens did act as intercessors for wrongdoers or petitioners to secure for them royal clemency and grace. On her coronation day in 1236, Eleanor of Provence obtained a grant of pardon from Henry III for a man found guilty of the crime of trespass in a royal forest: similar successful intercessions were recorded at later coronations. By acting as mediator to restore peace between her husband, Edward II, and his cousin, the Earl of Lancaster in 1318, Isabella of France was realising the image of the queen as intercessor and peacemaker: by her actions in obtaining grace from Edward III for the six burghers of Calais in 1347, Philippa of Hainault was doing the same.

Apart from the sceptre in her right hand, the representation of the Queen on the obverse of the Great Seals of Eleanor of Castile, Margaret of France and Isabella of France (1295–1358), the consort of Edward II, shows the Queen holding cords on her breast instead of the sceptre. Francois Garnier has argued that this pose of hand on breast – hand on heart – denotes sincerity, acceptance and ‘intérieurité’, which may be translated as connection with the soul, as opposed to the body, to all of which one might add humility, a vital quality of true noble and royal nature. This representation of the queen consort – standing, full-length, crowned, sceptre in right hand and left hand holding cords on the breast – may have been based on French models, as the seal of Blanche of Castile (1188–1252), queen of Louis VIII and mother of Louis IX (St Louis), as well as the seals of later French queens, have this design. The pose itself was not limited to one artistic medium, or indeed to the 13th and 14th centuries. It may be found in sepulchral effigies, sculpture and manuscript illumination, including William Torel’s effigy of Eleanor of Castile in Westminster Abbey; one of the surviving statues of the ‘Eleanor crosses’, namely Alexander of Abingdon’s statue of Queen Eleanor on the Waltham Cross; on the initial letter of a charter of 18 November 1347 from Edward III to the Queen’s College, Oxford and on the initial letter of letters patent of 7 July 1413 to Colchester, portraying the Empress Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine: this last serving to emphasise the links between queens on earth and saints in heaven.

The impact that images and decoration on seals had on other artistic forms is well illustrated in the initial letter ‘E’ in a...
Queens and Powerful Women

Heraldry entered into the queen's seals in England towards the middle of the 13th century. It both mirrored and influenced fashion and art. At first, on royal seals, it was only found on the counterseal of the queen's Great Seal, as in the two Great Seals which Eleanor of Provence used as Queen of England, before and after her husband Henry III renounced his titles as Duke of Normandy and Count of Anjou in 1259. On counterseals of both Great Seals, a shield with three lions passant guardant (the arms of her husband Henry III) hangs by a strap from a three-branched tree. The design of the Great Seal of Eleanor's namesake and daughter-in-law, Eleanor of Castile, is very similar to that of her mother in law, but two castles and two lions (for Castile and Leon) are added to the field on the obverse (Figs 5,6). Indeed, the quartered arms of Eleanor of Castile may have popularised a new fashion in England, since quartering was rare before the reign of Edward I. However, significant although the introduction of heraldry into the seals of queens consort in England undoubtedly was, armorials designs had figured in the seals of English noblewomen since the mid-12th century. Both Rohese de Clare and her daughter, Alice de Gant, used seals featuring the chevrons of the family of Clare, while the earliest extant English seal depicting a standing noblewoman with her heraldic arms is that of Margaret de Quincy, Countess of Winchester (d. 1235). The design of some English noblewomen's seals parallel developments in the queens' seals, for in the 13th century Ela de Longespée (on a seal dating before 1242), Agnes de Vesci (on a seal dating to c. 1254) and Devorguilla de Balliol (on a seal dating to 1284) are all represented as standing figures on the obverse of their vesica-shaped seals, with shields of their arms on the reverse. Moreover, the shields of the arms of Agnes de Vesci and Devorguilla de Balliol are suspended from the branches of trees. The obverse of the Great Seal of Margaret of France (d. 1318), the second wife of Edward I, shows the Queen in a gown decorated with her husband's heraldic arms, standing between two shields of the arms of France and Brabant, while on the reverse, a shield with the arms of England hangs from a three-branched tree on a field powdered with fleurs-de-lis. The Queen's seal shows parallels with those of English aristocratic

Figure 4 Obverse of the Great Seal of Queen Philippa, wife of Edward III (80 x 50mm). Society of Antiquaries of London, seal cast case A1. case A1.

Figure 5 Obverse of the Great Seal of Queen Eleanor (of Castile), first wife of Edward I (8.0 x 5.6mm). The National Archives of the UK, TNA DL 27/196.

Figure 6 Counterseal of the Great Seal of Queen Eleanor (of Castile), first wife of Edward I (8.0 x 5.6mm). The National Archives of the UK, TNA DL 27/196.
ladies of the late 13th and early 14th centuries, whose seals depict them either with shields of arms, or wearing gowns richly decorated with family coats of arms.

Heraldry, which emphasised family links, marriage alliances and social aspirations and achievements began to play an increasingly dominant role in the seals of royalty and nobility alike during the 13th and 14th centuries. Noble ladies could have the heraldic arms in the seals laid out to illustrate their lineage and their marriage alliances. Eleanor Mauduit placed four shields grouped in a circle on her seal, to record her parentage and her three marriages, while Margaret, lady Badlesmere, by heraldic marshalling on her seal, recorded the arms of her father, mother and both her husbands. 

Shields of arms could be displayed singly, dimidiated, impaled, grouped or quartered. In addition, heraldic badges were added to women’s seals from the mid-13th century and supporters from the 15th century. Supporters were usually animals or birds, real or imaginary, which had a family or personal connection to the owner or user of the seal. Beatrice Ros favoured greyhounds, which, chained and collared, are shown supporting her seal. So important did heraldry become that, after the end of the 14th century, great ladies were not usually represented in their seals other than through their coats of arms, together with crowns, coronets and supporters to indicate their status and importance. Thus, the seals of Katherine of Valois, wife of Henry V and Elizabeth Woodville, wife of Edward IV, feature a shield of arms surmounted by a crown, with supporters on either side, and not a representation of a crowned female figure (Fig. 7). The addition of supporters to both sides of the shields of arms in the 15th century meant that, in order to accommodate this extra decoration, the Great Seals of queens and the seals of noblewomen changed from vesica shape to round.

Other than with royal, heraldic or other symbols of status, great ladies in the 12th and 13th centuries might be portrayed in their seals as indulging in the aristocratic pursuit of hawking. The poor could not afford hawks, and in any case were prevented by law from owning them, so hawking was reserved for the aristocracy. As Bedos-Rezak has observed, images of hawking were rarely found on men’s seals, but were important on women’s. The seal of Isabella of Angoulême, second wife of King John (d. 1246) shows the Queen crowned, holding a flower in her right hand and a hawk on her left hand (Fig. 8); the seal of one of Edward I’s daughters, Elizabeth (d. 1316) as Countess of Holland, represents her as carrying a hawk on her left hand (Fig. 9); the obverse of the seal of Ela de Longespée, Countess of Warwick (d. 1298) shows the countess bareheaded, hair unbound, holding a hawk on her left hand. Some saw the association of women with hawking as not entirely flattering. Bedos-Rezak quotes the 12th-century scholar, John of Salisbury, who claimed: ‘women were better at
hawking than men, because the worst people were always the most predatory’. However, the image of a great lady as master of the hunt could also be seen as symbolic of her power and authority. A recent study of the images of Mary of Burgundy (d. 1482), wife of Emperor Maximilian I, has argued that the falcon carried by her was a visual representation of her status and power and was, indeed, on their joint seal, a parallel symbol of sovereignty to her husband’s sword: ‘Mary’s primary position as ruler of Flanders is expressed by the hawk she holds on her gloved hand’. Very occasionally, a great lady might emphasise her status and importance by employing a classical gem in her seal. The use of classical gems seems to have been restricted to women of the highest birth and associations. Isabella, Countess of Gloucester and Essex (c. 1100–1217), first wife of King John, was a generous patron of Margam Abbey, which had been founded by her grandfather Robert, first Earl of Gloucester. Her seal has, on the obverse (which is vesica shaped), a representation of the Countess, standing, wearing a gown with long trailing sleeves, holding in her right hand a flower and in her left a hawk. The legend on the obverse is: + SIGILLVM ISABEL COMITISSAE GLOCESTRIE ET MORETVN. The counterseal is an oval classical gem, 25mm x 27mm, showing an imperial bust being crowned by two winged figures of Victory (Nike) with, below, an eagle between two standards. The legend on the counterseal is: + EGO SVM AQVILA CUSTOS DOMINE MEE (I am the eagle and guardian of my lady). Isabella, one of the daughters and co-heiresses of William, second Earl of Gloucester (d. 1183), seems to have inherited and adopted the antique seal he used as a counterseal, for it is identical to hers, the only difference being in the legend, which, when used by the Earl, reads: + AQVILA SVM ET CVSTOS COMITIS (I am the eagle and guardian of the Earl). Another example of the practice of the use of classical gems by great ladies is the seal used by Isabel Plantagenet, Countess of Bedford (1322–82) eldest daughter of Edward III (Fig. 10). The fine gem at the centre of the seal depicts a naked woman riding upon a sea horse, set within a richly tracered medieval border with four roundels (apparently with the Evangelists’ symbols, though these have now broken away).

It is worth commenting briefly on one type of woman’s seal which has not been found in England in the Middle Ages and this is the seal of the queen as regent. This was very different from the situation elsewhere in Europe. For example, in 1374, Charles V of France made arrangements for the government of France in the event of his death. He declared that his wife, Jeanne de Bourbon, was to have guardianship of their children until they reached the age of 14, because: ‘a mother loves her children more tenderly and has a gentler and more feeling heart to look after them carefully than any other person, however closely related to them’. Other French queens had even greater powers. Just before his death in 1226, Louis VIII granted the government of France and the tutelage of the young King, Louis IX (St Louis) to his Queen, Blanche of Castile. Her political influence during her son’s minority and her personal authority over him are apparent, not so much from administrative records and historical texts, but from the narrative sources and from manuscript illuminations, which show her advising Louis in matters of state and directing his education. Queen Isabeau of Bavaria, Queen of Charles VII of France, used a seal showing her as regent of France between 1417 and 1418. In contrast to this, no woman was regent in England between 1253–4, when Eleanor of Provence acted as regent (together with her brother-in-law Richard Earl of Cornwall) and 1513, when Catherine of Aragon was regent in the absence of Henry VIII. Neither Isabella of Angoulême nor Katharine de Valois was permitted to act as regent for her young son and Margaret of Anjou attempted in vain to claim the regency in 1454. It is not altogether clear why queens were never regents in medieval England, though one cause may rest with the English common law. Developments during the course of the 13th century resulted in married women being seen as possessing very few rights in marital property or money: such rights were almost entirely reserved to their husbands. It has been argued that, by about 1300, there were ‘no limitations to the husbands rights over his wife’s chattels… the common law has definitely decided that marriage makes the wife’s chattels absolutely the property of her husband’. As a married woman had no property, she could make no contracts on her own account and her ability for independent action was severely circumscribed. The standard view of the wife’s legal position under the common law in the 1290s was given voice by John de Mettingham, the Chief Justice of the Common Bench at Westminster, who stated: ‘I believe the husband has control and mastery at the table and in all his orders’ (‘jeo quid qe le baroun ad principalte e la mestrie en table e par tut ces comandemenz’), while in an even more extreme statement of the standard view, a lawyer in 1289 commented that a wife was barred from acting in a particular case because, as a married woman, her situation was ‘if she is in prison’ (‘Sy pur coe non claym en dreyn fusom barre a touz jours la femme serreyt barre e coe serreyt duresse desy com ele est en prison’). Widows had far more rights than married women (for which reason, many wealthy widows refused to remarry) but even so, these rights could be limited: for example, the guardianship of a widow’s children was customarily taken from her and bestowed on the feudal lord. The complex issues are a subject for more detailed study elsewhere, but the relatively low status of women according to the common law, added to the fact that almost all royal wives in England in the Middle Ages were foreign and so immediately suspect, makes it

Figure 10 Seal of Isabel, Countess of Bedford, daughter of Edward III (34 x 40mm). The National Archives of the UK, TNA E43/507

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unsurprising that widowed queens in England did not have much real power and some could suffer a very difficult widowhood.

The last aspect of seal design to be discussed in this article is the legend round the edge of the seals. For non-noble women, the legend usually contained their names with those of their father or husband (Isabel, daughter of Roger: Margery, wife of John), or sometimes gave reference to a trade, or rehearsed a personal motto. The same usage appears on the seals of their social superiors. In the 13th and 14th centuries, legends on the seals of noble ladies in England usually consisted of the word ‘sigillum’ followed by their names, and where appropriate, fathers’ names, husbands’ names and their titles. The 14th-century seal of Euphemia, daughter of Ralph Neville, Baron Neville, includes four shields of arms, recording the coats of arms of her father and her three husbands; while the legend states simply that this is the seal of Euphemia de Lucy (she retained the name of her first husband, Reginald de Lucy). Legends might also refer to the owner or user as the daughter of her father, as in the case of Avice, daughter of Herbert, or as the wife of her husband, as in the case of Alice, wife of William Grandorge. A few seals have mottoes, such as the late 13th-century seal of Matilda, widow of Sir William Hardreshull; the legend on her seal reads: *KI ME RECEIT SEIT BENEIT* (Who receives me shall be blessed).

Legends on the seals of royal ladies and the greatest noblewomen usually gave their titles, to underline their status and authority. Joanna (d. 1199), daughter of Henry II of England, became Queen of Sicily and, after she was widowed, she remarried and became Countess of Toulouse. On the obverse of her seal (Fig. 11), where she is shown seated on a folding chair, holding a decorated cross, her titles are given as Duchess of Barr, Countess of Toulouse and Marchioness of Provence; on the counterseal, where she is portrayed as a queen, standing, with a lily in her left hand, the legend refers to her as Queen Joanna, daughter of the late King Henry, King of the English (Fig. 12). There is no reference to her first husband, William II, King of Sicily, though it was through him that she was a queen, and she gave her husband her second husband the most unusual name of Wilhelmina, possibly in honour of her first husband. Noblewomen stressed their

nobility. The legend on the seal of Mary de St Pol, founder of Pembroke College Cambridge, daughter of Guy de Châtillon, Count of St Pol, widow of Aymer de Valence, Earl of Pembroke, lists her titles as Countess of Pembroke, lady of Wexford, of Montignac and of Bellac, while heraldry within the seal emphasises her Châtillon lineage and her Valence marriage. The legend on the seal of Joan (d. 1385) wife of Edward (‘the Black Prince’) the eldest son of Edward III, rehearses her titles as Princess of Aquitaine and Wales, Duchess of Cornwall, and Countess of Chester and Kent.

There seems to be a clear change, however, in the legends on the seals of some of the greatest ladies, notably those with royal connections, in the mid-15th century. At this stage, strong political arguments could be delivered through the legends. Katharine Courtenay (d. 1527), Countess of Devon and sixth daughter of Edward IV, used a seal which, in addition to displaying her complex coat of arms, bore the legend: *+ KATERINA COMITISSA DEVON’ FILIA SOROR ET AMITA REGUM* (Katharine, Countess of Devon, daughter, sister and friend of kings). This emphasis on the relationship, above all, to royalty, might have had its origin in the seal of Katharine’s redoubtable grandmother. Cecily Neville, Duchess of York (1415–95) was the 10th child of Ralph Neville, first Earl of Westmoreland, by his second wife, Joan Beaufort. Cecily married Richard, Duke of York, the first Yorkist claimant to the throne of England. He was killed at the battle of Wakefield in 1460, but his claim was adopted by his eldest son Edward, who was crowned king in 1461 as Edward IV. Cecily’s extremely large round seal (Fig. 13) features an eagle, ducal coronet round its neck, bearing a shield of arms: France and England impaling Neville. There are two supporters: a lion and an antelope, both with ducal coronets and chains round their necks. On each side, beyond the supporters, there is a bunch of roses. The legend in black letter conveys a clear message: *SIGILLUM DOMINE CECILIE UXORIS VERI HEREDIS ANGLIE ET FRANCIE ET DOMINI HIBERNIE MATRIS REGIS EDWARDI QUARTI DUCISSE EBOR* (the seal of the Lady Cecily, wife of the true heir of England and France and Lord of Ireland, mother of King...
Edward IV and Duchess of York).\footnote{Not for nothing was one of her nicknames ‘proud Cis’.

Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII and founder of two Cambridge colleges, adopted Cecily’s message, if not quite her tone.\footnote{Her seal (after 1502) displays an eagle, with a ducal coronet round its neck, bearing a shield with the arms of Beaufort, surmounted by a coronet and supported by two Yales (Fig. 14). The legend (again in black letter) reads: sigillum margarete comitisse richmond et derbii filie et heredis Johannis ducis someret et matris henrici septimi regis anglie et francie (the seal of the Lady Margaret, Countess of Richmond and Derby, daughter and heir of John, Duke of Somerset and mother of Henry VII, King of England and France).} This last – as with many of the seals commented upon in this short survey – underlines the fact that a royal or noble woman’s status and importance in the Middle Ages were customarily dictated by three relationships to men – those of daughter, wife and mother. The Empress Matilda (d. 1167), whose round seal was noted earlier, was the daughter of King Henry I of England, wife of the Emperor Henry V, King of the Romans, and mother of King Henry II of England. She was buried at the abbey church of Bec-Hellouin, before the high altar dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Two lines of the epitaph inscribed on her tomb recorded her life through these relationships ‘Ortu magna, vio major, sed maxima partu, Hic iacet Henrici filia, sponsa, pares’ (Great by birth, greater by marriage, greatest in her offspring, here lies the daughter, wife and mother of Henry).\footnote{However, in addition to declaring their blood and marital relationships, some royal and aristocratic women found a way to express their personal achievements, aspirations and influence in the seals which witnessed and authenticated their writen acts.}
25 Magrath 1921, vol. 1, p. xviii and plates. The original seal of Clare Hall shows the foundress holding in her left hand a book of the college’s statutes and with her right hand presenting the foundation charter to the master and scholars, Forbes 1928–30, vol. 1, 13, note 2.
26 A cast of the first Great Seal of Eleanor of Provence is in the Society of Antiquaries of London, seal cast case A1; Her second Great Seal is attached to an agreement by Eleanor concerning a transfer of lands between her younger son, Edmund, Earl of Lancaster and Sir Gilbert Talbot, 4 November 1271: London, TNA DL27/190; Sandford 1707, 57, 88, and note.
27 London, TNA DL27/196; Society of Antiquaries of London seal cast case A1; Sandford 1707, 57 and 129 and notes.
28 Ailes 2000, 219, 221.
30 See note 16 above.
32 This subject is excellently surveyed in Blair, 1943 19–26
33 Blair 1943, 23–4, pl. xvi.
34 Blair 1943 26, pl. xvi.
36 Bedos-Rezak 1988, 76.
38 Bedos-Rezak 1988, 76.
39 Roberts 2004, 140.
41 Birch 1893–1905, vol. 1, 35–6, no. 104; 39, no. 113; vol. 4.,1, 54–158, nos 2041, 2042, 2043
42 Birch 1893–1905, vol. 1, 9, no. 20.
43 London, TNA E43/507. The seal is attached to a receipt dated 2 April 1358 and cancelled by knife cuts for the sum of £15.00 received for the rent of Minster Lovel (Oxfordshire) from John de Grey. ODNB, vol. 29, 423–5
45 Poulet 1994, 113–14
48 Dalas 1991, 237–8
49 Fryde, Greenway, Porter and Roy 1986, 38, 42. In the 12th century, queens in England did occasionally act as regents during the absence of their husbands or sons (loc. cit, 32, 35–6).
52 Paul A Brand, ‘Cui in vita sua contradicere non potuit: husbands, wives and power within the family in thirteenth and fourteenth century England’ (unpublished paper). I am deeply grateful to Dr. Brand for permitting me to consult and to quote from this paper.
53 Pollock and Maitland 1911, vol. 2, 419.
57 Evans 1881, 34–6.
58 Pembroke College Cambridge, Archives College Box B7 and College Box B8: duplicates of a grant from Mary de St Pol to Pembroke College of land in Pembroke Street, Cambridge, 9 June 1348. I owe this reference to Jayne Ringrose, the archivist of Pembroke College. See also n. 7 above.
63 Cambridge, St John’s College Archives D5, 13; Jones and Underwood (1992, 70) note that Lady Margaret’s role at the court of her son, Henry VII, ‘bore striking similarities to, and indeed may have been modelled on, that of Cecily, Duchess of York at the court of her son, Edward IV’.
65 Chibnall 1991, 191 and n. 57.