

Book Reviews

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Malay Seals from the Islamic World of Southeast Asia: Content, Form, Context, Catalogue. By Annabel Teh Gallop. Singapore: NUS Press in association with the British Library, 2019. xvii+852 pp.

This exemplary piece of scholarship will be the essential and definitive reference work on the sigillography of the Muslim Malay world for a very long time to come. Based upon Gallop's unpublished doctoral thesis "Malay Seal Inscriptions: A Study in Islamic Epigraphy from Southeast Asia" (2002), which was the first (and also last) book-length study ever to examine this neglected sub-area in the field of Southeast Asian studies, the present (significantly augmented and updated) publication constitutes a careful documentation of 2,168 Malay seals. The pièce de résistance of this volume is its catalogue (pp. 53–722), which provides detailed descriptions and photographs of these seals from many public and private collections worldwide, including the deciphering and translation of the inscriptions, mostly recording seal impressions stamped in lampblack, ink or wax as found on such manuscripts as letters, treaties, and legal and commercial documents. The seals originate from the present-day territories of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and the southern parts of Thailand, Cambodia and the Philippines, covering the period from the second half of the sixteenth century to the early twentieth century. The value of this exhaustive sigillographic catalogue is further enhanced by a useful set of introductory chapters (pp. 1–52) with background information on content and form, context and the historical development of the Malay sealing tradition. Indexes (pp. 739–85) facilitate easy retrieval of information.

Gallop has successfully delivered on her self-professed aim “to make accessible a large body of primary source material from the Islamic world of Southeast Asia in the form of Malay seals, defined as seals from Southeast Asia or used by Southeast Asians, with inscriptions at least partially in the Arabic script” (p. vii). However, as Gallop states herself, the region of Lampung in South Sumatra, which is represented here by fifty-two seals (pp. 289–302), only has five seals that contain inscriptions in Arabic script “and thus fit the definition of ‘Malay seals’ applied in this catalogue” (p. 287), whereas a much larger body of over forty seals is wholly engraved in the local Indic-derived Lampung script that belongs to the so-called ‘*ka-ga-nga*’ writing system. Although these seals are quite different from the ‘Malay seals’ as concerns script but also content (p. 287), it is of course a bonus that they have been included in this book. Another notable exception to Gallop’s definition of Malay seals, also duly mentioned by Gallop (p. 697), is the Javanese cultural zone of Java, Madura and Bali, which generally has seals in local varieties of the Indic ‘*ha-na-ca-ra-ka*’ writing system, so that the chapter on seals in Arabic script from this area (with the notable exception of Banten in West Java) merely has thirty-five seals. A Javanese seal from Banten (no. 1940, p. 661) has nonetheless been included because of its early date and “great importance” (p. 661).

An intriguing curiosity in the chapter on ‘miscellaneous’ is an undated brass seal with the inscription “*qawl al-ḥaqq // w-y-l-m p-r-d-y-n-n p-l-w-m-n*” (no. 2137; p. 713); Gallop comments that it is “possibly the seal of a European in Southeast Asia”, providing the Romanization “Wilem Ferdinan Pluman” and tentatively suggests that the name may stand for “William Ferdinand Pluman” or “Plowman[?]”. It is kept at the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam (inventory no. TM-H-2190) and according to the museum’s website it originates from Aceh, Sumatra (which I suspect may just be guesswork), dated before 1923, whereas the inscribed name is given as “Willem Ferdinand Pluman” (Tropenmuseum Amsterdam

2020). As anyone familiar with *Jawi* script knows, European names are notoriously difficult to reconstruct. The first names are clearly Willem (and not ‘William’ as the word ends with l-m) Ferdinand, but the possibilities for the last name range rather widely. The *Jawi* spelling could reflect an Indonesian pronunciation, namely ‘Pelu(h) man/Pelo(h)man’, which could not only refer to English ‘Plowman/Ploughman’ and Dutch ‘Ploegman’, but one could also think of ‘Vloemen’ or ‘Ploemen’, ‘Flouman’ or ‘Fluman(s)’, ‘Ploumand’ or ‘Ploemans’, ‘V(e)loeman’ or perhaps ‘Vloemans’. Google affirms that all these theoretical possibilities are existing Dutch or Flemish family names, but an online search in combination with ‘Willem Ferdinand’ did not yield results.

However, after some hard slogging over the keyboard, I may have identified the one-time owner of the seal; namely, Willem Ferdinand Ploegman (1805–73), a Dutch missionary who had worked in such different places in the archipelago as Sumenep, Surakarta, Surabaya, Ternate and Padang. Together with Johan Bierhaus (1801–78), a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, he translated the Gospel of Mark into ‘Low Malay’ (Bierhaus 1856). His succinct biography can be found in the biographical dictionary by Troostenburg de Bruijn (1893, pp. 340–41). The Internet has a number of genealogical websites that also include his name; for example, the website www.geneaologie.nl, which provides the information that his son, who had a career as a civil servant in Batavia, was given the same name, which potentially would turn Willem Ferdinand Ploegman Jr (1834 Sumenep – 1899 Meester Cornelis) into another possible owner of the seal. However, the noteworthy Arabic phrase *qawl al-ḥaqq* would seem rather to point to the missionary background of Ploegman Sr. This religious expression is reminiscent of the most popular heading used on Malay letters; namely, *Qawluhu al-ḥaqq*, or ‘His word is the Truth’ (see p. 18 for Gallop’s discussion of this letter heading and its variations). In this particular case, *qawl al-ḥaqq* or ‘word of truth’, which is a subtle variation of this well-known statement, may have been used to propound the Christian doctrine that Jesus

is the Word of Truth, hinting not only at a passage in the Qur'an (19:34) that uses these keywords in connection with (the Prophet) Jesus, the son of Mary, but also at the Biblical declaration that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). Incidentally, Victor Willem Charles Ploegman (1893 Tegal – 1945 Surabaya) was Ploegman Sr's great-grandchild, who is known in Indonesian history as a lawyer and one of the leaders of the Indo-Europeesch Verbond (Association of Eurasians), killed at the 'flag incident' in Surabaya that took place on 19 September 1945.

Most elegantly designed, this book has the outward trappings of an attractive coffee table book, as it is oversize, profusely illustrated, heavy and, unsurprisingly, expensive. Turning its pages is a pleasurable experience, which is something that cannot always be said of essential resources for scholars.

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