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Imprint: A Forensic and Historical Investigation of Fingerprints on Medieval Seals*

Philippa Hoskin and Elizabeth New

SEALS HAVE APPEARED IN European and Asian cultures since ancient times, and indeed form some of the very earliest written records from Mesopotamia and China. They were widely used across the European Middle Ages, and provide important insights into medieval societies. As packages of image and text which have personal resonances and legal importance, and were in essence messages about representation of identity, they have also long been appreciated by medievalists, although their full potential has yet to be realized.¹

Imprint: A Forensic and Historical Investigation of Fingerprints on Medieval Seals is a new project, funded by the UK Government's Arts & Humanities Research Council, which is running for three years from January 2016.² *Imprint* is using seal impressions attached to documents dating from the mid twelfth until the mid fourteenth centuries, from the collections of Exeter, Hereford, and Lincoln Cathedrals, Westminster Abbey, and the National Library of Wales, to explore a range of historical and scientific questions. These include an exploration of the implications of sealing practice for revealing new evidence about networks of power, exchange, and

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¹ See for example B. M. Bedos-Rezak, *When Ego Was Imago: Signs of Identity in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2011) and B. M. Bedos-Rezak, "Outcast: Seals of the Medieval West and their Epistemological Frameworks (XIIth–XXIst centuries)," in *From Minor to Major: The Minor Arts in Medieval Art History*, ed. Colum Hourihane (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2012), 122–40, for an important recent study of high medieval European sealing practices, and of the study of seals.

² AHRC Project AH/M010813/1, <http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/projects?ref=AH%2FM010813%2F1>. The project is headed by Professor Philippa Hoskin at the University of Lincoln and Dr Elizabeth New at Aberystwyth University, with Research Fellows Dr. Hollie Morgan and Dr. Fergus Oakes. For live updates, see www.imprintseals.org.

authority; the “performative act of sealing,” ritual, and administration; sealing practice in relation to legal and administrative developments; the creation of proof and misuse of authority; and, from a forensic perspective, the viability of prints over time and technical challenges of identifying overlaid prints on uneven surfaces, adding to the body of evidence to support the uniqueness of prints. By considering these questions we hope to further research into the process of sealing, and perhaps the development of specialism in sealing. We also, however, hope to examine social networks and the way in which sealing might reflect local or familial hierarchies.

The process of documentary sealing, that is, attaching the impression of a seal matrix to a document as an integral part of the process of validation, was established in Britain by the end of the eleventh century. As a result of the development of English Common Law, and in particular the very limited use of the notarial system, by the end of the thirteenth century men and women at all levels of society could and did use seals.³ Furthermore, while the principal images on the seals of offices and institutions and those of the higher levels of the nobility were fairly standardized, and there were identifiable trends in a limited number of popular motifs among non-elite seal owners, details of seal design can provide extremely important information about self-representation and identity.⁴ Indeed, the image

³ For the development of sealing practices in post-Conquest England, see for example P. D. A. Harvey and A. McGuinness, *A Guide to British Medieval Seals* (London: British Library and University of Toronto Press, 1996), 5–6, 43, 63–64. For recent case studies of the development and social extent of documentary sealing in Britain, see for example E. A. New, “Lleision ap Morgan Makes an Impression: Seals and the Study of Medieval Wales,” *Welsh History Review* 27.1 (2013): 327–50]; John McEwan, “The Formation of a Sealing Society: London in the Twelfth Century,” in *Medieval Coins and Seals: Constructing Identity, Signifying Power*, ed. Susan Solway (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 319–30 at 319–20. In addition to seals of validation, seals of closure continued to be used in a wide range of contexts; see for example Paul Brand, “Seals and the Law in the Thirteenth Century,” in *Seals and their Context in the Middle Ages*, ed. P. R. Schofield (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015), 111–19, 111–12.

⁴ Trends in motifs have until recently been difficult to track with any accuracy because of limited recording of impressions and matrices, especially those representing men and women below the elites, but are gradually becoming better understood; John McEwan, “Seals in Medieval Wales and Its Neighbouring Counties: Trends in Motifs,” in *Seals and Society in Medieval Wales and its Border Region*, ed. P. R. Schofield and E. A. New (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016), 13–34. The importance of studying the details of all types of motif, and not dismissing certain types as “conventional” and with limited meaning, has been noted on occasion in past scholarship and is now being highlighted by focused studies. See for example E. A. New, “(Un)conventional Images: A Case-Study of Radial Motifs on Personal Seals,” in *Seals and their Context in the Middle Ages*, ed. P. R. Schofield (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015), 151–60.

and text on seals, and the context of the use of seal matrices, are excellent evidence for prosopographical studies, and they have been used extensively for investigations of noble and armigerous families.⁵ With more recording of seal impressions and matrices, and greater accessibility to such records, studies of the middling and lower levels of society are now also beginning to include this valuable material, a trend that is greatly to be encouraged.⁶

In addition to the impression of a seal matrix, the disks of wax attached to documents often have visible hand- and fingerprints, something that also makes them so attractive as a means of connecting with past lives. While historians and archivists have long noted and commented upon such prints, it is only in recent years that forensic techniques have provided the possibility of serious investigations, and it is in this context that *Imprint* has emerged. The current project builds upon a pilot study undertaken at Hereford Cathedral Archives in the summer of 2013, in collaboration with Luke McGarr and Karen Stow of Forensic Focus Ltd, which identified and worked with two hundred clearly visible prints.⁷

The pilot project allowed us to learn about the process of taking these images and also to find some interesting preliminary results. An unexpected discovery was that until 1300 palm prints rather than fingerprints were found on the wax, with a shift in the fourteenth century to a mix of palm prints and fingerprints. Among a collection of seals all dated to 1225–50, and all small grants or confirmations of land, all the prints found were of parts of the palm of the hand. When John the Clerk made a similar grant of property in circa 1300, however, the print left upon his seal was of the whorl of the finger.⁸ In addition, the pilot revealed matching prints across different documents for one recipient from different donors, but the reasons for this need further investigation since the scribes and witnesses also differ. Furthermore, where there are multiple seals on one document, the prints sometimes match,

⁵ See for example P. Coss, *The Origins of the English Gentry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 233–36; Brian R. Kemp, “Family Identity: The Seals of the Longspées,” in *Seals and their Context in the Middle Ages*, ed. P. R. Schofield (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015), 137–50.

⁶ <http://digisig.org/> is an important new web-portal which is bringing together a range of seal catalogues and other sources.

⁷ The pilot was facilitated by Rosalind Caird, Cathedral Archivist at the time, and the Reverend Canon Chris Pullen, Cathedral chancellor. We are most grateful to them and to their colleagues at Hereford Cathedral for their support for the pilot project and *Imprint*. A detailed analysis of this pilot study is currently being prepared for publication by Philippa Hoskin and Elizabeth New.

⁸ Hereford Cathedral Archives, HCA 692.

but sometimes they do not. From this data it was clear that more extensive sampling and analysis was likely to yield further new information.

As a result of the pilot study, the *Imprint* project team has been able to refine search criteria and estimate the number of sealed documents which need to be consulted to obtain a sufficient number of viable prints to allow for meaningful quantitative analysis for both the forensic and historical aspects of the project.⁹ At the time of writing the project team has recorded material from the National Library of Wales (sampling the Margam Abbey Charters), Hereford Cathedral Archives, and Exeter Cathedral Archives, and are in the midst of data gathering in Westminster Abbey Muniments. The recording process has in fact produced a higher number of viable prints overall than the pilot had suggested, although this varies considerably between different collections, for reasons which will be investigated at the analytical stage. The early results of the forensic analysis include further matching prints at Hereford Cathedral, and more generally suggest that the shift from palm, to finger and palm, and finally to fingerprints, observed in the Hereford Cathedral pilot sample, may be widespread, and will again help the project team to refine their investigations. The *Imprint* data is also proving rich in terms of the type of people involved in sealing, including a good proportion of women and laymen who appear to be of the middling and lower levels of society. This will enable testing of many of the key research questions about the actual involvement of such people in the act of sealing, with its associated connotations of a public exercise of authority and engagement with legal processes.

Imprint makes use of the opportunity to use new technology and interdisciplinary collaboration to answer questions and think in new ways about the practice and meaning of sealing for those many individuals of lower status in the central Middle Ages whose involvement in legal and administrative practice is so often disregarded.

⁹ It was estimated in the funding application that the *Imprint* project sampling process would produce approximately 1,000 examples of viable prints.