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REMARKS ON PERSONAL SEALS DURING  
THE MIDDLE AGES.

THE object of this paper is to draw attention to the varieties of personal seals used in this country during the middle ages; to submit a general classification of the devices which occur on them, and by the aid of dated examples to refer, approximately, certain subjects, of very frequent occurrence, to their respective periods. By confining myself within these limits I must necessarily omit any consideration of the great or state seals of England<sup>a</sup>, as well as of corporate seals, both ecclesiastical and secular, as, strictly, they do not fall under the denomination of personal seals. It will be convenient also to reserve, for another opportunity, the subject of seals purely heraldic in character, although they are named in the classification which I have here attempted.

At the beginning of the last century the learned Bishop Nicolson observed<sup>b</sup>, "whether the Norman nobility brought their use of large seals into this kingdom, or found it here, I am not certain; but here they had them, presently after their arrival." The progress of archæological study has removed all uncertainty on the subject: the use of seals, as a legal formality, was introduced into this country by the Normans. After the Conquest seals became component parts of legal documents, and it is to the legal importance which attached to them, that we owe the preservation of many thousands of impressions dating from the close of the eleventh

<sup>a</sup> It is to be hoped that Professor Willis may have leisure to complete, at no distant period, his admirable essay on these

seals, of which a portion has already appeared in this Journal, see vol. ii. p. 14.

<sup>b</sup> Historical Libraries, ed. 1776, p. 198.

to the end of the fifteenth century. As land became more and more subinfeudated, and wealth generally, more distributed, the use of seals was diffused among all classes legally competent to acquire or aliene property.

On personal seals of this early date, that is of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which may be termed the first period, the devices are entirely arbitrary and literal in character. Thus barons and persons of knightly degree<sup>c</sup> used seals representing a horseman, armed at all points, spurring to the fight, or riding, falcon on wrist, to the chase. The seals of females, single or married, sometimes bore their effigies attired in a costume generally indicating that of their time: besides these rude attempts at the human figure, birds, as eagles or hawks, lions, dragon-like forms, crescents and stars in a variety of combinations, and fleurs-de-lis are the subjects which most commonly occur. No device adopted at this time was sufficiently distinctive in character to identify the ownership of the seal; that object was attained by the surrounding legend, containing the title or name of the person to whom it belonged.

The shape of seals used by secular persons during this period was generally circular; the seals of females, like those of ecclesiastics, were mostly of a pointed oval form; the circular model however appears to have been the most prevalent.

There are no reverses to baronial or knightly seals of this date, produced, as was the case at a later period, by impressing a smaller seal, termed a *secretum* or privy-seal, on the back of the wax after the application of the great seal. The earliest example of this fashion, with which I am acquainted, is the

<sup>c</sup> It appears that during the twelfth century, it was not customary for a person entitled by birth to the honour of knight-hood, to use a seal until he had received that distinction. Thus Geoffrey de Mandeville, son and heir of Geoffrey earl of Essex, says, in a grant to the prior and convent of the Holy Trinity, London, "istam cartam feci signari sigillo dapiferi mei, Henrici filii Geroldi, donec sim miles et habeam sigillum, et tunc eam firmabo proprio sigillo." By some authors an expression of this kind, of which there are other examples, (Selden's Titles of Honour, vol. iii. col. 595, ed. Wilkins; Nicolson's Historical Libraries, p. 198, ed. 1776,) has been taken to mean that the person using

it was under age and *therefore* not entitled to use a seal; but it is obvious that the same disability would have prevented him from alienating property; moreover it is well known that in early times, knight-hood was often conferred on individuals before they had attained their legal majority. I would suggest therefore, that, as the ordinary device on knightly seals, anterior to the introduction of armorial bearings, was a knight on horseback, the meaning of the grantor's words may be simply that not being as yet a knight, he could not use a seal with the device appropriate to that dignity, to which by birth, as an earl's son, he was entitled. This Geoffrey de Mandeville died circa 1167.

seal of John, as earl of Mortaine, of the close of the twelfth century, subsequent to 1170; on its reverse is the impression of an antique gem with the legend, ✠ SECRETVM IOHANNIS<sup>d</sup>.

The wax used in taking impressions of seals during the eleventh and twelfth centuries appears to have been generally white; there are a few examples of red wax, but the colour seems to have been only applied superficially, and is usually more or less volatilised. Towards the end of the twelfth century green wax became very common; the colouring matter pervading the whole substance of the material; and it may be remarked that seals of this colour are in all instances better preserved than those of white or red; owing probably to the improved composition of the wax rather than to any other cause.

On reviewing the seals of the first period we see in them all the defects common to archaic art of whatever kind: poverty of invention, a want of imitative power, and a rude and superficial execution.

The introduction of heraldic insignia at the close of the twelfth century had the natural effect of producing a large class of seals exclusively armorial in character, and it is remarkable that from this date a decided and progressive improvement may be traced in the design and execution of personal seals. At the commencement of the thirteenth century the legal necessity for these instruments was thoroughly established, and it is obvious that there must have been at that time, as in our own, a large number of persons who would

<sup>d</sup> Badly engraved in Sandford's *Genealogical History*, &c. p. 55. Numerous impressions of it are extant. There is a very fine one in the muniment room of Oriel College, Oxford. The next in point of date, I believe, is on the reverse of the seal of Seiher de Quincy, afterwards earl of Winchester, (*Cart. Antiq. B. M.* xxii. 9,) of the time of John, ante 1210; it is a kite-shaped shield charged with his arms, without a legend. The obverse of this seal is curious, as presenting a mounted knight riding to the *left*, a position very rare on English seals; it may be remarked on the seal of Helias de Albiniaco, (*Cart. Antiq. Ib.*, 45, B. 27,) circa 1180. This arrangement is not uncommon on foreign seals, for example, on the bullæ of the kings of Castile and Leon; see a charter of Alphonso XI., dated

1360, (*Add. Ch. B. M.* 6334.) The seal of Seiher de Quincy is also worthy of attention as an early, perhaps the earliest, instance of horse-furniture being decorated with armorial bearings; but all the seals of this great baron are remarkable for their beautiful execution, particularly those made after his creation as earl of Winchester. I should observe, before closing this note, that there is preserved in the British Museum, an impression of a seal and counter-seal (*secretum*) supposed to be of Robert, surnamed Le Bossu, earl of Leicester, who died in 1167; I have not yet had an opportunity of examining it, and therefore cannot vouch for the evidence on which the conjectural date is founded. It may possibly be the seal of Robert Blanchemains, his son, who died in 1190.

require them in the ordinary transactions of life, and yet were not entitled to bear armorial distinctions, then the prerogative of the knightly order. Thus yeomen, merchants, substantial artificers, and the like, in short all persons comprehended by the term middle class, continued to fashion their seals according to their own taste, and in the same arbitrary manner as they had done at the earlier period; occasionally with slight modifications imitative of heraldic arrangement, as in the use of shields.

For a time they were content with the small variety of devices already described; the fleur-de-lis, birds, Agnus Dei, &c.; then rebuses on the christian or surname were adopted: these were quickly followed by symbols of occupation or handicraft; thus, the miller would bear an ear of corn fleur-de-lisé; the musician his viol or croute, the farrier or smith proclaimed his calling by a horseshoe, and the schoolmaster figured on his seal with that valuable instrument and symbol of discipline the birch. About the same time that grotesques make their first appearance on marginal paintings in manuscripts, that is at the commencement of the fourteenth century, we find them on personal seals, and they are met with in great variety throughout the same period.

The several types or devices above enumerated, sometimes in combination with architectural details, are those which are of chief occurrence from the thirteenth to the end of the fourteenth century. It was during this, which I would call the second, period that medieval seals attained their highest artistic excellence. The impulse given to all branches of the arts soon after the accession of Henry the Third, apparent in all the monuments of that reign, is nowhere more conspicuous than in the design and execution of seals; and these objects continue to present features of considerable beauty from that time until the year 1400.

The shape of seals during the thirteenth century was generally oval, more or less acute; so ordinary was this form that any one having to arrange a mass of unsorted deeds might easily pick out most of those anterior to the year 1300 by merely observing the contours of the seals. As no rule is without exception, so there are many circular and even heater-shield shaped seals of this date; but the ovoid will be found to predominate. I do not pretend to offer any decided opinion as to the symbolical import of that form; although it may be

assumed with great probability that it was suggested by the conventional method of representing the sacred nimbus which prevailed from a very early period.

The wax used during this period is generally dark green, and less frequently red or white.

Having before alluded to the secretum or counter-seal, I may here remark that it is of ordinary occurrence on baronial and knightly seals after the year 1200, from which period the use of it may be considered to have been fully established; but not for the purpose of sealing either letters missive or deeds, except in connection with the great-seal. Thus William earl Warenne concludes a letter to Hubert de Burgh, the Justiciary of Henry the Third, entreating pecuniary aid, "and because I have not my great seal with me, I have caused the present letters to be sealed with my private seal."

After the year 1400, personal seals, which are not of armorial character, gradually decline in importance both as to size, style of design, and execution. Thenceforth many represent simply merchants'-marks rudely executed, monograms, or a letter surmounted by a coronet, often the initial of a saint's name, or of the name of the individual, although not entitled to bear the coronet by nobility of birth. Merchants'-marks which appear to have been imitated from the Flemings during the reign of Edward the Third, and became very common during the fifteenth and early part of the sixteenth century, both on seals and signet rings, are composed of a private cypher combined with the initials of the owner's name. They offer a somewhat curious field for research, and are often very useful in identifying the persons by whom domestic, and parts of ecclesiastical, edifices on which they occur were built. They were more generally used in the great sea-ports on the eastern coast of England<sup>f</sup> than in the south; a fact which is readily accounted for by the frequent intercourse between those ports and Flanders. It may be observed also that such marks belonged chiefly to woolfactors, or merchants of the staple.

There is another, and most interesting, class of subjects, examples of which are common from the twelfth to the fifteenth century. I allude to those afforded by antique intaglios which

<sup>e</sup> "Quia autem magnum sigillum meum mecum non habui, presentes litteras privato sigillo meo feci sigillari." Ancient Letters in the Tower of London, vol. A.

<sup>f</sup> A very curious and extensive collec-

tion of the merchants'-marks of Norwich, has been formed by W. C. Ewing, Esq., of that city, and will shortly appear at the expense of the Norfolk and Norwich Archæological Society.

were very frequently used as personal seals during the middle ages. They were ordinarily set in silver, and surrounded by legends suggested by a mistaken interpretation of the subject represented<sup>g</sup>, or containing the name of the owner. Few of these relics belong to the best periods of classic art; they are chiefly of late Roman character; but occasionally a fine specimen may be met with. It should be remarked also, that although impressions of such seals are often in a high state of preservation, the subject of the intaglio is generally in very faint relief; owing probably as much to the inferior quality of the wax used in early times, as to the superficial cutting of the stone itself. These gems are easily recognised by the peculiarity of the impression they leave, arising from the convex surface which the ancients usually gave to precious stones intended for signets. A catalogue of the subjects of all intaglios of which ancient impressions are known to exist in England, would form a curious and, possibly valuable, contribution to glyptographical knowledge. In early times they were looked upon as pagan amulets, and destroyed, but soon found favour owing to the intrinsic value of the stones, and were frequently, and often most indecorously, employed to decorate shrines and sacred ornaments. Perhaps the earliest instance of the use of an antique gem as a personal seal is the *secretum* of John, as earl of Mortaine, before noticed; it represents a male bust, which a learned friend has conjectured may be intended for one of the later emperors. There is, I would observe, some reason for believing that engraving on precious stones, in imitation of the antique manner, was sometimes essayed by medieval artists, who were encouraged in their attempts by the high value which doubtless attached to such objects. An example, of very rude execution, in blood-stone, the device being a cock, was recently found at Thwaite in Norfolk, and is now in the valuable cabinet of Mr. Fitch of Norwich; it is in a silver setting, apparently of the fourteenth century<sup>h</sup>. It

<sup>g</sup> See the description of several antique intaglios, particularly of a cornelian, with a medieval legend, in the possession of Mr. Barton of Woodbridge, Suffolk, in the *Archæological Journal*, vol. iii. p. 76. The counter-seal of Roger, archbishop of York, who died in 1181, is formed of a gem representing a chimera with three heads; the legend is allusive to the Holy Trinity. It is engraved in the first vo-

lume of the *Vetusta Monumenta*.

<sup>h</sup> The legend is, ✠ IOHANNES CHRISTI AMICE. Mr. Fitch possesses also another relic of similar character; it is the personal seal of Gilbert de Hulcote, date thirteenth century; the device is a sea-horse engraved on blood-stone; setting of silver; this intaglio, however, is apparently late Roman.

may be mentioned as an instance of the occasionally strange application of antiques to signets in medieval times, that a thumb-ring was discovered a few years since in the coffin of an ecclesiastic, in Chichester cathedral, set with an Abraxas gem<sup>1</sup>; the deceased churchman, it may be well believed, had worn it guiltless of all knowledge of Alexandrine pantheism. We can readily account for the number and variety of antique intaglios which occur as seals, during the middle ages, when it is considered that in addition to those which may have been discovered on Roman sites in England, many were brought into the country by pilgrims from Italy and the East, in the belief that they possessed talismanic virtues<sup>k</sup>.

The materials of which the matrices of medieval seals were formed is a subject deserving a few remarks. In their character and mode of application to documents, the earliest seals were imitations of metal bullæ, the use of which was first adopted in Europe by the Frankish sovereigns<sup>1</sup>. The bulla itself, partaking rather of the nature of a coin than a seal, could not be struck, even in lead, without a greater degree of trouble and pains than were compatible with the ordinary and frequent use of it; and although pendant metal seals continued to be used ordinarily by some princes, while others employed them only on occasions of particular solemnity, we may reasonably believe that the application of an engraved die to wax was a practice coeval with the earliest use of seals in Europe, as formal attestations of public or private compacts. Lead, from the facility of working it, was naturally first adopted for the seals of the middle and poorer classes of society, and we find accordingly the few matrices of the close of the twelfth and several examples of the thirteenth century, which are preserved, formed of that metal. From the importance attached to their seals by the higher classes, it is probable that those of the nobility, who, imitating royalty, had their great and privy seals, were formed of a superior and more durable substance, probably of silver; but few examples of early date have been preserved. In the thirteenth century a mixed metal resembling

<sup>1</sup> An agate, resembling the example in *Montf. Antiq. Expl. ii. part ii. p. 353*. The ring was of gold, and was found on the right hand thumb-bone of a skeleton, the supposed remains of Seffrid, Bishop of Chichester A.D. 1125. An engraving of it was published by Mr. King.

<sup>k</sup> For a curious illustration of the talismanic properties ascribed to antique gems, see the *Archæologia*, vol. xxx. p. 438.

<sup>1</sup> See on this subject *Mabillon de Re Diplomatica*, and the observations in the *Nouveau Traite de Diplomatique*.

brass, the manufacture of which was long confined to Cologne, was commonly used for the matrices of seals, and continued to be the material usually employed until the sixteenth century. Silver matrices of personal seals are of rare occurrence.

With these preliminary observations on the general character of medieval seals, I shall now proceed to submit a plan for their classification according to subjects, under three main divisions, as regards time, already suggested.

**FIRST PERIOD.**—From the eleventh to the close of the twelfth century.

The devices on secular seals are, mounted knights; effigies of females; Agnus Dei; birds, eagles or falcons; animals, commonly lions; varieties of the draconine type; a conventional flower, fleur-de-lisé in character; stars and crescents diversely arranged.

It has been supposed that the birds, animals, flowers, &c. which appear on seals late in this period, were, on the introduction of heraldry, adopted by the individuals who had borne them, as part of their armorial ensigns; but a careful examination of a number of examples shews that such was not the fact; armorial bearings on the seals of the same persons are generally composed of heraldic charges wholly different.

**SECOND PERIOD.**—From the year 1200 to the year 1400.

The subjects on seals may be thus classed; 1. Heraldic devices; and, on smaller seals, cognisances or crests. 2. Birds, animals, flowers, &c., as in the earlier period, on the seals of ordinary persons. 3. Rebuses on christian or surnames. 4. Symbols of crafts. 5. Grotesques and, apparently, satirical devices. 6. Effigies of patron saints, often of the saint after whom the owner was named; and devotional subjects in general, as Agnus Dei, Ave Maria, the head of St. John the Baptist, all of which were probably regarded as possessing talismanic virtues; symbols of the Evangelists, &c. 7. Merchants'-marks, coronetted letters, and minor devices of great variety, but not of a remarkable character.

**THIRD PERIOD.**—From 1400 to 1500.

We find the former types repeated throughout this century, marked by inferior execution.

In a future number I propose to consider the subjects above enumerated in detail, and to illustrate them by engravings of dated examples.