



Medieval Seal Matrices: A Collector's Experience (by Dr. John Rassweiler)

The number of matrices and seals made from these matrices in the medieval period are unknown, but are likely to be in the millions. However, only relatively small numbers are known today. Many of these matrices from the highest levels of society (royalty, noble men and women, knights, senior ecclesiastics, and so forth) have long been in institutional and private collections and have been extensively studied. Most of the remaining surviving matrices are the personal seals of more ordinary people – minor nobility, clergymen, merchants, farmers, and virtually anyone, both men and women who had responsibility for property or money. Many have been found in recent years with the aid of metal detectors, and they continue to be found in significant numbers. Such recent finds make up the bulk of my collection which now numbers over 400 matrices and nine sealed documents.

When I began to collect I was fortunate to meet several scholars of medieval seals including museum curators with important institutional collections, and the best advice I received was to look at as many matrices and seals as possible, and to try to understand the key elements of identification by reading about them. I have found the introductions to the catalogues of seal matrices in the British Museum (A. B. Tonnochy, 1952), and the Schøyen Collection (R. Linenthal and W. Noel, 2004) helpful, and the British Museum publication *Good Impression: Image and Authority in Medieval Seals* (N. Adams, J. Cherry, and J. Robinson, 2008) has a series of scholarly articles and excellent illustrations of the matrices included in an exhibition in 2007. Two principal guides to British seals, the actual wax sealings as opposed to the matrices, both well illustrated, are *Seal Matrices in the British Museum* (A. B. Tonnochy 1952), the more recent *Catalogue of Seals in the Public Record Office [Personal, Monastic]* (3 vols., 1978 – 86) by R. H. Ellis, and the *Catalogues of Seals in the National Museum of Wales* by D.H. Williams (Vol. I & II, 1993, 1998) *A Guide to British Medieval Seals* by P. D. A. Harvey and A. McGuinness (1996) is also essential reading.

I list below the literature which I have found useful especially for the helpful illustrations of both common and more upper class matrices.

With reasonable attention, by handling as many examples as possible, by studying the available literature, and by consulting with dealers and academic/curatorial experts in the field, I have learned to estimate a seal's approximate century, and perhaps even more fundamentally, to determine whether or not it is medieval or a later copy.

Matrices can be made from a variety of materials: the majority from c. 1150 to c. 1250 were of lead, and from 1250 onwards they are usually of copper alloy. Matrices made of silver are relatively uncommon but they are not rare, and those made of gold or ivory are very rare. Most

seals combine a legend with a pictorial device. The legends are usually in Latin throughout the middle ages, although vernacular legends are not unusual after about 1300. They may include the name of the owner, but impersonal mottoes are also common, especially in the 14th century. The style of lettering is usually one of three types, and it offers clues as to the date of the matrix: Roman capitals, Lombardic capitals, or black-letter (gothic). Other attributes are helpful in the dating process including the types of handles and the complexity and sophistication of devices and handles. The devices themselves present an endless and appealing variety.

Forged matrices are unusual. If one happens on an early medieval forgery it will be of great interest. However something acquired which is more modern, perhaps a 19th/20th century antiquarian casting or deceptive electroplate copy, should be chalked up to experience and displayed with proper humility.

There are no dealers who are devoted exclusively to the trade in medieval seal matrices. However, examples can be found in the stock of antiquities dealers who handle metal detector finds, dealers specialising in gold, silver and base metal objects, and occasionally booksellers who have experience of documents with seals as well as the matrices themselves. Such dealers usually have a level of expertise and these relationships should be cultivated. I have found the best tactic is to visit as many antique shops and antique fairs as possible, to search, ask, and establish credibility – some basic knowledge goes a long way. Seal matrices are rarely displayed prominently but one encounters sellers who know at least what they are, and are sometimes able to suggest other local sources. In my experience London's Portobello Road market and the flea market at Clignancourt in Paris have been worthwhile places to visit.

The internet also offers opportunities. E-Bay regularly has medieval seal matrices offered under that search title, with a number of vendors having examples to sell. The problems, of course, are the inability to identify the seller, unsubstantiated claims as to age, and the difficulty of judging quality. Nevertheless, it is an excellent place to gain experience of what is available and to gauge prices. Good things do appear and many active collectors monitor the site regularly and bid prices consistent with quality.

General internet searches will also identify some venues, usually antiquities dealers, where there are matrices for sale. These dealers change regularly but their offerings often deserve attention, and there are sometimes opportunities to establish continuing relationships, even if it means buying a piece or two to establish your interest and knowledge. There are occasional online auctions, usually with a range of antiquities, some with catalogues and opportunities for the material to be viewed. The internet also increasingly offers access to museum collections but it is a work in progress and can be frustrating.

The principal auction houses, especially in London and Paris, have regular sales which include antiquities and medieval artefacts. Unfortunately at the larger houses the current minimum price thresholds prevent the offering of most seal matrices, but examples do appear from time to time at the smaller venues. Identifying interesting lots in such auctions, where there may be only a single medieval seal matrix on offer, is a challenge, and it is hoped that the *Sigillum* website will eventually be able to list forthcoming sales. An unusual auction devoted exclusively to a

collection of over three hundred matrices, and with a fully illustrated catalogue, was held in Paris at the Hôtel Drouot (the Commissaire-Priseur was Libert) on 24 September 2008.

Metal detector online sites, of which there are many, often show matrices, but options to purchase have been rare. In the UK, finds can be reported to the Portable Antiquities Scheme <http://finds.org.uk/>, and in the case of objects in gold or silver, must by law be reported and fall under the Treasure Act 1996 whereby national museums have the right to purchase.

In establishing a collection, many issues arise. Cost and availability may be important. Common matrices of lesser quality are regularly available in the 50-300GBP range, better and larger ones 1,500-4,000GBP. Prices over 5,000GBP are rare, but there are no standards and little literature on pricing. Pricing is primarily based on buyer's and sellers' expectations. Matrice designs and texts are interesting subjects, especially for collectors wishing links to history and art. Puns, jokes, surnames and business identification are common and considerable literature is available. Provenance is rare, except for the location of the find, but studies in this area sometimes lead to exciting links to history, people and places.

Selected literature:

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