

A digitalized wax and lacquer seal store (‘sigillotheque’) or a common human memory

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Seal remains from the cesspool

N.B. I prefer to use the term lac seal or lacquer seal in stead of wax seal to indicate that the shellac remains of a lacquer seal are conserved undamaged in a cesspool, while true wax seals rot and disappear. Wax seals are made of “wax” with beewax as major component.

Recently [2004, ACZ] I was confronted with pieces of lacquer seals, which were found by archeologists in cesspools¹. These pieces must derive of sealed documents thrown-away in the best place at that time. The rotting process of the feces and other material have caused the thin brittle seals to break into pieces. After collecting and cleaning of these pieces of an unknown number of seals, attempts are made to fit the pieces together into hopefully recognizable seals.

Many (university) researchers and their students of medieval documents (in The Netherlands) have limited sigillographic knowledge and the same is true for many archeologists. The duration of the education is too short to spend time on teaching sigillography (and heraldry).

Researchers prefer to illustrate their scientific articles, but the only “remains” of a medieval/historic person is his seal impression. Lack of knowledge may result in a wrong description of the seal, a photograph of the seal put upside down or in mirror image. Or a wrong combination of a seal and a person. I leave the sources unmentioned.

Found seal matrices

During archeological research seal matrices may be found accidentally. In case the image of the matrix is still recognizable it can be described and identified. But due to lack of time (and knowledge) the found item is only mentioned as “matrix”. However, there are exemptions. One of them is the marvellous book by Hendrikse on matrices found with metal detectors in the clay soils of the Zeeland province. He described seal matrices and their impressions and when possible he identified the owner.²

Seal experts or Sigillographists

Archeologists have to possess a general knowledge to be able to “read” the history of an excavation. For a single person it is almost impossible to survey the total field. Therefore, among them specialists of certain subjects and objects come up. And the same is true for the specialized companies. However [in 2004, ACZ] in The Netherlands too few archeologists have knowledge of sigillography.

It has been estimated that in The Netherlands some 50 000 coats-of-arms (coa’s) exist. But most of them were never cut in seal matrices. On the other hand several seal matrices may have been made of an unknown or lost coa. Hence, we do not know how many matrices were

cut. Even some matrices may have been cut for special occasions, after which they were destroyed. Similarly, a second matrix may have been cut, used and destroyed, because the owner had left his matrix elsewhere. Or a person had a matrix for personal use, and another for his work. For instance, a notary. Or a new matrix was needed because of a social change of the owner. For instance, a cheap(-looking) monogram-seal changed into a heraldic seal.

Furthermore, the owner might like to change his/her coat of arms per pale or quartered to include in a second quarter the coat of arms of the mother and after marriage that of her husband, and occasionally that of her mother when her family is socially standing on a higher level than that of her husband's family. In the French-Napoleonic years the heraldic seals were forbidden and one had to cut a new one for instance with his initials or some non-heraldic emblem as a head of a Greek or Roman god. Sometimes a person had to have more than one matrix. For instance, one while traveling and the other for his representative at home. Two matrices could occur when one was lost³ another one made, while the first one was recovered.

The circumscription may be helpful in identifying a personal seal, but after badly impressing a seal may be difficult to read. And during its stay in the cesspool the edge of the seal may probably be the first part which crumbles and disappears. In general, the seal may be 'uncoloured', as shading and stipples are absent in the matrix. And what about a 'monogram-seal'. Who is the person indicated by the initials? In short: who is the person that impressed the seal. Or who is the owner of an unidentified seal matrix.

A digitalized sigillotheque: a future dream?

Forensic (trace) investigation programs can be carried out on large data collections of fingerprints, portraits and (mini quantities of) DNA ("genetic fingerprints") exist.⁴

I was thinking about similar investigations to identify seals of unknown owners, when I attempted to identify the remains of seals showing (parts of) heraldic data. For example seal remains of a cesspool of city of Tiel showed a picture of a pelican. This could point to a member of the De Virieu family, who lived at the nearby city of Zaltbommel. At present we depend for identification on our memory and that of others. And on the Muschart collection of the Central Bureau of Genealogy at The Hague. This collection includes some 150 000 seal descriptions and their archival sources, all subdivided by heraldic objects. However, in spite of the large number of seal descriptions, including many 'doubles' he could not visit and investigate all Dutch archives, museums, libraries and private collections. For instance, Muschart paid a visit to the Archives of the city of Wageningen and concluded that there were only some 100 seals present. However, I observed, photographed and described some 1500 seals. Maybe, at the time I visited Wageningen more archival material was still in the Provincial Archives at Arnhem (Gueldre).⁴ In short: [at present, 2021] nobody knows how many seals are conserved in the various collections in The Netherlands.⁵

Of course, a digital store of seals - a sigillotheque - with descriptions, pictures and key words of each seal, conserved in The Netherlands and elsewhere would be an ideal. A scan of the unknown seal matrix or seal impression could be compared with the seals in a sigillotheque.

Users

Who will use the sigillotheque? An example: in the Wageningen Municipal Archives I observed sealed letters, signed with unreadable signatures or with initials only. Comparing scans of these seals with the seals stored in a sigillotheque would have helped in identifying the seal and the sender.

Human memory

As long as no sigillotheque is available we depend on collections such as Muschart's (with alphabetic index of the charges) and on human memory, preferably of several sigillographists.



Coll. Anton C. Zeven 48.13.
Onbekend, mogelijk een Arnhemse Van der Horst of een Arnhemse Van Eck.
Arnhem, 1780.
GAW, Oud-archief 1092.
Een leeuw. Helmtteken: een uitkomende leeuw.
N.B. Staat van Oorlog over 1780. Begeleidende brief van H.W.Brantsen, Arnhem, 3-3-1780.
Envelop met drie 'leeuwen'zegels, achterzijde met 3x Stad Arnhem.



Coll. Anton C. Zeven 20.25.
Onbekend, zie voor achtergronden Klinkenberg van Echten (20.24).
--, 18-6-1793.
GAW, Oud-archief 104.
Geen schild. Een op de rug gezien half naar links gewend vogeltje, dat op een roodborstje lijkt, staande op de rechterhelft van een horizontaal geplaatste boomstam, waaruit op de linkerhelft drie twijgjes rijzen. Het vogeltje houdt een takje in de bek, dat in drie knoppen of rozenbottels eindigt.
N.B. Samen met 20.24 (zie boven), Comité Revolu[ti]onaire (20.26) en Nuijen (20.27).
Misschien een afdruk van een intaglio gesneden stempel.

Two seal impressions of unknown persons. Municipal Archives of Wageningen.
Borrowed from note 5.

Literature and sources

¹M.H. Bartels & L.M. van der Hoeven. 2003. Familie, vrienden en zaken. Een onderzoek van het sociaal-economisch netwerk van de families van Lidth de Jeude (1701-1778) te Tiel aan de hand van lakzegels uit een beerput. *Bijdragen & Mededelingen Gelre* 99: 7-25. Remains of seals of a cesspool pointing to the network of the Lith de Jeude family.

² H. Hendrikse. 2004. Zegelstempels en zegelringen uit Zeeuwse bodem. Uitgeverij Aprilis, Zaltbommel. 144p. Seal matrices found in province Zeeland `sunken` soil. Several medieval cities and villages "sunk" in this province.

³ And of other important identification possibilities such as the identification of faces, tyre and shoe sole prints to mention only three.

⁴ A.C. Zeven. 2001. Het verlies van zegelstempels in Kampen in de 16^e eeuw. *Heraldisch Tijdschrift* 4: 68-69. The loss of seal matrices at Kampen in the 16th century.

⁵ Anton C. Zeven. 2006. Persoonlijke was- en lakzegels van uit het gemeentearchief van Wageningen. *Liber sigillorum wageningenensis*. See: www.antonzeven.nl

[In 2004 I found only one collection of seal impressions on internet. In 2021 there many collections available.]