Malay Seals as Sources for the History of Southeast Asia

Annabel Teh Gallop (British Library)

Abstract

Malay seals – which can be defined as seals from Southeast Asia engraved in Arabic script – have been used in the archipelago as symbols of royal authority for over three hundred years. Nearly 1,900 Malay seals have been documented so far, dating from ca.1560 to the early 20th century, and originating from nearly every corner of the archipelago, from Aceh in the extreme west, to Sulu and Mindanao in the north, and the island of Flores in the east.

Malay seals are in general extremely reliable historical witnesses, with care and consistency in the use of names and titles, pedigrees, toponyms and dates. As most of the Malay seals documented are from seal impressions on letters or treaties exchanged with European powers, sovereign seals are disproportionately represented in the corpus. Taking into further account the fact that over 50% of all Malay seals are dated, these sovereign seals are extremely important primary sources for history and biography in the Malay world. For example, a seal gives us the only evidence for the name of the sultan of Pahang who was reigning from 1614 to 1615: Sultan Alauddin Riayat Syah. In such ways, used in conjunction with the documents on which they are found, seals play an extremely important role in settling questions of the chronology of Islamic kingdoms in Southeast Asia.

(Left) Seal of Sultan Muhammad Azimuddin of Maguindanao (r.1780-1805), from a letter to King George III of Great Britain, 5 June 1775. British Library, IOR: H/128, p.496

(Right) Seal of Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Halim Syah of Kedah (r.1803-1843), from a letter to Lord Minto, 20 May 1811. British Library, MSS Eur.D.742/1, f. 3