



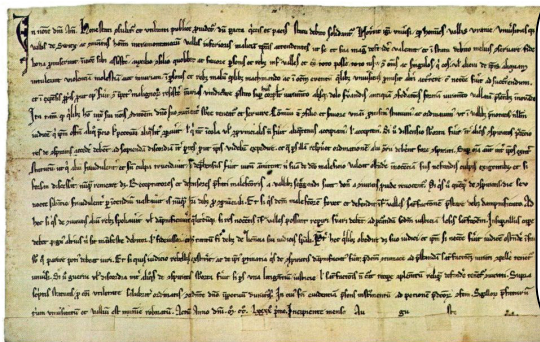
Source: Kozuch, via [Wikimedia](#)

What is a seal?

A seal is the impression left in a soft material (typically wax) by an engraved **matrix**.

This matrix (which was often also referred to as a seal) could be set in a ring or as a stamp.

Source: [Wikimedia](#)



What were seals used for?

Seals were used to prove that a letter or document was issued by a particular person or organisation, like how we use signatures or passwords today.

Seals could be attached with a 'tag' to a letter or document or used to 'seal' a document.



The 'Imperial Seal of China' was a jade seal used by Chinese emperors from third century BC to tenth century AD.

Who used seals?

Seals were commonly used by a variety of people across medieval Europe and east Asia.

Lots of men and women from different social backgrounds used seals – they were essential for doing business.

Organisations like towns and cities, religious houses, churches, and guilds also had their own shared seals.

People could buy ready-made seals or they could have seals personally engraved with their own design.

Some examples of medieval seals

On the legend (the text around the design), it reads in Latin: 'Matilda, by Grace of God, Queen of the Romans'.



Source: [Wikimedia](#)

The seal of Empress Matilda (1102–67) depicted her sitting crowned and enthroned with a sceptre. This seal was originally designed during her first marriage when she was queen of Germany. She continued using this seal when she was at war with her cousin, Stephen, over who should rule England and Normandy.



Source: [Wikimedia](#)

In east Asia, seals were typically square-shaped and impressed on ink rather than on wax.



Source: [Met Museum](#)



Source: [Wikimedia](#)

Some people liked to be depicted riding horses or hunting, such as Adelaide, duchess of Brabant (1233–73), whose seal shows her on horseback.



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Margaret Gilde of Holsam had a depiction of her namesake St Margaret slaying a dragon on her seal.



Some designs were more simple: Margery Peverel's seal showed her family heraldry with some flowers.

Source: [Oxfordshire County Council](#)

Design your own seal!

1 What shape will your seal be?

Seals in medieval Europe tended to be shaped as circles (usually if they were owned by men) or oval (if owned by women or by Church officials).

In east Asia, seals at this time tended to be square or rectangular.

3 What will you write in the legend?

The **legend** is the part of the seal with writing in it, usually arranged in a band around the design.

Typically people would write 'S.' or 'Sigillum' (which is Latin for seal or sign) and then their name.

They sometimes also wrote mottoes or sayings rather than their name.

2 What image will your seal have?

Various images appeared on seals from people and animals to buildings and cities to coats of arms.

The possibilities are endless.

You could depict yourself doing one of your favourite hobbies. You could draw something that is special to you or something that you enjoy. Or perhaps you want to draw your home or something about your family.

4 What will you use your seal for?

Think about how you might use your seal. Will you use it to seal secret messages to your friends? To sign important documents? To let others know who you are?

