In 1862 Bror Emil Hildebrand published the first part of a corpus of medieval Swedish seals, *Svenska sigiller*. Hildebrand was Antiquary of the Realm of Sweden and responsible from 1837 for the collections that were to become the Swedish Museum of National Antiquities. A second part followed in 1867. Here Hildebrand published and illustrated medieval seals preserved in what is now The National Archives and dating from the end of the 12th century to 1350.¹

Hildebrand’s time, the mid-19th century, was a period of recording: ancient monuments, buildings etc., and corpus publications of seals were issued in many European countries. The publication of Swedish seals is relatively early, which may be due to that fact that compared with many other European states, Sweden has few medieval documents. The reason for this is partly the country’s late Christianisation, but it is also a result of the losses the archives suffered in the great fire in the Royal Palace in 1697 and the fire in the Wrangel Palace in 1802. The low number of documents, the oldest of which dates from the 1160s, is also reflected in the number of seals known or preserved. The two parts of Hildebrand’s work were published with two kinds of illustrations. In the first part they are quite simple and rather crude, made with a ‘photo-lithographic method’; in the other they were ‘engraved in stone’ (Hildebrand 1867). In the second one the lines are finer and the manner more refined. A drawback of these early publications is that it is difficult to know how reliable the illustrations are.

Swedish interest in sphragistics did not start in the 19th century, however, but rather in the decades around the year 1700. When the Antiquaries, the officials appointed by the King, started studying and copying medieval manuscripts, they also took an interest in the seals. Drawings were made and reproduced as woodcuts, but much of this early documentation was destroyed in the fires mentioned above. The most important of these Antiquaries was Johan Peringsköld, although the accuracy of his or his assistants’ drawings cannot be relied upon.

Medieval seals are not only documented as impressions in wax or other materials, but also by surviving matrices. A recent survey located some 550 medieval seal matrices in Sweden, preserved in museums and other collections.² With the use of metal detectors by amateur archaeologists, many seal matrices have come to light in Denmark in recent years, but because of current Swedish legislation, this has not happened in Sweden. This means that our hopes of finding new, hitherto unknown, medieval seals have been low.

The earliest known Swedish equestrian seal (Fig. 1), and indeed the oldest known seal, belongs to the oldest document preserved in Sweden, sealed by King Karl Sverkersson and Stefan, Archbishop of Uppsala, shown here as illustrated by Hildebrand.³ The charter is dated between 1164 and 1167. The 12th century was a formative period for Sweden when rather little is known about its rulers, and the only written Swedish sources earlier than this document are brief runic inscriptions. According to the *Chronica regni Gothorum* by the late-medieval cleric Ericus Olai, Karl was elected King of Östergötland in 1158 before being made King of Sweden. Papal letters dated to 1158 or 1159 mention Karl as the King. ¹164 is the year of the consecration of Stefan as the first archbishop of Sweden. The latest possible date of the document is 1167, when Karl died. His seal can thus be dated quite narrowly to the first years of the 1160s.

The design of the seal follows the then already classic pattern of an obverse with the king enthroned and a reverse with an equestrian image. The obverse, the majesty side, of the seal is incomplete. A wood-cut in a publication from 1725 shows that, even then, nearly as much was missing as today. We see the King enthroned, with an orb in his left hand, in accordance with English and Continental seals; in his right he is holding a sword.

The counterseal, on the reverse, shows the first known Swedish equestrian seal (Fig. 2). The King sits on a horse, galloping to right. He is not dressed in armour, but appears to

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1. Hildebrand 1867.
3. After Hildebrand 1862.
wear a close-fitting garment; he also appears to wear a crown of the same type as on the obverse, but the headgear is not preserved in its upper part, and the face is badly damaged. Behind the king’s head two ribbons or streamers with tassels can be seen, seemingly fastened at his neck. Similar streamers can be seen on two earlier equestrian seals of Stephen, King of England, though he is clearly clad in armour (on a document dated 1136) and on his slightly later seal. On both he has a conical helmet. Should these streamers on the Swedish seal be interpreted as *pendilia* of the crown? Such *pendilia*, originally part of the Byzantine imperial insignia, should hang from the sides of the emperor’s diadem. On the other hand, jewelled bands hung from the neck side of the imperial diadem.

Karl Sverkersson holds a lance in his right hand and a shield in his left, which means that the back of the shield, which is a Norman shield with rounded top, is shown. Is the ornamented border on his breast something belonging to his dress, or a shoulder strap for the shield? Or does he hold both the shield and the reins with the spread fingers of his left hand? In the Middle Ages the saddle had been developed to give the rider better support and provide more protection, in that the front, the pommel, and the back, the cantle, were made higher. The saddle shown on the seal has a rather high cantle, while the pommel cannot be seen. It is fastened with a girth, and a small saddle cloth lies under it. In a galloping movement, the horse is normally held upright, with a flag with streamers, a *gonfanon*. This means that the image on Karl Sverkersson’s seal is not typical, the King holding the lance the way he does, and wearing a crown. The classic equestrian image was established by the mid-12th century. In T.A. Heslop’s words: ‘The short shield held in front of the body and the sword arm stretched out behind were to remain the norm not just for kings but for all equestrian seals until the close of the Middle Ages’.

The second earliest equestrian seal preserved in Sweden is that of Jarl Birger, nicknamed Brosa – ‘the smiling’. (This was probably because of a defective lip rather than his friendly smile.) He was one of the most important figures in Sweden in the final decades of the 12th century, related to both of the two families fighting for royal power at the time. He was the jarl of King Knut Eriksson, and is mentioned as a jarl for the first time in 1174. As mentioned before, there are very few written sources in Sweden from that time, and very little is known about him. Birger Brosa is mentioned in a number of documents as ‘dux sueorum’ and ‘sueorum et guttorum dux’, that is, ‘jarl of the Swear and the Götar’, the inhabitants of the most important parts of Sweden. He is also mentioned in a secondary source describing a treaty between Sweden and Lübeck concerning trade, signed probably in 1175 by King Knut Eriksson, Jarl Birger, and Henry the Lion, Duke of Saxony.

The only impression preserved of his seal (Fig. 3) belongs to an undated document in which Jarl Birger donated land to the nuns of Riseberga Abbey, sometime between 1180 and his death in 1202. It is a large seal and is fairly well preserved;
only the lower part is missing. Birger is represented sitting on a horse galloping to the right, in armour, with his right hand holding his sword pointing upwards behind him. He wears a conical helmet with a nasal over a mail coif, covering the chin, and a hauberk, belted around waist. He wears chausses, that is, chainmail leggings. He also has prick-spurs, hardly discernable today. The knight is very slender, even skinny.11

The sword, of the kind in use from the Viking Period onwards, has a straight hilt and a round pommel. As the sword could have been represented simply as a plain surface, the lines that can be seen as a contour should perhaps instead be interpreted as a fuller, the groove running along the blade. Birger holds his shield in front of him, covering his left arm; his left hand must also hold the reins, but that cannot be seen. The shield is of the Norman type, tapering, with a flat top. It has a decoration which can be interpreted as a lily staff; however, whether this should be seen as the earliest example of Swedish heraldry is doubtful. The saddle has high cantle and pommel, is fastened with a girth, on a small and undecorated saddle-cloth. The horse too is slender, with a long, curved neck and extremely thin forelegs. It appears to have all its legs in the air, and the knight and his horse make a triangular form, which appears to have all its legs in the air, and the knight and his horse make a triangular form, which

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‘Karolus, frater eius’ or ‘frater ducis’. This Karl must have been called Karl Bengtsson, but we also know from the 13th-century Hakonar saga by the Icelander Sturla Thordarsson that Karl was called, at least in some circles, ‘the deaf’. He is regarded as having been born, at the very latest, in 1165, and is thought to have been so much younger than Birger that they must merely have been half brothers. It is not known at what age a nobleman acquired his seal in 12th-century Sweden, but a reasonable assumption is upon reaching his majority. According to medieval Swedish provincial laws this was at the age of 15. This would date the matrix to about 1180. We also know that Karl Bengtsson became jarl only in 1219, many years after the death of his brother Birger. This would also mean that the legend of the seal would be correct until 1219 at the latest. He served as the jarl of King Johan Sverkersson, and followed after the death of his brother Birger. This would also mean that a reasonable assumption is upon reaching his majority.

Despite the differences between the two images, they are very similar in execution and spirit. Among the European seals in publications that I have studied, I have not seen any seal using the image field in this way. They are also among the largest of the period, perhaps an expression of the aspirations of a young nation to be on a par with the rulers on the Continent. To me it seems probable, even likely, that they were made by the same seal engraver.

Birger’s seal was probably used from 1174 onwards, Karl’s perhaps from about 1180. As these are among the very first seals in use in Sweden in the late 12th century, and, as in this period very few people had the right to use seals, it seems unlikely that just any Swedish goldsmith also acted as a seal engraver. A seal most likely had to be ordered and made abroad. If we first consider the question of why the seals of these brothers or half-brothers are so similar, there is one possibility. When Birger’s seal was made, probably in 1173/74, Karl’s was made as well, in expectation of his coming of age. As I find the execution of the legend less professional than the execution of the image, perhaps they were imported without legends, and these were added when needed, afterwards.

I have arrived at dates for these Swedish seals based on historical facts only. None is attached to a securely dated document. How does my hypothesis work when confronted with the development of seals outside of Sweden?

Dating seals is difficult. Early ones are often preserved only as a single impression, and even when the document is firmly dated, we can only say that the matrix existed when the document was sealed, not for how long it had been in use. The date when the owner of a seal acquires the title mentioned on the seal is the terminus post quem, and the date of the document forms the terminus ante quem. But again, we rarely know if the owner had several seals.

For comparison I have not been able to consult every corpus publication of seals, merely those easily available in Stockholm, as well as recent publications and exhibition catalogues. There is an abundance of equestrian seals in France, Germany and England, of varying artistic quality. Equestrian seals as a group date back to just after the middle of the 11th century, but it is the period 1150–1200 that is of real interest in this discussion. The equestrian seal was introduced in France as the seal of the seigneurs, counts and the dukes. By the 1130s the type is established to which these two principal matrices belong, where the knight holds his sword behind and his shield in front. But there is constant development. On early seals, the horse is walking. Around the middle of the century, the horse gallops powerfully, increasingly so towards the end of the century, and eventually it moves with all its hooves in the air. Around 1200 a flat-topped helmet with a visor replaces the conical helmet.

Even in distant Provence, such a seal would look essentially the same. William IV of Forcalquier, Count of Provence, had (on a document dated 1193–98), a large, double equestrian seal.
The obverse shows a rider in armour; the reverse is a hunting seal, a rider with a falcon, a dog, and a heron. In the second half of the 12th century a number of counts in Germany also chose this image.

Summing up comparisons, it seems that the seals of Karl Sverkersson, Birger Brosa and Karl the Deaf have no close relations among the seals in Germany, France, or England which are those countries where the matrices were most likely to have been made. There is in particular much evidence for contact between Sweden and the Continent. This was above all the result of Christianisation: in the 12th century hundreds of churches were built and the Cistercians established themselves in Sweden. There is also evidence of contacts with England in church art and early medieval liturgy. Apart from the many contacts created by the church there were of course also political contacts and trade. Considering the general stylistic progression among Continental and English seals, I think the seals of Birger Brosa and Karl the Deaf may well be given the date I have proposed, the 1170s.

The powerful image of a knight in armour, with a sword or a lance and a shield, galloping along on a horse, is of course the very symbol of the knight and of physical power. The position of the horse, displayed on the seals of Birger Brosa and Karl the Deaf, with all feet in the air, became predominant on the equestrian seals of the 13th century and later. But the motif on these seals had its counterparts in other art forms. On the Bayeux tapestry (probably commissioned in the 1070s), warriors on galloping horses can be seen rendered in the same way, and 100 years later we find the motif in book illumination.

A manuscript in the university library of Heidelberg contains a German translation of the Chanson de Roland. The manuscript can probably be dated between 1168 and 1172. Here we find a drawing (Fig. 6) representing a knight exactly as on the seals of the period: Roland, on his warhorse Velentich, and with his sword Durendal, in pursuit of a fleeing enemy. There are others examples from c. 1130 onwards which include a floor mosaic in Ganagobie, a small Benedictine Abbey in Provence and fol. 133 in the Liber in honorem Augusti, a chronicle from 1195–6, written in Palermo. This shows Diepold von Schweinspunt on horseback with lance and gonfanon, and below him an army of knights on horses at a powerful gallop, wearing conical helmets with nasals, resembling the knights depicted on late 12th-century equestrian seals. Their shields and the caparisons of their horses show armorial signs as do the late 13th-century equestrian seals. The motif also occurs in Swedish art, on a relief on the façade of Grötlingbo, a small country church on Gotland. On the façade we find a series of finely-dressed limestone ashlars carved with reliefs within arches that once formed a frieze below the base of the roof of an earlier church, built c. 1200. The sculptor was one of the very few artists to whom we can attach a name: Sigraf. Here a knight is represented, in a slightly rustic way, with lance and shield, riding as his continental colleagues. To those living in the 12th century this was a familiar theme and one found not only on seals.

Notes
1 Hildebrand 1862, pl. 1.
2 Klackenberg and Tegnér, 2002.
3 National Archives, DS 51.
4 Svenskt biografiskt lexikon, Karl Sverkersson.
5 English Romanesque Art 1066–1200, 303, nos 331–2.
6 Peringsköld 1725; Fleetwood 1936–47, ‘Karl Sverkerssons kontrasigill’.
7 Heslop 1984, 303.
8 Svenskt biografiskt lexikon, ‘Birger (1)’.
9 Blomkvist 2005, 354–7; Sveriges Traktater I, no. 50.
10 National Archives, DS 823.
12 Svenskt biografiskt lexikon, ‘Birger (1)’.
13 National Archives, DS 70; DS 11.
14 Svenskt biografiskt lexikon, ‘Karl döve’.
15 The chronicle of Henry of Livonia, 190 f.
16 University of Heidelberg, Cod. pal. ger. 112; Heinrich der Löwe und seine Zeit, I, 58 ff.
17 In Barruol et al. 1996, 21 ff.
18 Liber in honorem Augusti, a chronicle, telling the history of Sicily (Burgerbibliothek, Bern, Cod. 120 II, fol. 133; Költzer 1995, 41 ff).
Medieval Seal Matrices found at Castles and Castle Mounds in Denmark – What does Archaeology tell us about their Use?

Michael Andersen

Medieval seals are traditionally studied from a heraldic, epigraphical, biographical or iconographical point of view. And sigillographic studies are usually carried out on preserved impressions, most of them in wax, a minor number in metal. In those rare cases where the matrix is actually preserved, it is often studied not as an archaeological object per se, but rather as an image. In many cases the historian will actually be satisfied with a modern impression of the matrix – information about find context, material and manufacture being regarded of less importance.

Archaeology, however, has much to offer modern sigillography. It is important, for example, to pay attention to the material used for the matrix, because this may indicate something about its use. From an impression, it is not clear whether the matrix was made from silver, bronze or lead. This is important information, since a king’s or bishop’s seal made from lead is suspicious. If not simply a fake, the seal has certainly functioned under special circumstances. Archaeology is also a matter of find context. Where was the seal matrix actually found? Most known matrices have been preserved in the ground, whether in a grave or elsewhere.

Among many different types of objects found at medieval castles and castle mounds in Denmark are seal matrices (Fig. 1). Their number is not very high, and may be counted in dozens. Seal matrices have been found both as a result of excavations and as stray finds. Their numbers are so great that the seal matrices from castles can be regarded as a special find group. The introduction of metal detectors in Danish archaeology is responsible for making the study of seal matrices from an archaeological point of view more relevant than ever before.

A seal may either belong to an institution, for example a monastery, a guild or a town, or the seal is personal. In the latter case it usually displays the name of the person who owned or used it. The seal matrices found at Danish castles and castle mounds are all personal. It is a well-known fact that the seal of an individual must be regarded as one of the most personal belongings of all. The seal on a medieval deed corresponds to the signature on paper today when we sign a document. Obtaining a person’s seal, could result in the issue of documents in his or her name. A number of cases from medieval Europe indicate that this could cause great difficulties.

It was once felt among sigillographers that the possibility of finding a seal matrix was relatively small, as it was believed that the matrices were generally broken after the death of their owners and discarded. To quote Diederich:

Daß heute nur noch wenige Typare erhalten sind, erklärt sich nicht alleine aus den eingetretenen Verlusten. Entscheidend ist vielmehr, daß man nach dem Tode eines Siegelführers seinen Siegelstempel vernichtete, weil man befürchtete, er könne mißbraucht werden.¹

and Laurent:

Ces matrices étaient généralement brisées lorsqu’on cessait de les utiliser et les pièces originales conservées sont exceptionnelles.²

It is necessary to revise our opinion on this point.

More than 400 seal matrices from the Middle Ages are kept in Danish museum collections.³ The special thing about the Danish collections of seal matrices is that almost all of the objects have a known provenance. Most of them have been

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¹ Diederich: Daß heute nur noch wenige Typare erhalten sind, erklärt sich nicht alleine aus den eingetretenen Verlusten. Entscheidend ist vielmehr, daß man nach dem Tode eines Siegelführers seinen Siegelstempel vernichtete, weil man befürchtete, er könne mißbraucht werden.

² Laurent: Ces matrices étaient généralement brisées lorsqu’on cessait de les utiliser et les pièces originales conservées sont exceptionnelles.

³ Danish museum collections.
found in the ground; a smaller number, all of them institutional seals, have been kept for example in cathedral chanceries or town offices more or less to the present day. The number of matrices originating from private collections is very small; a quite different situation to that in the United Kingdom, France and Germany, where it is often the case that the provenance is doubtful or unknown due to trading among collectors. It may even be the case that the country of origin is unknown. A known provenance adds immense historical value to a seal matrix.

The number of seal matrices found in Denmark has been increasing since the 1980s, mainly due to the activities of metal detectorists, who hand in their finds to the National Museum in accordance with Danish antiquarian law. The use of metal detectors by private individuals has not been banned in Denmark, as for example in Sweden and France. Instead Danish museums and antiquarian authorities have established an exemplary and very rewarding collaboration between professional archaeologists and amateurs. Finds must be handed into a museum as it is illegal for private individuals to keep the finds themselves. In return, a reward is paid, and, more importantly to many finders, the amateur archaeologist receives information about his or her find. This liberal attitude towards the private user of metal detectors has resulted in a large number of finds of great value. One of the consequences of this practice is that types of metal objects that were commonplace. This applies to many sorts of coins and pilgrim badges as well as seal matrices.

Approximately 30 seal matrices have been found at castle mounds and castles in Denmark. Interestingly institutional seals are not numbered among them. Some examples are unfinished, which is interesting, as it shows that seals were engraved at the castle. All of the matrices in question are bronze, personal seals. This is not surprising since most known seal matrices are made of this material. In Denmark this applies to approximately 85% of surviving seal matrices.5

How should we then interpret these finds? What is the link between the owner of a specific seal matrix and the castle where it was found? Does the seal in any way indicate the name of the owner? It is known from documentary sources that charters were issued at a number of Danish castles and strongholds. Some of the strongholds belonged to the crown, but this was not always the case, as many castles were private. The letters were usually sealed by both the issuer and a number of witnesses. It is reasonable to believe that a seal matrix might be lost on such an occasion to be found later by a lucky archaeologist. In such cases it would probably prove to be intact, and, after conservation, there should be every chance of reading and interpreting it. However, a number of matrices found at castles in Denmark are broken or in other ways made unfit for use, for example by hammering or filing the face of the matrix. It is clear that this has been done deliberately. Destruction of the matrices applies to approximately 25% of the finds.

Only a few broken seals from castles are known from the archaeological literature. John Cherry has published an equestrian seal matrix from the early 13th century found in England at Kempsford, Gloucestershire. The seal was broken in two, and Cherry suggests that the act took place at the owner’s castle. The fragments are believed to have been thrown away in the River Thames which runs next to the castle.6

Jules Roman mentions the broken seal of Marguerite, Dame de Villars-Thoire, which was found in the ruins of the Montreal (Ain) castle.6 As far as I know these are some of the only observations of their kind outside Denmark, but, on the other hand, comprehensive studies of seal matrices as archaeological objects are still missing from most European countries.

Broken seals are usually found in graves, where they were placed together with the deceased. The intention was to make it completely impossible to misuse the seal after the owner’s death. Perhaps it was also the intention to make identification of the dead body possible, when the grave was opened some time in future. We know from both written sources and from archaeological finds that seals were broken after the owner’s death. This practice is mentioned in several instances during medieval times in Denmark, Sweden, England and elsewhere.7 One could assume that the finding of a broken seal matrix would automatically indicate a cemetery or a church, but this is not the case. Instead we can tell from the Danish finds that broken seal matrices are indicators of either a cemetery or a castle. No broken seal matrices have occurred under other circumstances in Denmark.

I have not been able to find any written sources that relate in detail what happened to the seals at castles, but I believe I can give some indications. One explanation could be that the owner of the seal had committed a crime so serious that he lost his rights and privileges – as a knight for example. In such a case his coats of arms might be broken at a ceremony, where it is reasonable to imagine that his seal matrix would be treated in the same way. In fact it would be the ‘killing’ of the seal. Less dramatic, but still serious, was the case where a seal matrix had been used for fraud and had to be taken out of use. We do not know if this was the case sometime during the 13th century at Hallenslevlund, a local stronghold in western Sealand, south of the medieval town Kalundborg. Archaeologists found a broken seal with the coats of arms of the Hvide family – one of the most wealthy and influential families in medieval Denmark (Fig. 2). On the fragment the following inscription is preserved: SECRETEM PETRI PI’ (secret seal of Peter son of…). We have not yet discovered who Peter was. When studied carefully it is obvious that the reverse has been hammered and that the seal was deliberately destroyed. We must conclude,

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**Figure 2** Seal for a Peter of the Hvide family found at the stronghold Hallenslevlund in West Sealand (length 6.9cm). Photo Flemming Rasmussen

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We do not know why the matrix was actually broken. However, there are other, less sensational explanations. Could it be that a seal was declared dead, null and void, and a new one was presented to the public in a ceremony which took place at the castle? The situation could be that the owner of the seal had a new one made, perhaps for security reasons. It is quite certain that many important persons changed their personal seal several times in the course of their lives. Hans Kjeldsen’s case is an interesting one. He served as Danish Chancellor from 1486 onwards. Unfortunately he must have lost his silver seal matrix just outside the medieval city of Roskilde, where it was found 12 years ago (Fig. 3). It is remarkable that we do not have impressions from this seal on charters preserved in our archives. Instead we know of three other seals that have replaced one another during the same period.9 Why did he change his seal so often? He could not possibly have lost them all. Change in social position during a long career is certainly one explanation, but precaution is definitely a consideration. It could be a wise safety measure to change a seal. The interesting question is what happened when he changed from one to another. He could not simply throw the old one away. It had to be officially declared that the old one was no longer valid, and that a new and slightly different one would now be in use. How was such a declaration made in the Middle Ages? It had to be done in front of witnesses, and these witnesses must be on the same social level as the owner of the seal. Where would this act take place? The castle would be a natural location. The old seal would be broken in front of the witnesses, and, at the same time the new one would be presented. We know a number of instances from historical sources throughout Europe, where seals have been declared void. It is documented that the Earl of Gloucester and Hereford in 1267 lost his seal and, at the same time the new one would be presented. We do not know why the matrix was actually broken. There may be other, less sensational explanations. Could it be that a seal was declared dead, null and void, and a new one was presented to the public in a ceremony which took place at the castle? The situation could be that the owner of the seal had a new one made, perhaps for security reasons. It is quite certain that many important persons changed their personal seal several times in the course of their lives. Hans Kjeldsen’s case is an interesting one. He served as Danish Chancellor from 1486 onwards. Unfortunately he must have lost his silver seal matrix just outside the medieval city of Roskilde, where it was found 12 years ago (Fig. 3). It is remarkable that we do not have impressions from this seal on charters preserved in our archives. Instead we know of three other seals that have replaced one another during the same period.9 Why did he change his seal so often? He could not possibly have lost them all. Change in social position during a long career is certainly one explanation, but precaution is definitely a consideration. It could be a wise safety measure to change a seal. The interesting question is what happened when he changed from one to another. He could not simply throw the old one away. It had to be officially declared that the old one was no longer valid, and that a new and slightly different one would now be in use. How was such a declaration made in the Middle Ages? It had to be done in front of witnesses, and these witnesses must be on the same social level as the owner of the seal. Where would this act take place? The castle would be a natural location. The old seal would be broken in front of the witnesses, and, at the same time the new one would be presented. We know a number of instances from historical sources throughout Europe, where seals have been declared void. It is documented that the Earl of Gloucester and Hereford in 1267 lost his seal matrix from a bridge. It was then declared null and void and a new one was officially presented in front of witnesses.9 Of course there was no seal to break if it lay deep underwater. The situation was the same, when Danish King Valdemar’s seal went down with a ship between Jutland and Seeland in 1359.10

In 1505 the Danish nobleman Oluf Mouritzen Falkenberg was attacked by the Swedes, who stole his seal matrix among other things. We know this from a document, which he had to issue to make the matrix null and void.11 The situation was different in Sarum in England in the 13th century. In an ordinance respecting the use of the Chapter seal of Sarum, dated 7 January 1214, it was decided from that date to give up the use of the old bone seal on account of its numerous flaws.12 We do not know what happened to the bone seal, but it was probably treated in a way that would make it impossible to misuse it afterwards. Perhaps it would not be surprising if a fragment turned up at a castle nearby. The second seal of the mayors of London is an interesting example, as we know from a document of 17 April 1381 that it was to be destroyed because it was ‘small, crude and ancient, ugly and unworthy of the honour of the said city’ (‘parvum, rude et antiquum erat, ineptum et indecens’), and a new one, ‘commendable and skilful’ (‘honificum et artificiosum’), which the mayor had made for the said office, should take its place.13

If the seal matrix was made of silver the situation would be different. Silver matrices, with very few exceptions, are not found in graves and definitely not at castles. They were melted down instead and turned into new silver objects. In France it was a tradition that the silver matrices of the kings were given to a monastic institution at La Saussaisie-les-Villejuifs (Seine-et-Oise).14 And in England Queen Elizabeth I donated her silver matrix to her chancellor Bacon, who had a cup made from it. He couldn't keep the matrix, of course.15 The matrices of the bishops of Durham were offered to the shrine of St Cuthbert.16 It is interesting to observe that when the German bishop Bruno of Meissen resigned in 1228 his seal was broken. One half was given to the cathedral chapter, the other half was sent down instead and turned into new silver objects. In France it was a tradition that the silver matrices of the kings were given to a monastic institution at La Saussaisie-les-Villejuifs (Seine-et-Oise).14 And in England Queen Elizabeth I donated her silver matrix to her chancellor Bacon, who had a cup made from it. He couldn't keep the matrix, of course.15 The matrices of the bishops of Durham were offered to the shrine of St Cuthbert.16 It is interesting to observe that when the German bishop Bruno of Meissen resigned in 1228 his seal was broken. One half was given to the cathedral chapter, the other half was sent down instead and turned into new silver objects. In France it was a tradition that the silver matrices of the kings were given to a monastic institution at La Saussaisie-les-Villejuifs (Seine-et-Oise).14 And in England Queen Elizabeth I donated her silver matrix to her chancellor Bacon, who had a cup made from it. He couldn't keep the matrix, of course.15 The matrices of the bishops of Durham were offered to the shrine of St Cuthbert.16

It is well documented that cities kept their old seals even though they were no longer in use. Wilhelm Ewald mentions several examples of German cities that kept their old and discarded seal matrices. In 1568 the city of Nuremberg placed its old seal matrix in a leather pouch that was closed and sealed. They did not destroy it.18 The same occurred in Breslau in 1530, where it was publicly announced that

Figure 3 Hans Kjeldsens silver matrix found near the medieval city of Roskilde. Modern impression to the left (diam. 2.9 cm). Contemporary impression of one of his earlier seals to the right. Photo Flemming Rasmussen
Bedos-Rezak regarding the French medieval towns of Arras (Pas-de-Calais) and Najac (Aveyron). An interesting variation of the practice is the English case of 1292, when the King of England had the seal of Scotland publicly broken and sent in four pieces to the English Treasury to be kept as evidence of English suzerainty.

Can we draw any parallels with the seal matrices found at Danish castles? The vital point is that seal matrices were often kept after they were no longer in use. It is, however, important to stress that the written sources, with few exceptions, speak of institutional seals. The ones found at the Danish castles are all personal. The royal castle of Søborg is the castle in Denmark where most seal matrices have been found (Fig. 4). Søborg is a ruined castle in North Sealand, originally built by the Archbishop in around 1150, and later extended by the King in about 1200. It functioned as an important royal prison and as a royal stronghold until the 16th century. Eight seal matrices have been found to date, two of which were deliberately damaged (Fig. 5). One of the damaged matrices is made of lead (Fig. 6). It is very difficult to read the legend. It has been struck with a hammer in the centre, and, in addition, it has been cut with a knife or something similar.

Were seals actually produced at Danish castles, or were they only brought there to be officially presented and later – after a longer or shorter period of use – declared null and void? The art of seal-cutting was a highly regarded skill of the goldsmith in the medieval period. It is reasonable to suppose that seals in general were produced in towns, where the goldsmiths had their workshops. So the expectation would be to find archaeological evidence of seal-cutting in the stratigraphy of urban sites. We only know one example of an unfinished seal matrix from an urban context in Denmark. It is a bishop’s seal matrix with a defect, it has a flaw and is unfinished. It was found just outside the cathedral of Roskilde.

However, at least three unfinished seal matrices have been found at castle mounds in Denmark. During the 14th century, when the use of seals became more widespread, blank seals were produced in quite large numbers. They were subsequently engraved with legends and images and often appear among metal detector finds. The area around the castle mound of Tårnborg in south-west Sealand was excavated some years ago.
(Fig. 7). Among the finds were seven medieval seal matrices of different dates (Figs 8–12). The royal castle of Tårnborg, which literally means 'Tower Castle', was in use from the late 12th century until the 15th century. Tårnborg consists of two mounds. The largest one measures 69 x 69m and has the remains of a wall and a central keep made of brick. The fortress forms part of the coastal defence at the Great Belt. One of the seals belonged to an Olaf Koggi (Fig. 9). The inscription reads: s olavi koggi, (although the ship depicted is not a cog). Another seal belonged to a man named Hemming: s hemmingi lug… . Three of the seal matrices are of special interest in the present context: one is broken and two have not been finished (Figs 10–12). The broken one is only a small fragment and is difficult to read. On the two unfinished matrices there is nothing to read as the inscriptions have not been engraved.

One of the unfinished examples is a royal matrix where the King is shown on his throne with orb and sword in his hands (Fig. 11). Was this where the King usually had his royal seals made? It is very unlikely. Royal seals were produced by the finest goldsmiths in one of the Danish cities – or perhaps even abroad. This seal was possibly for use on a special occasion when the king himself was not present. I will return to this special use of seals. It is often said that seals were so important that they had to remain with their owners all the time. However, there are many indications that seal matrices, especially those of officials, could travel unaccompanied. The other unfinished matrix was intended for a clergyman as the pointed oval shape indicates (Fig. 12). Again, the matrix lacks an inscription, but there is space for a legend. The image is incomplete but it seems to show the Lamb of God.
The last Danish find to be discussed here was found some years ago at the medieval manor called Hørup in North Sealand. It is a plain circular matrix, unfinished as both motif and inscription have not yet been added (Fig. 13). Was it planned for someone to have a seal cut and presented in the presence of witnesses at Hørup? Or were a number of blanks simply kept so that a seal could be cut only when needed.

I believe that the seals found at Danish castles and castle mounds from the Middle Ages bear witness to an aspect of life peculiar to such sites: i.e. to the practice of witnessing documents, and, furthermore, witnessing the introduction of new matrices.

What is the link between a seal matrix found at a castle and the owner of the matrix? There are many possibilities. Perhaps the only connection is that on a certain day a number of men of high status were present, who were able to witness the introduction or destruction of a seal matrix. Usually they would be there simply to witness documents. We cannot be sure that the owner of the seal was the owner of the castle, where it was found. But may we then conclude that the owner of the seal matrix was present on the same day at the castle, when his seal was either broken, introduced or simply used for sealing? Usually the seal matrix would follow its owner – sometimes all the way to his grave. It was dangerous to leave it in the possession of another person. Still we know quite a number of examples that reveal how seals were sent to a specific place, where a deed was to be issued. It was impossible, or simply not practical, to gather all the relevant persons at the same time. Wilhelm Ewald mentions several examples of the practice of collecting seal matrices from a number of persons or institutions in order to seal an important document. The owners of the seals were not necessarily present for practical reasons.23

Although it may sound risky, we know that a person could have his master’s seal cut. This is why goldsmiths in a number of German towns were forced to ask for a sealed letter, if they were to cut a new seal. The owner was not present, so he had to issue an order. In such cases the seal did not have to be made of the finest material, because it was only meant to be used once or twice. From Danish history we know of the case in 1346, when King Valdemar negotiated with the knights of the Teutonic Order over the sale of Estonia. The King sent an official, the knight Stig Andersen, to Reval (present day Tallin) to settle the matter. It was considered too dangerous to send with him the official state seal matrix. Instead he was given a sealed letter, which entitled him to have a royal seal cut upon his arrival in Reval.24 This was to be a seal matrix that the King would probably never handle. The matrix does not exist any more. However, a find from Estonia in the 19th century may provide a close parallel. This matrix, made from bronze, bears the inscription: [Seal for Eric by the Grace of God King of the Danes and the Slavs] (Fig. 14). Unfortunately no impressions have survived, and, therefore, we do not know to which Eric it belonged. An educated guess would be that it was King Eric Menved, who died in 1319. Did King Eric ever visit Estonia? Only a few Danish kings did. One thing is certain: we cannot interpret the seal matrix as an indication of a royal visit to Estonia. It may very well have been made for the Danish administration there.

The link between the owner of a seal matrix found at a castle and the owner of the site is difficult to determine. The archaeological finds, however, provide new information about administrative practices at castles. A seal matrix found at a castle cannot be used as proof of the seal owner’s visit to the location in question. It is advisable to be very cautious when dealing with seals found at castles since a seal found in the ground need not provide evidence of who owned the place. There is of course some link between the owner of the seal and the castle, but it may be of a very superficial character. Perhaps he simply needed to go to the castle to have a letter witnessed or to have his seal authenticated or cancelled in front of witnesses, whom he may not have known. He may even have had his seal sent instead of going himself!

Notes
1 Diederich 1980, 13.
2 Laurent 1987, 5.
3 Andersen 2002.
4 Andersen 2002.
5 Cherry 2002.
6 Roman 1912.
7 Andersen 2002; Cherry 2002.
8 Andersen 1997, 45.
9 Bloom 1906, 139–40.
10 Thiset 1917, cat. no. 38.
11 Kancelliets Brevbøger, 687.
12 Bloom 1906, 188.
13 Age of Chivalry 1987, cat. no. 195.
15 Bloom 1906, 85.
16 Bedos-Rezak 2006a, 349 ff.
17 Ewald 1914, 110.
18 Ib., 237.
19 Ib., loc. cit.
20 Bedos-Rezak 2006a, 342–3.
21 Cherry 2002, 83.
22 Andersen 2000, 146.
23 Ewald 1914, 54–5.
24 Christensen 1957–9, 381–428.
The Re-engraved Matrix: Bishop versus Chapter in Nidaros around 1300
Erla Bergendahl Hohler

This is a story about a matrix which was re-engraved. Basically, there is nothing surprising in this. There are any number of examples, known from all countries and periods. Old matrices received new legends, reconstructions were made when the original was lost, or new ornaments were added. Or there are deliberate fakes. Most of the time we do not know why these things happened. Here we have, however, a case of re-engraving where we can reconstruct very well why it happened.

In the archives of The Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters in Trondheim was a bronze matrix, apparently found in the river bank in the 1870s. It is now exhibited in the Museum of Natural Science and Archaeology (Videnskapsmuseet) in Trondheim. It has a loop on the back, and the legend in the beaded ring reads (normalised): SICILU CAPITULI ECCLESIE SANCII OLAVI REGIS ET MARTIRIS. The figure is crowned and enthroned, and carries an orb and sceptre (Fig. 1).

This is the seal of the Chapter of the cathedral in Trondheim. The town was called Nidaros in the Middle Ages, and it was the centre of the archdiocese of the same name which included not only Norway, but also Iceland, Greenland, Orkney, Shetland and the Isles.

There is no doubt who the figure represents. Olav Haraldsson was King of Norway from 1015 until he was killed in battle in 1030. He was claimed as a martyr and saint only five years later, and he became by far the most popular saint in the North, where a large number of sculptures and paintings are still preserved. Most often he is represented as an enthroned king. He was enshrined in Nidaros cathedral, so it was perfectly reasonable that the Chapter should have chosen him for their seals; many of the archbishops did, too, and a large number of churches, religious foundations, or guilds in Scandinavia; England, Poland, or Germany had him as their patron saint.

On this seal matrix, the saint, flanked by a five-petalled rose to either side, is seated on a throne. His crown has a low ring and wide-spreading fleurons in the 13th-century manner. He appears to be wearing a sub-tunic and above this a tunic with short and wide sleeves, falling in soft thin folds held in by a belt. The mantle, fastened with a chain across the chest, has been draped from his left knee across to the right in distinct folds. The drapery belongs to the thin ‘troughed-folds’ or ‘muldenfalten’ type of the first half of the 13th century, rather than to the later ‘broad fold’ type, which reached Norway c. 1270–80. The throne has corner posts with projecting lily-shaped crests, and is decorated with tall, round-headed arches. On the seat is a cushion with a criss-cross pattern. The legend, framed by beaded rings, is easily readable, but the cross at the top is not aligned with the crown.

The earliest known impression with this image of St Olav is attached to a letter from 1263 or 1264. This date fits reasonably well with the style and with the fact that the Chapter, for various reasons, apparently enjoyed a vastly increased income in the 1250s, and may have felt that they could afford a little extravagance, such as a new seal matrix.

The attribute is interesting. The orb is quite common in representations of St Olav, but the sceptre appears unusual. Olav is normally represented as holding an axe. He was killed with an axe, and so that is a symbol of his martyrdom. This is the usual explanation given, but it has also been suggested that the axe is a symbol of royal power, since so many Norwegian kings selected this axe for their own seals or banners. Conversely, the royal axe might refer to St Olav’s position as eternal king of Norway.

Whatever the explanation, the axe is not the only possible attribute employed in representations of St Olav. Nearly all the surviving sculptures from the 13th and 14th centuries show him seated on a throne, with his right arm stuck out as if holding something. Most of them have lost their right hands. But the St Olav from Tanum holds his preserved hand up in such an elegant way that there is no room for an axe handle – a sceptre is much more likely (Fig. 2). Moreover, very few have any mark or hole in the gown or on the plinth which indisputably proves an axe; a small hole on the knee may equally have supported a sceptre. Later restorations have often had them axes.

Olav statues from the late Middle Ages are different; these are normally represented standing, and holding solid halberds. From this, the dogma of the obligatory axe may have its origin.

There is, nonetheless, evidence for sceptres. A sceptre appears on the seal of the Dominicans in Oslo, and on the seal of the Guardian of the Franciscans in Bergen, where Olav holds both the axe and the sceptre. Here, the sceptre is crowned by a hand, a main de justice, on top. Other saint-kings in Scandinavia: St Erik, and St Knud, certainly have sceptres.
This seal was not the first in Nidaros. There is an earlier seal, which also shows St Olav with a sceptre.\(^1\) The only surviving impression is attached to a document from 1225, and is badly damaged; the legend is lost (Fig. 3).\(^2\) The picture is quite like that on the matrix, but the figure is much less robust, the mantle is drawn across the knees in the opposite direction, and the right arm is bent in a different way. The legend is missing, but the document text, although ambiguous, refers to the ‘korsbroedra’ (choir-brothers) of the ‘stadhr’ (place) of St Olav. Some historians have suggested that the regular Chapter at Trondheim was instituted only by Archbishop Sorle in 1252\(^3\) – secular or regular, the canons would anyway have needed a seal before this, and would have had one made. So they established a tradition, probably already in the 12th century. They selected St Olav as their symbol: he was represented as an enthroned king, and he carried a sceptre, not an axe.

But the preserved matrix contains more than just an enthroned king with a sceptre: there are also two roses in the background. This is where the story begins. The earliest impression of the Chapter seal with this particular representation of the enthroned St Olav with orb and troughed folds is, as stated above, attached to a document from 1263 or 1264 (Fig. 4).\(^4\) But there are no roses in the background.\(^5\) However, it is definitely impressed with the very matrix that survives in Trondheim – the dimensions are the same, and all the details, such as the round-headed arches on the throne and the misaligned cross, are identical. Decisive is the positioning of the letters in the legend, where the capital L and I radiate from the bottom right-hand corner of the throne. All features are identical – except for the roses.

There are two other surviving impressions from this matrix without roses. One is from 1277, and the other is from 1281.\(^6\) In the latter document it is used only as a counterseal, for the Chapter is here also employing a larger seal (Fig. 5).\(^7\) This has a motif of a fairly usual kind, with a symbolic church, containing Christ in a niche, with the clergy below. Judging from the details in this seal, such as the rather primitive Gothic architecture, this should also have been made in the second half of the 13th century.

So there is evidence that at least in 1281 the Chapter owned two matrices, one small with the enthroned St Olav, and one larger with architecture and clergy. And both were plain, without any roses.

The next surviving impression turns up in 1303.\(^8\) In fact, there are two impressions from this year. They show the same seated St Olav as the previous ones. But on the best preserved of the two there is a star on the dexter side of the King (Fig. 6).\(^9\) There may have been another on the sinister side, but there is not enough left of either of these two impressions to be sure.

At first glance, it would appear to be the same matrix as that used in 1281, only with this star added. But closer scrutiny shows that it is in fact impressed by another matrix. It is 2mm wider, the throne appears to have Gothic pointed arches, not round-headed, and the letters in the legend are differently placed, with the S at the corner of the throne. Trifling differences, but again decisive.

After a new interval the next surviving impression of the Chapter’s seal dates from 1307, four years later.\(^10\) Here the St Olav is again employed as a counterseal, with the larger seal on the obverse (this is broken). But in this instance it is a genuine
impression from the matrix preserved in the museum: the one which had the roses added. And all the subsequent impressions from this date until the Reformation are made with this rose-decorated matrix.21

To recapitulate: the Chapter had a matrix, without roses, last documented in 1281 (Fig. 2). From 1307 on, they used the same matrix, but with two roses added (Fig. 1). But in the interval, they used another matrix, documented in 1303 (Fig. 6). The changes are noted by Trætteberg in his shortlist of Nidaros seals (1953), but he does not comment on them. What was going on?

The state of preservation of Norwegian medieval documents and written sources is not very satisfactory, compared to most other European countries. A great deal has been lost. But most of the remaining documents were put into print in the Diplomatarium Norvegicum (DN) from the 1860s on, and the seals were carefully drawn for The National Archive (Riksarkivet) by hired professional artists. And miraculously, enough written material survives from the period just before and after the year 1300, so that we can in fact follow what went on in the Nidaros Cathedral establishment at the time. There was a tremendous battle going on between the Archbishop and his canons. This battle has aroused quite some interest (and a certain amusement) among historians,22 but no-one has noticed that there is also tangible evidence, in the form of seals.

Archbishop Jon (1268–82) had been on collision course with the King about the power of the archiepiscopal administration. He had to some extent been quite successful, and the Chapter had benefited very well from this. As a consequence, the canons became quite ambitious, perhaps a bit above themselves. There was a six-year vacancy before they got a new archbishop, and by then they had apparently become used to taking on all the administration, also that which rightly should belong to the bishop: appointments of priests and canons, jurisdiction and collection of fines, incomes from land, everything. But now, the new Bishop, Jørund, (1288–1309), was apparently determined to put a stop to all this. He was appointed by the Pope, and did not belong among the local canons since he came from another diocese, and he clearly felt that the Bishop should take back all these responsibilities unto himself, without consulting the Chapter.

The belligerent canons did not take this lying down. From documents we can see the on-going dispute. (I have selected a few – there are in fact about 20 letters preserved which relate to this.) The earliest is from the Pope in 1292, from which we gather that Jørund had complained to him that some ‘clerics’ had exercised violence against other ecclesiastical persons.23 In 1293, the canons and many local clerics issue a statement listing all the rights which the Chapter had at the time of the previous bishop, and claim that they alone shall be in charge of the Cathedral’s inventory.24 Several letters from other ecclesiastical institutions in the bishopric bear testimony to the previous rights of the canons, which they explain that Jørund has ignored. In return, that same year the Archbishop fines the whole Chapter a large sum for not having turned up at a meeting to which he had called them. The meeting, as a matter of fact, was planned to take place in the furthest north of Norway, a very long and uncomfortable distance away, and the summons may have been regarded as pure provocation by the canons.25 In other letters from the Pope, or from his nominated official, the Bishop of Bergen, we learn continually about riots in the streets, public excommunications during church services, and other humiliations on both sides.

In addition to these letters, there is the Icelandic Bishop Laurentius’s saga. Laurentius Kalfsson spent some years in Nidaros as a young man, was taken under Archbishop Jørund’s wing, and became wholly his man. In his saga, written soon after his death and apparently a near-autobiography, he describes these incidents seen from the Archbishop’s side; Jørund certainly had a case as well.26

From 1297 there is a letter from the Pope, trying to sort things out.27 An agreement between the parts in the same year states that the Chapter shall keep its various incomes, the Chapter’s Thesaurarius shall be in charge of their property: their gold, their table ornaments etc., and two canons shall be in charge of the necessary keys.28 In 1299 we see that the Archbishop had indeed confiscated the canons’ property. Inquisitors appointed by the Pope write to the Archbishop that he shall hand back to the Chapter all the goods that he has impounded. Among the things listed in this letter are their seal matrices (‘sigilla ipsius capituli’). He had clearly taken both the small and the large matrix.29 It cannot be known precisely when the confiscation had taken place – the letters from this early turbulent period have all lost their official chapter seals. The temporary agreement from 1297 was however sealed only individually by the canons.

Then, in 1303, there are the two letters from the Chapter mentioned above, with seals attached. The canons have written to the various diocesan bishops, enclosing copies of the Pope’s judgment on the matter,30 and it is one of these letters which has the seal with a star in the background.31 The other letter is a document related to somebody’s gift to the church, but here the seal is so damaged that it cannot be properly evaluated.32 Presumably this was also the matrix with a star. From this evidence, it would seem that the Chapter, tired of waiting for the Archbishop to do as he is told, must have commissioned a new matrix for themselves.
In September 1303, yet another message to the Archbishop arrives from the Bishop in Bergen, the Pope’s official, again insisting firmly that all the Nidaros canons’ properties must be given back to them. The Archbishop presumably gave in after that. He went away to Bergen, and later moved to Oslo, as is evident from other documents. By 1308 he was back in Nidaros, where he died in 1309.

As for the Chapter, there are no surviving seals until we get to the year 1307, when there is a letter with seal attached. This is a perfectly ordinary and peaceful document: it acknowledges an endowment of 100 marks to the Chapter from King Håkon V and his Queen. For this they used the old matrix, the one that had been confiscated by the Archbishop. This was now clearly back in its rightful place, with the Chapter. But the canons have now had two roses engraved in the empty spaces above the saint. They obviously wanted to make quite sure that no-one made any mistakes here!

But what about the large matrix, the Chapter’s main seal, with the church building and the clergy engraved? This was also confiscated, as the admonition from the Pope in 1299 indicates, and presumably also handed back?

There are impressions from 1307 and 1359, but both are unfortunately incomplete. The third, the only reasonably well-preserved impression made after the incident, dating from 1448, was drawn for the National Archive in the 19th century. At this time there was certainly at least one rose to be seen on this seal (Fig. 7). This particular part of the seal is lost today, but cannot really be an invention by the artist. The canons must have felt the need to safeguard this matrix, too, after their horrible experience.

So that is the story. Thanks to all these documents, the life of the preserved matrix can be reconstructed. But why did the canons go back to using the old matrix, when the new one with the star, presumably made around 1300, was clearly both more elegant and more up-to-date, stylistically speaking? Several papers in the current conference demonstrated how new matrices would be commissioned in order to demonstrate ambitions, or to keep up with stylistic developments; the canons of Nidaros clearly did not care. Were they unusually conservative, or do we see here a triumphant gesture on the part of the Chapter?

Notes
2. T.1504 (Rygh 1875).
3. See Morgan 2004, 26 for a discussion of the development of drapery folds in Norway,
4. NRA-AM 5.1.
6. The seal/matrix has been discussed by many writers: Fett 1903, 67–8; Kielland 1927, 124; Trætteberg 1953, no. 29; Trætteberg 1958, 204; Fjordholm 1996, 90–3; Dybdahl 1999, 100, and ibid 1999a, 50, no. 62; Adorsen 2006, 112.
12. DN II 8 RN 1529.
15. Trætteberg 1953, no. 27.
16. NRA-AM 5.11, DN III, 16, Reg. II, 261
17. Trætteberg 1953, no. 27.
18. NRA-AM 30.7, NRA-AM 7.8
19. Trætteberg 1953, no. 32.
20. NRA-AM 7.21.
23. DN VI, 61, Reg. II, 662.
25. Keyser 1856–8, II, 75; DN II, 764.
30. DN IV, 57, Reg. III, 106.
31. Trætteberg 1952, no. 32.
32. DN II 68, Reg. III, 108.
34. DN II, 87, Reg. III, 428.
35. Trætteberg 1953, no. 28.
36. Trætteberg loc. cit.
37. I am very grateful to Halvor Kjellberg, Riksarkivet, who looked at this and the other impressions with me, and discussed them with me.

Figure 7 Chapter seal of Nidaros Cathedral 1448. Drawing NRA, AM 16.4
Seals of Swedish Towns before 1350

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Introduction

In the year 1350, after the Black Death had swept over Europe, King Magnus Eriksson’s realm was one of the largest in Europe, reaching from Greenland and Iceland in the north Atlantic to the Gulf of Finland in the east. King Magnus had inherited the Norwegian and Swedish crowns and bought Scania from the collapsing Danish realm. The map in Figure 1 shows the extension of medieval Sweden and also the 27 towns that are believed to have existed about 1350. Most of these towns were small, not to say very small, in comparison with many continental towns. The biggest ones, such as Visby, Stockholm and Kalmar, were international ports with maybe one or two thousand inhabitants, many of them Germans, while the smallest ones such as Hästholmen and Vimmerby had just a few hundred inhabitants and markets of not more than local importance. What all these towns did have in common was that they all had royal privileges to have markets and that their inhabitants were entitled to make a living from trade and handicraft. The towns were thus distinguished from the surrounding countryside by these royal privileges. One of the visual signs of their independence was that the towns had a seal of their own.

In 1350 King Magnus was the first Swedish king to introduce a written law that was common to all the provinces of the realm. He also introduced a special code of law for the towns and some of the statutes in the town law allow us to come to conclusions concerning the use of the town seal in the 14th century. In one statute there are instructions about how the town seal was to be safeguarded. It reads:

To the house or chest in which the town seal, town book or charters are kept, there shall be two keys, one for the Swedish mayor and one for the German mayor, who that year are in office.

From this we can gather how important the seal was for the town administration. The use of the town seal is also mentioned in two other statutes of the town law. The first one deals with the confirmation of an inheritance. It is stated that the heirs shall go before the mayor and the aldermen at the town hall and get their decision confirmed with a charter and seal. The second one deals with the situation when an inhabitant has to prove that he has paid his fines. If he can prove it, he receives a charter and seal as evidence thereof. These are the only two statutes where the town seal is actually mentioned, but the seal would certainly have been used in many other situations to validate documents. These statutes make it clear that from 1350 every town in the realm had to have a seal of its own (Fig. 1).

Town seals

This discussion of the seals follows the categories recommended by the Comité de Sigillographie within the Conseil international des Archives. The following paper gives, for each of the 27 towns, an illustration of the oldest surviving seal, and, where there is older, written evidence of a seal, also the date of that document.

The oldest known town seal dates from about 1255 and comes from the port Kalmar close to the southern border of the realm. This was a town with a considerable German population and with ties to Lübeck. The seal shows a tower by the sea which actually occurs in Kalmar. This architectural type of seal is also known to have been in use in Stockholm in 1296, and in Lödöse, Nyköping and Jönköping in the 14th century. These towns were all protected by and developed in close connection with a royal castle, although the castles on the seals are depicted only as symbols of a fortified town, not as an architectural representation (Fig. 2).

Another kind of architectural town seal are those from Skara and Uppsala (Fig. 2). These were episcopal sees where the cathedral was the largest and most important building in town. It has been suggested that the seal from Skara depicts the real Romanesque cathedral, but, as the building was demolished in the Middle Ages, this is difficult to assess. The building displayed in the Uppsala seal definitely does not show the Gothic cathedral of Uppsala, but rather a symbolic picture of a church building.

 Heraldic motifs such as lions and eagles in a shield were already used in the first generation of Swedish town seals in the second half of the 13th century (Fig. 3). The shield-shaped seal of Örebro is typical for the 13th century and it is believed...
that Linköping also had a shield-shaped seal with a lion's face in the 13th century, before the town adopted the round seal that is known from the 14th century. Linköping was a town with an episcopal see and an impressive cathedral, but in contrast to Skara and Uppsala, the seal did not show a church building. It has been suggested that the lion's face in the seal comes from a misinterpretation of the name of the town in old Norse: *Leo*nkop*ngr*, which translated is 'Liontown' and hence the lion's face. The eagles in the seals of Örebro and its neighbour Arboga are typical of towns with a dominant German population. It is slightly surprising that the two towns had such a similar motif on their seals. The lion passant that is found in the seal of Söderköping probably had its origin in the coat of arms of the nobleman Svantepolk Knutsson who was the lord of the province and of the town.²⁰
Emblematic town seals are closely related to heraldic seals (Fig. 4). This group of Swedish seals encompasses towns of a very different nature, from the important Hanseatic town Visby on Gotland to the tiny Hästholmen on the lake Vättern. The difference in population and wealth is obvious in the sheer size of these seals. The seal of Hästholmen is surprisingly the only Swedish seal depicting a ship from this period. The seal of Visby from the mid-14th century has an interesting prehistory. It is a combination of the two different seals that the German and the local inhabitants used in the 13th century. This seal, from the mid-14th century, is the first one where the two groups of inhabitants have a Common Seal for the town of Visby. While the German traders earlier used fleurs-de-lis as their emblem, the lamb was the emblem of the inhabitants of Gotland. Fleurs-de-lis, the emblem of St Mary, was also the motif of the town seal of Enköping, which like Visby and many other Swedish towns, had a considerable German population and a church devoted to St Mary. The crown emblem of Sigtuna is possibly a symbol recalling the first Christian king who resided there in the 11th century. At present there is no good explanation as to why the town of Köping used the cross emblem in the town seal. Notable is the letter K for Köping.  

Two towns, Västerås on lake Mälaren and Åbo in Finland, used town seals with monograms that were similar (Fig. 5). It was at the same time an initial – A for Aboa and for Aros (the medieval name of Västerås) – and a monogram for St Mary. These towns were important ports and episcopal sees with cathedrals devoted to St Mary. The fleurs-de-lis on the seal of Åbo make it possible to distinguish between the two. Västervik and Ulfsby were small ports on each side of the Baltic sea. The simple W in the town seal is an initial for the name of the town. This is the most basic form of a town seal.  

Hagiographical seals form the last category of medieval Swedish town seals in this discussion (Fig. 6). While the seals of Skänninge and Strängnäs show well-known saints such as St Mary, St Peter and St Paul, the other saints are of a more local nature. The female saint that was worshipped in medieval Vimmerby is not identified, but the holy bishop that is seen on the seal of Växjö is most probably St Sigfrid, who was the patron saint of the cathedral in this town.  

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Figure 4 Emblematic seals (scale: 70% of original)

Figure 5 Seals with a monogram (scale: 70% of original)
town seals with St Olav are typically Scandinavian (Fig. 7). This Norwegian saint, whose grave is in Trondheim, was immensely popular in great parts of Scandinavia. In the seals of Norrköping and (Söder-)Tälje we can see the holy king majestically seated with his attributes the axe and the globe. In the seal of Torshälla, he is seated in a Viking-style ship.\footnote{Holmbäck and Wessén 1966, 59, 243.}

**Conclusion**

From the middle of the 13th century Swedish towns adopted the continental use of a town seal as an expression of their independence. Many of the towns were then only recently established and the seal is often the first sign of that a place has been urbanised. The use of written documents and seals was a part of the European culture that was brought to Sweden from the 12th century onwards. The 13th century was a very dynamic one for the development of towns, literacy and hence the use of seals.

Swedish town seals are of a general European kind and of well known types such as architectural, heraldic, emblematic and hagiographical. Seals with monograms and initials are another category represented in Sweden. Most of the influences in this field can be supposed to have reached Sweden via Germany. The hagiographical town seals with the St Olav-motif, however, are probably the only category that is typical for the Nordic countries and more or less unknown in the continental material.

**Notes**

2 Andersson 1990, 42–57. The towns and their seals of the Norwegian (dark green on the map, Fig. 1) or former Danish provinces (pale green on the map) are not discussed in this article.
3 Holmbäck and Wessén 1962.
4 Holmbäck and Wessén 1966, 4.