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Lotus Seals and Lotus Sealings: A Cross-Civilizational Perspective

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Lotus Seals and Lotus Sealings: A Cross-Civilizational Perspective

(跨文明视觉中的莲印和莲纹封泥)

Bin Yang

University of Macau

ABSTRACT

By “lotus seal” and “lotus sealing,” this paper refers to seals and sealings that were found to feature the lotus plant, flower, leaves, stalks, or buds, in part or as a whole plant. The paper first reviews the lotus seals and sealings in ancient Egypt, discussing recent archaeological findings and some collections in a few museums. The discussion then moves on to introduce the significance of the lotus in ancient Egypt. The lotus seals and sealings in Mesopotamia, India, Southeast Asia, and Tibet will be examined to illustrate their cultural diffusion and adaptation from Egypt. India was a key transit point where the Brahminist and Buddhist adoption of the lotus took place and spread to East Asia. Common themes, patterns, and ideas associated with the lotus are shared among these seals and sealings across the Afro-Eurasian continent. Meanwhile, the absence of this kind of seal in Ming-Qing China at a time when a seal-cutting culture prospered there deserves special attention, and the author argues that the existing Chinese cultural tradition was the chief reason. Indeed, the cross-regional diffusion of the lotus symbol must be understood in various local contexts. Therefore, while embodying a global cultural diffusion, lotus seals and lotus sealings indeed simultaneously represent various local realizations.

Keywords

Lotus, lotus seal, lotus sealing, Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, Southeast Asia, Tibet, China, Buddhism, cross-civilizational, cultural diffusion, localization

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INTRODUCTION

By "lotus seal" and "lotus sealing," this paper refers to seals and sealings that were found to show impressions of the lotus plant, whether flower, leaves, stalks, or buds, or the plant as a whole. The paper first reviews the lotus seals and sealings produced in ancient Egypt through including recent archaeological findings and some collections in a few major museums. Subsequently, the paper moves on to introduce the significance of the lotus in ancient Egypt. The lotus seals and sealings in Mesopotamia, India, Southeast Asia, and Tibet will then be examined, respectively, to illustrate their cultural diffusion from Egypt. India's position as a key transit point for the Brahminist and Buddhist adoption of the lotus will be highlighted to show the cultural diffusion from Egypt to East Asia. Lotus seals and sealings in Asia, particularly in medieval India and Tibet, largely resulted from the rise and spread of Buddhism. Common themes, patterns, and ideas and values associated with the lotus are shared among these seals and sealings found across the Afro-Eurasian continent. At the same time, the cross-regional diffusion of the lotus symbol must be understood in various local contexts. The lack of such a kind of lotus seal in Ming-Qing China when the seal cutting culture was at its height deserves special attention, and the author argues for the Chinese cultural tradition being the chief reason. Therefore, while embodying a global cultural diffusion, lotus seals and lotus sealings in fact simultaneously represent a local realization.

Archaeological findings have shown that Egypt was the origin of lotus seals and sealings. In fact, the lotus played a significant role in ancient Egypt's culture, religion, and society. Sun Weizu has briefly compared the functions of sealing (*fengni*; 封泥) in Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, the Persian Gulf, and China.¹ He has pointed out that while their uses were imbued with regional features, their major functions remained principally the same. Sealing was used to seal materials, goods, and documents; to claim ownership; to prevent possible misuse, abuse, theft, or embezzlement; and to keep documents confidential. They, like seals, were also symbols of political and economic power, and thus social status. This paper puts aside the issue of function, instead examining the distribution of the various forms of the lotus in seals and sealings from Egypt to Asia.

¹ Sun Weizu 孙慰祖, *Fengni de Faxian yu Shiyong* 封泥的发现与使用 (The discovery and use of clay sealing) (Shanghai: Shanghaiashudian Chubanshe, 2002), 9–10.

EGYPT: THE LOTUS IN SEALS AND SEALINGS

Scarab seals were popular amulets and impressions in early Egypt. Their discoveries in large numbers, their inscriptions, and typology have constituted invaluable sources for archaeologists and historians. In addition, they also represent a remarkable artistic achievement. Very interestingly, on some scarab seals, the symbol of the lotus is fairly common and stable. This section introduces some lotus seals and sealings from a few major museums across the world as well as from recent archaeological findings discovered in Egypt.

THE LOTUS IN SCARAB SEALS

In the Brooklyn Museum (New York, USA), there are over ten scarab seals inscribed with the lotus flower or plant. Among these, six scarab seals include a winged disk and lotus. They were made from either faience or steatite (soapstone), dating around ca. 1539–1292 BCE (the XVIII dynasty of the New Kingdom) (Fig. 1).² Their sizes are similar, no longer than 1.6 cm in length, about 1.1 cm in width, and less than 1 cm in height. A close look at one of the seals finds a vivid depiction of the lotus (Fig. 2).³

² CUR.05.354_erg2.jpg. Brooklyn Museum photograph, 11/26/2007.

<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/8620>. Accessed on February 29, 2020.

³ CUR.05.354_erg2.jpg. Brooklyn Museum photograph, 11/26/2007.

<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/8620>. Accessed on February 29, 2020.



Figure 1. Six scarab seals with winged disk and lotus



Figure 2. Scarab seal with lotus flower

In the museum, there is a glass scarab seal inscribed with a lotus flower, dating ca. 1630–1539 BCE, with a size of $0.8 \times 1.2 \times 1.8$ cm (Fig. 3).⁴ Three other similarly sized glass scarab seals also feature the lotus plant.⁵ Unfortunately, their patterns are too faded to be clearly examined.

In some instances, the lotus was depicted on the back of a scarab seal. For example, among the five hundred scarab seals collected by Captain Timins, there is one seal the back of which is “decorated by a sphinx cut in relief with a lotus and papyrus flower issuing from its back.”⁶



Figure 3. Glass scarab with lotus flower

⁴ CUR.05.354_erg2.jpg. Brooklyn Museum photograph, 11/26/2007.

<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/3216>. Accessed on February 29, 2020.

⁵ CUR.37.508E_NegID_14.617GRPA_print_cropped_bw.jpg., 2016.

<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/117152>. Accessed on February 29, 2020.

⁶ Percy E. Newberry, “Introductory Note,” *Ancient Egyptian Scarabs and Cylinder Seals* (Routledge, 2005), 9.

THE LOTUS IN CLAY SEALINGS

In Canada, the Royal Ontario Museum has seventeen samples of sealings associated with the lotus. They are imprinted on unfired clay. Almost all of them belong to one style of impression, namely, a male bust wearing a diadem containing a lotus (sometimes with the diadem adorned with lotus petals). The seals in this group were all discovered in Edfu, dating from the fourth century BCE to the middle of the first century BCE. Their size is small, with a width of just over 0.3 cm and length up to 2 cm (Fig. 4, 5 & 6). Fig. 4 is a sealing of unfired clay, dating c. 305–30 BCE and with dimensions of 1.5 × 1.5 cm.⁷ Fig. 5 too is also of unfired clay, dating c. 182–88 BCE, with dimensions of 1.6 × 1.5 cm.⁸ Fig. 6 is a seal impression of a male bust wearing a diadem with a lotus on unfired clay, dating c. 182–88 BCE, with dimensions of 1.8 × 1.7 cm.⁹

⁷ <http://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/317495/seal-impression-of-male-bust-wearing-radiate-diadem-with-lot?ctx=c9a7ce7d-cf97-471b-abba-c1502123941d&idx=0>. Accessed on July 2, 2018.

⁸ <http://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/397523/seal-impression-with-male-bust-wearing-diadem-with-lotus?ctx=57143168-3576-4192-9a73-20e521a1bf3d&idx=14>.

⁹ <http://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/345663/seal-impression-of-male-bust-wearing-diadem-with-lotus?ctx=e9c65801-63a5-47a4-95f1-b61c434eaf29&idx=5>.



Figure 4. Sealing of a male bust wearing a diadem containing a lotus



Figure 5. Sealing of a male bust wearing a diadem containing a lotus



Figure 6. Seal impression of a male bust wearing a diadem with a lotus

A few features of this sealing group deserve attention. First of all, they are small in size, and indeed, similar to the size of real scarab seals. And, all being oval, they probably adopted the physical form of scarab seals as well. Hence, these clay seals demonstrate a strong early tradition in Egypt, and it is reasonable to conclude that their functions were not very different from those of scarab seals. At the same time, their uses were probably more extensive than those of scarab seals.

Second, the image of a male bust wearing a diadem adorned with a lotus as a common motif must be understood as a symbol of power and royalty. Among the same group of sealings in the museum, there exist some seals with a male or female bust and with the names of a king or a queen, such as Ptolemy II Philadelphus, Ptolemy IV Philopator, Cleopatra VII, Ptolemy XII, and so on. As is well known, one major function of seals and sealings was to show the power and ownership of the king. Therefore, the lotus was a symbol of royalty in this context.

In addition, the lotus associated with a diadem reserved only for a king suggests an alliance between religion and politics, that is to say, a combination of religious and secular power. Finally, all the clay seals were found in Edfu, an important town in ancient Egypt and a recent archaeological project there has produced some fascinating findings on lotus seals and lotus sealings.

LOTUS SEALINGS AT EDFU

Edfu (known in antiquity as Behdet) is an Egyptian city, located on the west bank of the Nile River between Esna and Aswan. The remains of the ancient settlement of Edfu are situated about 50 m to the west of the Ptolemaic temple—to the left of the older temple pylon. The monument of Tell Edfu is in fact of greater historical and archaeological interest than the famed Ptolemaic temple itself. Although major parts of the settlement have been historically compromised due to various factors, rich information from as far back as the pre-dynastic period has been preserved. It seems that the town flourished during the First Intermediate Period when the kingdom expanded extensively to the west, and this town is one of the few settlements in southern Egypt that thrived while the north, especially around the delta, was in decline (Table 1).

Table 1. Dynasties in Early Egypt

Early Dynastic Period	3150–2686 BCE
Old Kingdom	2686–2181 BCE
First Intermediate Period	2181–2055 BCE
Middle Kingdom	2055–1650 BCE
Second Intermediate Period	1650–1550 BCE
New Kingdom	1550–1069 BCE
Third Intermediate Period	1069–744 BCE
Kushite Egypt	744–656 BCE
Twenty-sixth Dynasty of Egypt	664–525 BCE

Since 2001, the Tell Edfu project has been directed by Nadine Moeller (Oriental Institute, University of Chicago). The ongoing excavation has provided new evidence regarding local town administration during the transitional phase from the end of the Middle Kingdom to the early Second Intermediate Period (ca. 1770–1650 BCE). The ancient town of Edfu functioned as the capital of the

second Upper Egyptian province during that time and played an important role within its region.¹⁰ One of the most significant findings at Edfu is its many clay sealings.

More than 1,400 clay sealings have been excavated in relation to this late Middle Kingdom administrative complex, and many of them are associated with the lotus.¹¹ Lotus sealings can be divided into two themes here. The first decorative motif appears on a large number of sealings and is characterized by the symmetrical arrangement of *nefer* signs in mirror-image pairs flanking a larger central sign that can be identified as a stylized ankh. The seal impressions were made using a scarab seal, the most common type of seal during the late Middle Kingdom.¹² The *nefer* sign represents beauty, or perfection, and is essentially related to the lotus.

The other most frequently encountered sealing motif appears directly with the lotus: a standing male figure holding a large lotus flower (*chilian nanzī*; 持莲男子).¹³ This motif is one of the most frequently encountered motifs on sealings from the administrative building complex at Tell Edfu, where 123 sealings bearing this motif have been discovered.¹⁴ The male or female so depicted holding a lotus flower seems to be inhaling the perfume of the flower. According to Egyptian religious belief, smelling the lotus scent helped to restore the diseased to health. This lotus motif with a male holding a lotus was later found in Asia, but exhibits deep Buddhist influences (Fig. 7).¹⁵

¹⁰ Nadine Moeller, "Unsealing Tell Edfu: Who Was a Local Official and Who Was Not?" *Near Eastern Archaeology* 75, no. 2 (June 2012): 116–125.

¹¹ Moeller, "Unsealing Tell Edfu," 118.

¹² Moeller, "Unsealing Tell Edfu," 118.

¹³ Moeller, "Unsealing Tell Edfu," 121.

¹⁴ Moeller, "Unsealing Tell Edfu," 121.

¹⁵ Moeller, "Unsealing Tell Edfu," 122.

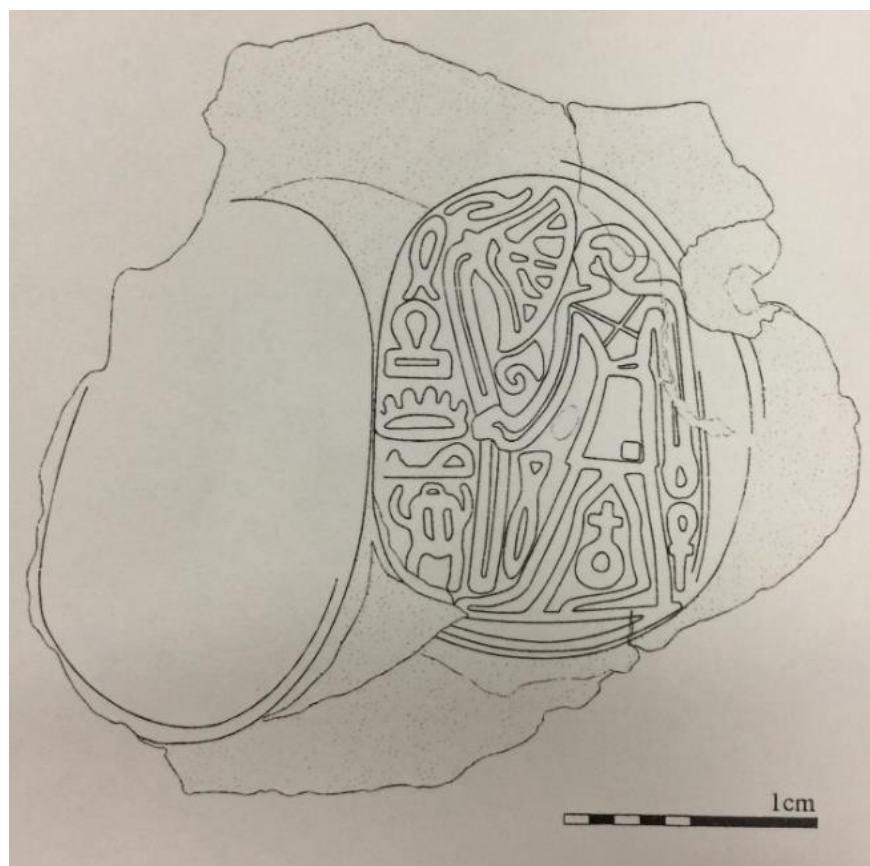


Figure 7. Sealing showing a man holding a lotus flower, Edfu

Daphna Ben-Tor, the curator of Egyptian Archaeology at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, has done some remarkable studies on the designs and features of late Middle Kingdom Egyptian scarabs. It was found that floral motifs in the First Intermediate Period, the early Middle Kingdom series, and in the late Middle Kingdom series comprise primarily papyrus plants, supplemented with a small number of lotus flowers.¹⁶ Of these sealings, almost all major motif patterns illustrate the role of the lotus in ancient Egypt. One pattern comprising a central vertical geometric motif usually ends with floral motifs—lotus flowers or papyrus buds—at both ends.¹⁷ In the late Middle Kingdom, a cross pattern of petals forming a rosette-like design constitute the most common form of cross pattern, and other

¹⁶ Daphna Ben-Tor, *Scarabs, Chronology, and Interconnections: Egypt and Palestine in the Second Intermediate Period* (Fribourg & Göttingen: Academic Press & Vandenhoeck Ruprecht, 2007), 10.

¹⁷ Ben-Tor, *Scarabs, Chronology, and Interconnections*, 12.

variations of lotus flower designs are found.¹⁸ Studies of human and mythical figures sometimes show the figures smelling and/or holding a lotus flower,¹⁹ a popular practice discovered not only in tombs, but also in seals and sealings of other periods. One of the sealings, for example, depicts a human figure presented next to a large lotus flower and holding it with one hand.²⁰ Indeed, a man holding a lotus flower constitutes the most popular theme in sealings at Edfu. Among private-name scarabs, the lotus also appeared. One scarab bearing the name of a princess, for instance, displays “a four-paired scroll border with round scrolls, and a central vertical bar ending with a lotus flower.”²¹ However, for reasons unknown, lotus flowers are extremely rare in the Second Intermediate Period Egyptian series, occurring only on isolated examples.

In all, three general patterns of the lotus motif are to be found on the lotus seals and sealings in Egypt: a male holding a lotus, a child atop a lotus, and, related to the second pattern, the lotus seat, pedestal, or throne. The first is primarily associated with the idea of resurrection, the second with birth or rebirth, and the third, royalty. One may wonder why the lotus was so popular in Egyptian seals and sealings. This has to be understood in the broader context of the lotus symbol in Egypt.

THE SYMBOL OF THE LOTUS IN EGYPT

In Egypt, two native species of lotus grew, the white lotus (*Nymphaea lotus*) and the blue one (*Nymphaea caerulea*). A third one, the pink lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*) was introduced into Egypt from Persia during later periods, and this paper does not discuss this variety. The white lotus and blue lotus known to the ancient Egyptians simply as a “lotus” are in fact not lotuses at all, but members of the water lily family. The sacred blue lotus was the most commonly used type in earlier times in Egypt. The ancient Egyptian word for lotus in the hieroglyph was *seshen*.

The white lotus blooms during the evening, connoting strong lunar associations, while the

¹⁸ Ben-Tor, *Scarabs, Chronology, and Interconnections*, 23.

¹⁹ Ben-Tor, *Scarabs, Chronology, and Interconnections*, 34.

²⁰ Ben-Tor, *Scarabs, Chronology, and Interconnections*, 35.

²¹ Ben-Tor, *Scarabs, Chronology, and Interconnections*, 40.

flower of the blue lotus closes at night and sinks beneath the water's surface, but rises in the morning to open up to the sun. This is probably why the blue lotus was taken as a natural sun symbol and was associated with the process of the creation and continuance of life. In Hermopolis, a major city in antiquity located near the boundary between Lower and Upper Egypt, it was believed that a giant lotus blossom was the first living form to emerge from the primordial waters of Nun.²² From this flower, in turn, the sun god Ra came forth.

In ancient Egyptian life the lotus had its own god, Nefertum, who was particularly associated with the blue lotus. His name has been variously translated as Perfection, Beautiful Being, Tem the Younger, or Beautiful Beginning, denoting the idea that he was the first incarnation of Tem or Atum.²³ Nefertum is generally shown with a large lotus blossom forming his crown or as a small child crouched on a lotus flower, the latter being a popular theme across Asia. And Nefertum, the lotus god of healing, was provided with the title "Protector of the Two Lands." The "two lands" refers to Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt; the term symbolizes the unity of Egypt and thus the power of the king or god. The lotus was the symbol of Upper (southern) Egypt. It was often shown with its long stems intertwined with the stalks of the papyrus plant that was used as the symbol of Lower (northern) Egypt. This represented the unification of these two lands and served as a testimony to the strength, intelligence, and prowess of the current reigning Pharaoh, who was responsible for keeping the two lands joined as one.

Ancient Egyptians lived in a narrow strip of fertile land that bordered the Nile. Every plant including the lotus that could be utilized in some way as food eventually found its way to the Egyptian table. The lotus was used to make drinks (including wine), bread, perfume, and medicine, in addition to being eaten directly as a food. It was also used as a symbol in the system of numeration. The number 1,000 was represented by a picture of a lotus flower, and the number 2,000 by a picture of two lotus flowers growing out of a bush.

As a symbol of birth and rebirth, the lotus was closely related to the imagery of the funerary and

²² Nun or Nu is the oldest of the ancient Egyptian gods and father of Ra, the sun god. The name Nun means "primeval waters."

²³ Atum was considered to be the first god in Egypt, having created himself sitting on a mound (or identified with the mound itself) from the primordial waters (Nun).

Osirian cults.²⁴ The four sons of Horus were frequently shown standing on a lotus in front of Osiris,²⁵ as shown in Fig. 8.²⁶ The Book of the Dead contains spells for “transforming oneself into a lotus,” thus fulfilling the promise of resurrection, an idea that was to be conceived in East Asia as the rebirth that could be reached through the lotus. This is why the lotus was used as a component of floral collars that adorned the sick, since it was believed that smelling lotus blossoms would help to restore the sick to health. The tomb texts at Denderah read, “The sun, which was from the beginning, rises like a hawk from the midst of the lotus bud. When the doors of its leaves open in sapphire brilliance, it has divided the night from day.” Of the sun god Horus, we are informed that “He opens his eyes and illuminates the world. The gods rise from his eyes and men from his mouth, and all things are through him, when he rises brilliant from the lotus.”²⁷

²⁴ Osiris was an Egyptian god of the afterlife, the underworld, and the dead.

²⁵ Horus is one of the most significant ancient Egyptian deities. He served many functions, most notably being a god of kingship and the sky.

²⁶ <http://nile-flood.tumblr.com/post/108032319922/%E6%80%9D%E3%82%8F%E3%81%9A%E4%BA%8C%E5%BA%A6%E8%A6%8B%E3%81%97%E3%81%9F%E7%A5%9E%E6%A7%98%E9%81%94%E3%81%AE%E7%AB%8B%E3%81%A1%E4%BD%8D%E7%BD%AE-akalle-the-four-sons-of-horus>. The House of Eternity of the Royal Prince Khaem Uaset, son of King Ramses III, QV44, West Uaset (Thebes). Accessed on February 29, 2020.

²⁷ Cited from William E. Ward, “The Lotus Symbol: Its Meaning in Buddhist Art and Philosophy,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 11, no. 2, Special Issue on Oriental Art and Aesthetics (Dec. 1952): 135.

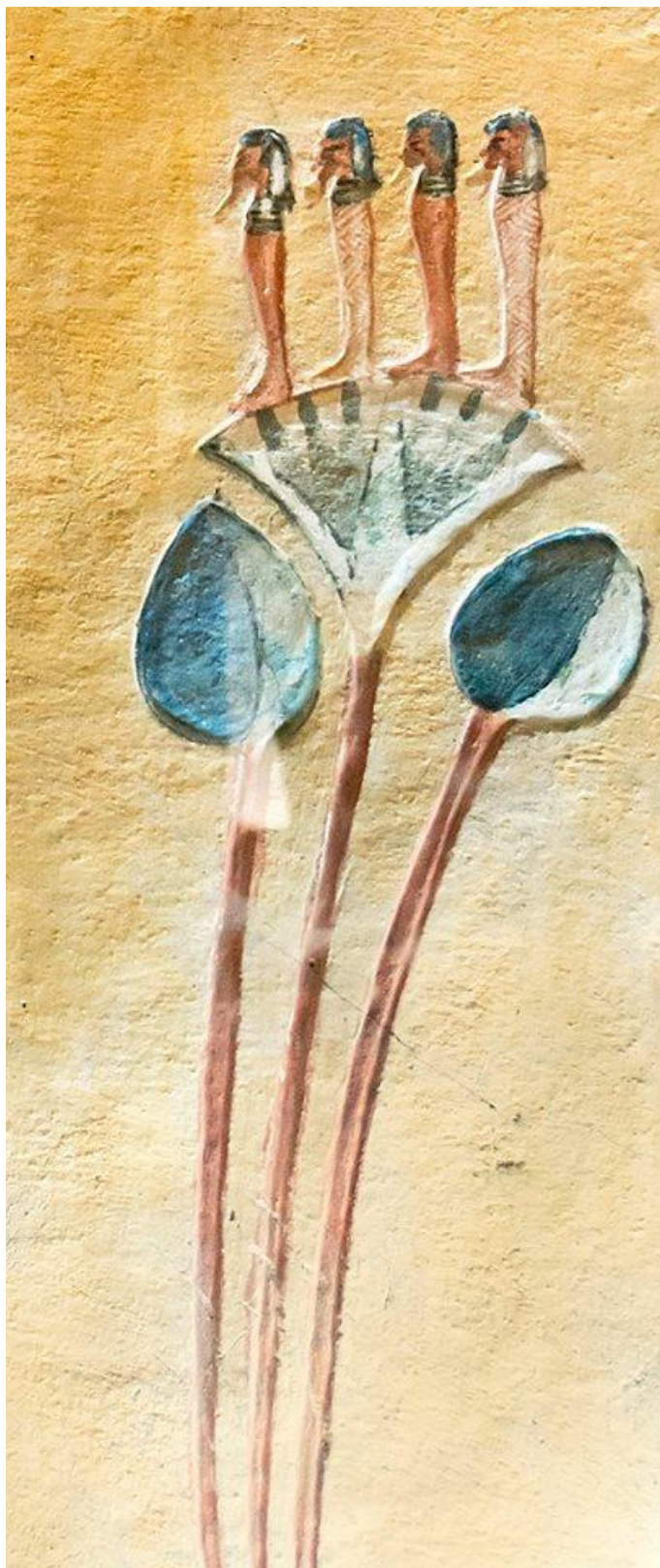


Figure 8. The four sons of Horus on a lotus

The discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb proved the significance of the lotus. Representations of the blue lotus were found scattered over Tutankhamen's body, and other forms of the lotus were found in the tomb. One was a plaster head of Tutankhamen (r. 1332–1323 BCE) as a child/god emerging from a lotus, which stands alone.²⁸

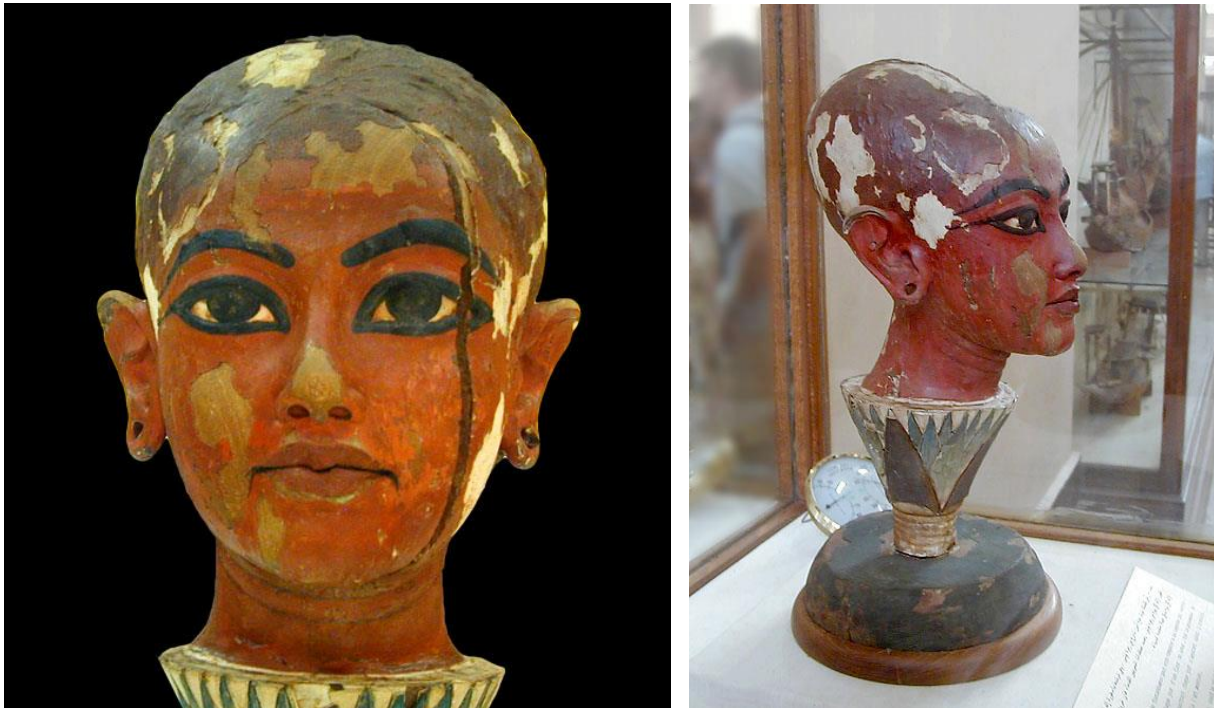


Figure 9. Tutankhamun as a child on a lotus

Another eye-catching item in the tomb associated with the lotus was a triple lamp showing three lotus flowers carved from a single piece of alabaster, indeed a masterpiece of art (Fig. 10).²⁹

²⁸ Also known as the Head of Nefertem or the Head from the Lotus Bloom.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Head_of_Nefertem#/media/File:T%C3%A2te_de_Tout%C3%A2nkhamon_enfant_\(mus%C3%A9e_du_Caire_Egypte\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Head_of_Nefertem#/media/File:T%C3%A2te_de_Tout%C3%A2nkhamon_enfant_(mus%C3%A9e_du_Caire_Egypte).jpg);

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Head_of_Nefertem#/media/File:Tutankhamun_emerging_from_lotus_flower.jpg. Accessed on February 29, 2020.

²⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/Egypt.Museum/posts/lamp-in-the-form-of-three-lotus-flowers-from-the-tomb-of-tutankhamun/21411668859191/> Accessed on February 29, 2020.

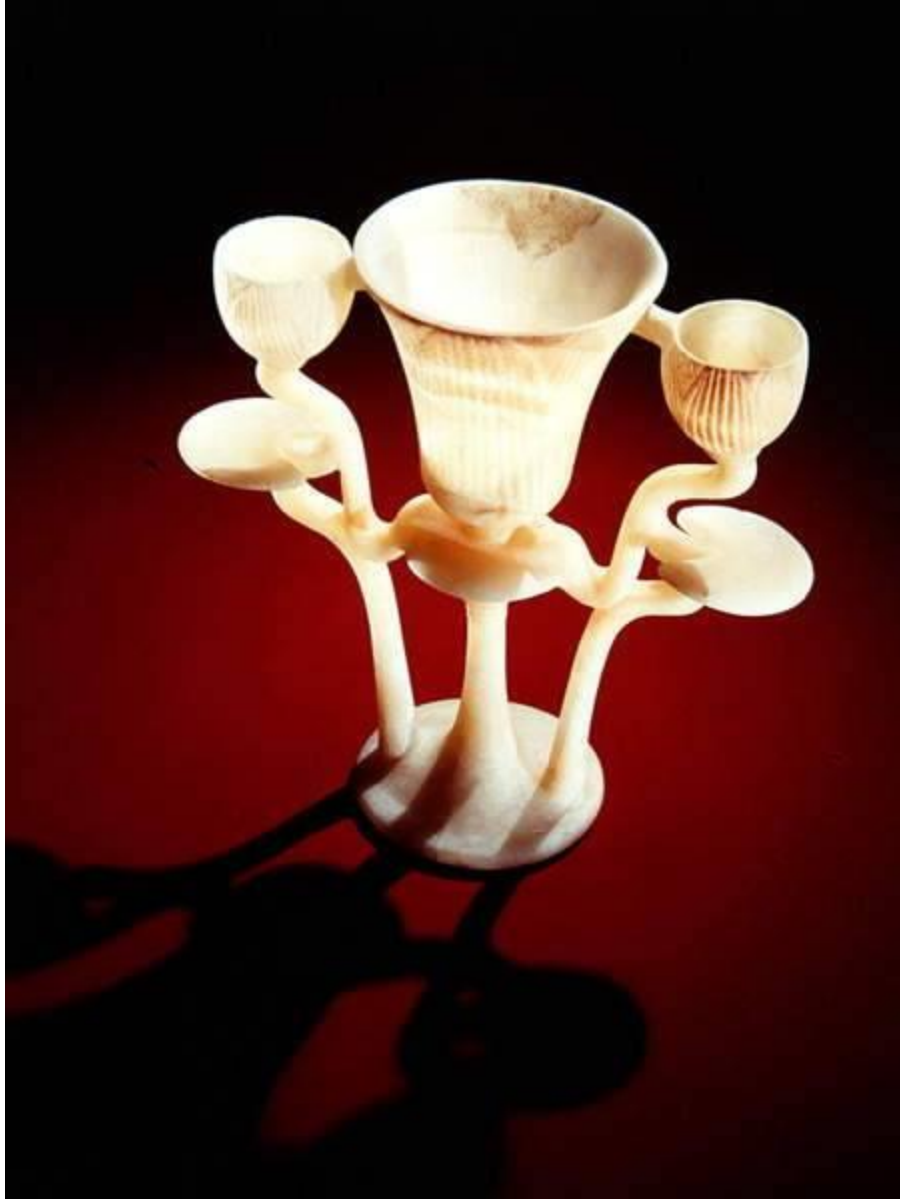


Figure 10. Lamp in the form of three lotus flowers

In conclusion, in ancient Egypt, the lotus was intimately associated with the etheric elements of water and of fire, and thus seen as a source of life. The plant was generated in water, but its flower unfolded daily at the dawning of the sun. Ancient Egyptians knew this, and constantly celebrated the purity, healing, and rebirth symbolized by the lotus in their daily life.

CHILD ON A LOTUS IN MESOPOTAMIA

The symbol of the lotus spread from Egypt to the Near East, the Mediterranean World, Mesopotamia, and India. Scholars have long noted the Egyptian connection to the lotus in Asia. As early as the 1950s, Willian E. Ward pointed out that the lotus as a symbol of the sun and of life, immortality, and resurrection, probably had its origins in ancient Egypt.³⁰ Lotus seals and sealings found in Mesopotamia illustrate this cultural diffusion.

At the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, there is an iron seal that “shows a running antelope, turning its head toward a pursuing man. What seems to be a lotus-flower appears in front of the animal, a branch below it.”³¹ Scholars have pointed out that the lotus, originally from Egyptian art, had “changed its significance, together with many other Egyptian religious symbols adopted in West-Asiatic art.”³²

In Iraq, the lotus occasionally appeared in ancient seals and sealings. The impression of an ovate seal, found at Nimrud and dating before the end of the seventh century BCE, shows a nude child squatting on a lotus (Fig. 11).³³ Barbara Parker has pointed out that this “is most likely derived from the motif so common on the Syrian ivories of the birth of Horus.”³⁴ This impression appears to be identical with one tablet from Nineveh that also depicts the same nude child on the lotus. However, the Nineveh version was “being paid devotions by a typically Assyrian figure,” suggesting “that the infant Horus had been taken into the seal cutters’ repertory, no doubt under the influence of the Syrian elements.”³⁵ These Syrian elements, without any doubt, were spread from Egypt. The four sons of Horus standing atop a lotus and Tutankhamun as a child on a lotus, both mentioned above, served as two of many prototypes

³⁰ Ward, “The Lotus Symbol,” 135.

³¹ Raphael Giveon, *The Impact of Egypt on Canaan: Iconographical and Related Studies* (Freiburg, Switzerland, and Göttingen, Germany: Universitätsverlag & Vandenhoeck Ruprecht, 1978), 92.

³² Giveon, *The Impact of Egypt on Canaan*, 33.

³³ Giveon, *The Impact of Egypt on Canaan*, 33. For Egyptian influences at Nineveh, an ancient Assyrian city of Upper Mesopotamia, especially the lotus symbol, see Leonard W. King, “Some New Examples of Egyptian Influence at Nineveh (Continued),” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 1, no. 4 (Oct. 1914): 237–240.

³⁴ Barbara Parker, “Seals and Seal Impressions from the Nimrud Excavations, 1955–58,” *Iraq* 24, No. 1 (Spring, 1962): 39.

³⁵ Parker, “Seals and Seal Impressions,” 39.

in terms of both the form and essence that were imitated. Therefore, the nude child on the lotus illustrated the influence of the lotus culture with its religious dimensions, moving from Egypt, thence to Syria, and on to Iraq.



Figure 11. A nude child on a lotus

LOTUS SEALINGS IN INDIA

While it had its associations with Egypt, in India the lotus was more evidently adopted in daily life and in religious activities, a practice continuing until the present day. The lotus is attributed to all Brahminic gods and, through them, to those of Jainism as well as to those of Buddhism. As in Egypt, the lotus in India became a symbol of the sun, standing for the solar deity Surya in the Hindu pantheon. Surya is a Sanskrit word that means "sun." Surya is referred to as "Lord of the lotus, father, and king," and Vishnu is a personification of the sun, or conversely, the sun is a personification of Vishnu.³⁶

The lotus plays a very important role in connection with Brahmā. The lotus of Brahmā is called

³⁶ Ward, "The Lotus Symbol," 136.

“the highest form and aspect of the Earth.”³⁷ The idea of the lotus symbolizing creation rising out of water, as mentioned above in connection with Horus, is seen again in Hindu and Buddhist mythology. At the time the universe was to be created from the cosmic waters, a lotus issued forth from the navel center of Vishnu, who reclined on the serpent Ananta. The lotus opened and gave birth to the creator, Brahma, who then set about creating an ordered universe out of chaos.³⁸ Such a genesis narrative in India is almost the same as in Egypt, except for the different names of the gods involved.

In Sanskrit, *agni* means fire and is also the name of the Vedic fire god of Hinduism. Agni embodied the fire of rebirth and the fire within the energetic sap concealed in plants. Such a conceptualization again has a heavy Egyptian influence. Meanwhile, Agni was one of three great gods in the *Rig Veda* and was also worshiped by the Persians until the time of Zoroaster, which indicates that Mesopotamia was a transit point between Egypt and India. Agni’s personification of fire made him the center of ancient Vedic worship.

As both a symbol of the sun and of creation arising out of water, in India the lotus was associated with Agni, who was born of water or directly from the earth as it rests on the water.³⁹ In Hindu mythology, Agni was born from a lotus created by Brahma, which shows a direct and essential connection between the lotus and Agni. The lotus flower in the pre-Buddhist era was adopted by the early Buddhists. In Buddhism, the lotus symbol became a living flower; it took on the significant meaning of purity, and more importantly, creation (or birth and thus life) arising out of water.⁴⁰ Here, the three major themes in seals and sealings (probably the same as in other forms of art) associated with the lotus are discussed: Buddha seated on a lotus, the birth of Buddha, and a male holding a lotus.

Buddha on a lotus throne is first seen in the early iconic phase, i.e. after the second century CE, in Amaravati and Gandara. In the pre-Buddhist Kushan Empire of northern India and Central Asia, the tree, the wheel, the sun-disc, and the lotus flower all appeared on its coins. Seated figures of rulers appeared on coins from about 100 BCE, while coins of the first or second centuries showed the Buddha

³⁷ Ward, “The Lotus Symbol,” 136.

³⁸ Ward, “The Lotus Symbol,” 136–137.

³⁹ Ward, “The Lotus Symbol,” 138.

⁴⁰ Ward, “The Lotus Symbol,” 137–138.

replacing the male figure enthroned on a lotus flower.⁴¹ The lotus is in fact ubiquitous in early Buddhist art, as ornamentation, as a part of votive offerings in veneration scenes, and laid on the altar-like Buddha throne.⁴² Buddha seated on a lotus throne or Buddha enthroned on a lotus seat hence illustrates the intrinsic link between the lotus and royalty, an association similar to that in ancient Egypt.

The symbol for the birth of the Bodhisattva (Laksmi-abhiseka) is connected with a very old cult of life and fertility, in which the lotus as a symbol of the world plays a role.⁴³ It is therefore hardly surprising that the next important scene, the birth of the Buddha, is represented with a leap into the sphere of purely symbolic allusion. In numerous seals and sealings, this event is often shown by a standing or seated female figure (usually thought to be the goddess Lakshmi, or Laksmi), who is being showered with water by two elephants in accordance with the *abhiseka* rite (a kind of baptism, initiation, and ritual bath). One or two elephants depicted alongside a woman symbolized the birth of Gautama Buddha. This representation may be enhanced by a water container and lotus plants, or it may be confined to just a container holding the lotus. To be sure, the hypothesis that this group symbolizes the birth of the Bodhisattva has been contested, but India's ancient symbols of fertility and good fortune—the female deity or Mother Goddess, the elephant, the lotus, the vessel of life's bounty, the holy water—may very well represent a holy birth rite.⁴⁴

The lotus held in the hand was a common motif pattern in India, too (*padmahasta*, *padmapāni*), and is an attitude characteristic of Hindu goddesses. This was adopted in the iconography of Mahayana Buddhism by the Universal Savior, the greatest from among the many Bodhisattvas. In India, the figure who holds the lotus could be Surya, Indra, Vishnu, or Lakshmi (the goddess associated with wealth and fertility). In Vishnu's hand, the lotus symbolizes water; in Lakshmi's, wealth; in Parvati's, detachment; and in Indra's, prosperity.⁴⁵ In early Buddhist literature, the lotus was used as a metaphor for essence,

41 Dietrich Seckel and Andreas Leisinger, "Before and Beyond the Image: Aniconic Symbolism in Buddhist Art," *Artibus Asiae*, Supplementum 45, (2004): 3–107.

42 Seckel and Leisinger, "Before and Beyond the Image," 18.

43 Seckel and Leisinger, "Before and Beyond the Image," 41.

44 Seckel and Leisinger, "Before and Beyond the Image," 17–18.

45 Pratapaditya Pal, *Indian Sculpture: Circa 500 B.C.–A.D. 700, Vol. I* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 41.

and thus as a symbol of the faith itself, and in later literature, as a support for other emblems such as the thunderbolt or book.

In the Museum of India (Kolkata), seventy-six sealings (including a few votive tablets) associated with the lotus were viewed via a Google search.⁴⁶ Gajalakshmi, associated with wealth and fertility, dominates this group of sealings. About forty-three of the seventy-six sealings depict this Lakshmi scene.

Lakshmi (or Laxmi) is the Hindu goddess of wealth, fortune, and prosperity. She is the wife and *shakti* (energy) of Vishnu, one of the principal deities of Hinduism and the Supreme Being in the Vaishnavism tradition. Lakshmi is also an important deity in Jainism and a goddess of abundance and fortune for Buddhists, represented on some of the oldest surviving stupas and cave temples of Buddhism. Lakshmi is often depicted seated on a lotus, flanked on either side by an elephant (*gaja*), or she typically stands or sits like a yogi on a lotus pedestal and holds a lotus in her hand, a symbolism for fortune, self-knowledge, and spiritual liberation. *Gajalakshmi* (Lakshmi with elephants), is one of the most significant Ashtalakshmi aspects of the Hindu goddess. The earliest available depiction of Gajalakshmi appears on a coin found in Kausambi from the third century CE.

Fig. 12 is a round sealing (4.8–4.9 cm in diameter), originally found in Bihar.⁴⁷ It depicts a Gajalakshmi holding in her two hands lotus stems that are growing out of the ground near her feet. Two elephants sprinkle water with their trunks on either side of the goddess's head. At the bottom of the sealing, there are some almost illegible inscriptions. Sri or Sri Lakshmi ("beloved spouse of Vishnu") is important because she is the "Lotus Goddess" and is associated in literature with the lotus flower in every way. She is referred to as "lotus-born," "standing on a lotus," "lotus-colored," "lotus-eyed," and so on. Hindu kings, besides being married to a chief queen and many consorts, were also married to Sri Lakshmi, who is the guardian of their kingly fortune, and good luck incarnate.⁴⁸

46 National Portal & Digital Repository, Museums of India.

http://www.museumsofindia.gov.in/repository/search/im_kol/collection/object_type/seals%20and%20sealings/lotus/0/1/10?museumId=im_kol. Accessed on March 1, 2020.

47 National Portal & Digital Repository, Museums of India. http://www.museumsofindia.gov.in/repository/record/im_kol-6152-A18561-19873. Accessed on March 1, 2020.

48 Ward, "The Lotus Symbol," 138.



Figure 12. Gajalakshmi holding lotus stems

The scene in Fig. 12, as discussed, indicates the birth of the Buddha. Found in Bhita, Uttar Pradesh. Fig. 13 is an oval sealing (5.5 × 4.7 cm) with a motif of Gajalakshmi.⁴⁹ Lakshmi stands on the top, with two lotuses on either side, and is being anointed by elephants. On the bottom are two lines of inscription.

⁴⁹ National Portal & Digital Repository, Museums of India. http://www.museumsofindia.gov.in/repository/record/im_kol-N-S-1475-A11246-23344. Accessed on March 1, 2020.



Figure 13. Gajalakshmi with two lotuses

Fig. 14 is relatively large, 9.5 cm in diameter. It was an administrative sealing, originally found in Nalanda, dating from the Gupta period. It depicts Gajalakshmi standing as a female deity, holding lotus stalks and being anointed by two elephant-headed human figures. Two *kalasa* (pitchers) are placed on either side of the deity, and at the bottom is inscribed, “nagarabuktau kumaramatyadhi karanasya.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ National Portal & Digital Repository, Museums of India. http://www.museumsofindia.gov.in/repository/record/im_kol-9476-A11552-25813. Accessed on March 1, 2020.



Figure 14. Gajalakshmi holding lotus stalks

Another round sealing (Fig. 15), 6.1–6.2 cm in diameter and slightly blurred, was originally found in Bihar. It depicts Gajalakshmi in a traditional standing pose, holding a lotus in her left hand. Two attendants stand next to her on either side, holding upturned *kalasa*, and two elephants flank her and sprinkle water on the goddess's head from their trunks. At the base are some inscriptions.⁵¹

Many sealings of the same motif pattern exist, with only slightly different details (Fig. 16–17).⁵² This is the most popular form of impression so far in the group of lotus sealings, and it is certainly associated with Buddhism, particularly the birth of the Buddha.

⁵¹ National Portal & Digital Repository, Museums of India. http://www.museumsofindia.gov.in/repository/record/im_kol-A11310-6153-20212. Accessed on March 1, 2020.

⁵² National Portal & Digital Repository, Museums of India. http://www.museumsofindia.gov.in/repository/record/im_kol-6169-A18637-19851; http://www.museumsofindia.gov.in/repository/record/im_kol-6153-A18717-19866. Accessed on March 1, 2020.



Figure 15. Gajalakshmi holding a lotus in the left hand



Figure 16. Gajalakshmi holding a lotus stalk in the left hand



Figure 17. Gajalakmi holding a lotus stalk in the left hand

Found in Basarh, Bihar, north Dinai, the sealing shown in Fig. 18 was originally round, but the existing size is 4.3×3.3 cm. It depicts a Gajalakshmi with a lotus stalk in her left hand, pouring wealth from a *kalasa* in her right hand.⁵³

⁵³ National Portal & Digital Repository, Museums of India. http://www.museumsofindia.gov.in/repository/record/im_kol-A18715-6153-19865. Accessed on March 1, 2020.



Figure 18. Gajalakshmi with a lotus stalk in the left hand

Fig. 19 is a round sealing, from a finely engraved seal. The impression is of a *dharmachakra* (Wheel of the Dharma) flanked by two deer. While the Wheel of the Dharma is one of the Ashtamangala of Indian religions such as Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism,⁵⁴ this sealing is certainly typical of Pala, a powerful kingdom in northeast India from the eighth to the twelfth century where Buddhism thrived. Below the siddhamatrika inscription is a decorative lotus and foliage design. This sealing must doubtless have been used by a Buddhist monastery, as the deer, lotus, and *dharmachakra* are all symbols of Buddha.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ The Ashtamangala are a sacred suite of Eight Auspicious Signs endemic to a number of Indian religions including Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism.

⁵⁵ National Portal & Digital Repository, Museums of India. http://www.museumsofindia.gov.in/repository/record/im_kol-S-9-R-15-25992. Accessed on March 1, 2020.



Figure 19. *Dharmachakra* flanked by two deer

In this group of seventy-six sealings, some votive tablets share another major theme: an eight-armed goddess (Buddhist or otherwise) seated on a lotus. The goddess Padmā (lotus), “to whom the lotus is dear,” usually stands or sits on a lotus flower. Fig. 20, an oval-shaped piece, is dated to the early medieval period, originally from Paharpur, Bangladesh.⁵⁶ With a size of 5 × 4.4 cm, it depicts an eight-armed goddess seated on a lotus in Lalitasana (“the royal position” or “royal ease”) with a sword in her right hand. The goddess is crowned and has a halo. This sealing has clear Buddhist elements.

⁵⁶ National Portal & Digital Repository, Museums of India. http://www.museumsofindia.gov.in/repository/record/im_kol-P-S-63-SL-40-D-D-3-29453. Accessed on March 1, 2020.



Figure 20. Eight-armed goddess seated on lotus

In total, nine votive tablets of a similar impression exist, and the eight-armed goddess seated on a lotus in Lalitasana could be Tara, also known as Devi (Fig. 21, 22 & 23).⁵⁷

⁵⁷ National Portal & Digital Repository, Museums of India. http://www.museumsofindia.gov.in/repository/record/im_kol-P-S-172-SL-46-D-D-9-29457; http://www.museumsofindia.gov.in/repository/record/im_kol-P-S-65-SL41-26935; http://www.museumsofindia.gov.in/repository/record/im_kol-P-S-174-SL-48-D-D-11-29454. Accessed on March 1, 2020.



Figure 21. Eight-armed goddess seated on lotus

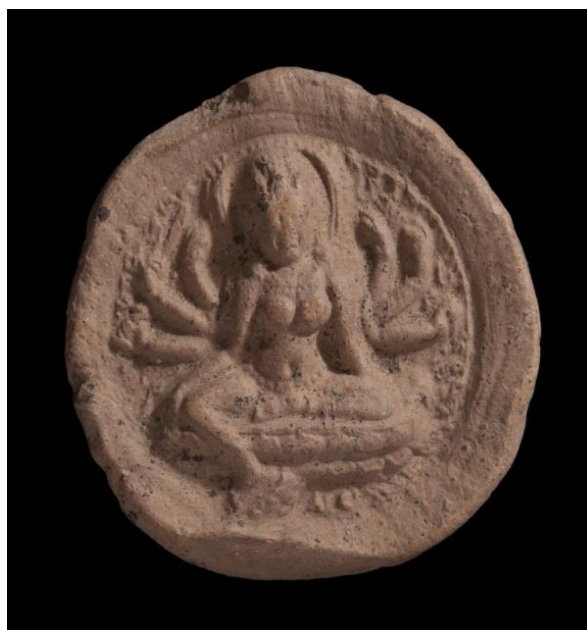


Figure 22. Eight-armed goddess seated on lotus



Figure 23. Tara (?) seated on lotus

To conclude, the lotus was frequently depicted as a seat for various deities in early and medieval India, whether Brahminist, Jainist, or Buddhist. By the medieval era, Buddhism was the major appropriator of the lotus seat/throne, which set up a solid foundation for the image of Buddha seated on a lotus in East Asia.

LOTUS SEALS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

In Southeast Asia, the ring motif has distinguished itself by its hybrid culture. Large numbers of gold rings, engraved with motifs or inscriptions, have been found primarily in Java but also at Barus in Sumatra and Limbang in Brunei. Many of the motifs engraved in intaglio on gold rings are connected with the word *gri*, the name of the Javanese goddess of good luck and prosperity, rice, and fertility. Some major attributes such as good luck, prosperity, and fertility are shared by the lotus symbol in Egypt and other parts of Asia, so it is not surprising that the lotus was one of the major expressions of the *gri*.

According to Annabel Teh Gallop, the *gri* motif in its original form is composed of the three old

Javanese characters that spell her name.⁵⁸ Stylized variants of this *gri* motif “soon evolved through the embellishment of the characters and the symmetrification of the design until the word itself was no longer recognizable,” leading to abstract designs formed by fish, water pots, lotuses, conches, and *makara* (a sea creature).⁵⁹ In India, water pots or pitchers were frequently found on Lakshmi sealings and were understood as wealth, fortune, and fertility. Fish, conch, *makara*, together with the lotus, originated in India and belonged to the so-called eight treasures of both Hinduism and Buddhism.

Lotus buds, lotus flowers, and lotus outline shapes were frequently adopted in Malay seals. One Malay seal, from the western Malay world of Sumatra, west of the Malay Peninsula, takes the form of beautiful petaled circles, unmistakably recalling the lotus flower in full blossom.⁶⁰ Another from Brunei, dated c. 1900, has curled-lobe petals enclosing lotus buds in profile with leaves.⁶¹ Also, two eighteenth century seals both adopt the form of a lotus bud in profile.⁶²

THE SCARCITY OF LOTUS SEALS AND SEALINGS IN CHINA

Although Buddhism spread, thrived, and was even later Sinicized in China from the second century CE onward, very few seals or sealings associated with the lotus have been discovered, while the lotus was very popular in other aspects of Chinese life such as architecture, costume, paintings, porcelain, and so on. The rarity is even more amazing considering the emergence and enormous influence of the seal and seal-cutting culture among imperial literati in the Ming-Qing period, which tradition has even continued up until the present time. One can't help wondering why China did not adopt or develop its own lotus seals or sealings.

My superficial understanding is as follows. First of all, the Chinese had their own seal/sealing

⁵⁸ Annabel Teh Gallop, “Malay Seal Inscriptions: A Study in Islamic Epigraphy from Southeast Asia,” Ph.D. thesis (3 vols), University of London, School of Oriental and African studies, 2002, 1: 32.

⁵⁹ Gallop, “Malay Seal Inscriptions,” 1: 32.

⁶⁰ Gallop, “Malay Seal Inscriptions,” 1: 255.

⁶¹ Gallop, “Malay Seal Inscriptions,” 1: 14.

⁶² Gallop, “Malay Seal Inscriptions,” 1: 119, 121.

tradition that had been well established by the Qin-Han period. From the late Shang period (twelfth century BCE), seals and sealings, official or otherwise, were found in huge quantities and were full of Chinese cultural features. Names and titles of clans, kings, officials, civilian and military posts, in addition to motifs of animals, birds, flowers, and mythical creatures were engraved on or molded into seals. And indeed, before the end of the Han Dynasty, or, roughly speaking, before the arrival of Buddhism, the lotus was hardly found in Chinese life and had no special significance for the Chinese.

In the collection of 303 portrait seals (*xiaoxingyin*; 肖形印) in the Palace Museum (Beijing), dating from the pre-Spring-Autumn period (770–475 BCE), but mainly from the Han Dynasty (7 BCE–220 CE), not even one seal is related to the lotus.⁶³ As an official collection produced or collected by the court of the imperial Qing, this collection may not be representative of the whole profile of portrait seals in early China. Nevertheless, it is surprising that no single seal is associated with the lotus, perhaps indicating that the symbol of the lotus had no importance at all for the Chinese before the end of the Han Dynasty. The absence of the lotus remains evident when the tomb stone motifs of the Han period found in Nanyang (南阳, a key center of the Han Dynasty) are scrutinized, or the clay sealing of the Qin-Han period recently discovered in Ru'nán Prefecture (汝南郡) (part of the Han center).⁶⁴ It might be argued that this is simply a very small sampling, and at the first glance, this assumption is fair enough.

It would be worthwhile to pursue a more rigorous search to ascertain whether such a hypothesis is supported by other images from other periods. Scholars have pointed out that this Palace collection certainly does not represent the evolution of Chinese image seals, but is merely indicative of contemporary or temporal features.⁶⁵ Mythical creatures such as the dragon and phoenix in addition to

63 Gugong Bowuyuan Xiaoxingyin Bianjishi 故宫博物院肖形印编辑室 (Editing Office of the Portrait Seals, the Palace Museum), *Gugongbowuyuan cang xiaoxingyin Xuan* 故宫博物院藏肖形印选 (Selected portrait seals from the Palace Museum) (Beijing: Renmin Meishu Chubanshe, 1984).

64 Shan Xiushan 闪修山, Chen Jihai 陈继海 and Wang Rulin 王儒林 et al., *Nanyang Handai Huaxiang Shike* 南阳汉代画像石刻 (Stone motifs of the Han Dynasty in Nanyang) (Shanghai: Shanghai Reminchubanshe, 1981); Wang Yuqing 王玉清 and Fu Quanxi 傅春喜, *Xinchu Ru'nanjun Qinhan Fengni ji* 新出汝南郡秦汉封泥集 (A collection of recently discovered clay sealings of the Ru'nán prefecture during the Qin-Han period) (Shanghai: Shanghaishudian Chubanshe, 2009).

65 Ye Qifeng 叶其峰, "Gugongbowuyuan cang Xiaoxingyin Shulue" (故宫博物院藏肖形印述略; A concise introduction to the selected portrait seals from the Palace Museum), in *Gugongbowuguan cang Xiaoxingyin Xuan*, 1984, 305–318.

highly regarded animals such as the tiger, deer, birds, and fish were often engraved in the pre-Han period, while social activities such as tiger hunting, fishing, horse raiding, dragon raiding, tiger fighting, cock fighting, soccer playing, among others, are all represented. The fact that the lotus is not included in this collection thus indicates that before the popular acceptance of Buddhism and Buddhist art, the lotus was not popular among the Chinese people. The insignificance of the lotus can be confirmed by *The Book of Songs* (*Shijing*; 诗经), in which, of the three hundred or more poems, only two refer to the lotus — as a symbol of the female and being associated with love. *The Verses of Chu* (*Chuci*; 楚辞), a southern poetry school, has relatively more mentions of the lotus, in which the flower denotes purity and love. Therefore, the cultural image of the lotus, marginal in early Chinese literature, was not found to be artistically articulated or realized before or during the Qin-Han period. But readers should not be surprised by the absence of the lotus in early Chinese seals and sealing, as in northern China, the Chinese cultural center, the lotus as a subtropical and tropical plant was rarely encountered. In conclusion, the lotus, a marginal plant in early Chinese life, was not important in early Chinese culture, and thus was not found in early sealing culture. It is the introduction and localization of Buddhism in China that brought about the significance of the lotus in Chinese culture.

When Buddhism thrived and became localized, the lotus consequently drew scholarly attention, and by the Song period, the lotus had replaced the chrysanthemum favored by such Chinese literati as Tao Qian (陶潜), which had become a symbol of the Chinese gentleman (*junzi*; 君子) in addition to bearing a Buddhist significance. However, from the Han through the Tang-Song to the early Ming period, the seal and seal-cutting culture in China continued but did not prosper, as the seals mainly remained governmental credentials. That is why the lotus image did not find an opportunity to penetrate into the seal culture.

From the mid-Ming period onward, pioneers such as Wen Peng (文彭) and He Zhen (何震) launched a fundamental revolution in seal cutting and the seal culture. On the one hand, they set aside the once popular nine-fold seal pattern and introduced the Qin-Han sealing features; on the other, they made seal cutting and the seal culture a major expression of scholarly activity. Meanwhile, the infusion of seals in Chinese paintings, together with the Qin-Han calligraphic style, began to establish seals and seal cutting as one of the major cultural fields for imperial literati in the Ming-Qing period. Put simply (and at the risk of oversimplification), the prosperity of the seal and seal-cutting culture from the mid-

Ming, through the Qing, into Republican China, and until today, largely benefited from its being modelled on the ancient (*figu*; 复古; or *mogu*; 摹古), namely, the Qin-Han style. As noted earlier, the lotus was not important during the Qin-Han period, but it became so in the following centuries, once Buddhist influence flourished in China. Scholars of seals and seal cutting later were able to trace the Qin-Han style to the Spring-Autumn and the Warring State periods, in which the lotus was not yet apparent in Chinese culture.

To be precise, the image of the lotus, whether flowers, leaves, buds, or stalks, was seldom engraved on Chinese seals. The most common expression of the lotus was the lotus pedestal accompanied by the image of the Buddha. Otherwise, images of the lotus seem to be rare. The lack of lotus seals/sealing in China is sharply contrasted by the popularity of other depicted forms of the lotus in Chinese society and culture during the post-Han period. Chinese architecture, painting, porcelain, poems, essays, and embroideries frequently included, mentioned, expressed, discussed, or were even devoted to various forms of the lotus during the Northern-Southern Dynasty period, and the Tang-Song-Yuan-Ming period, during which time Buddhism became prosperous and localized.⁶⁶ The absence of the lotus in seals and sealing hence resulted from the seal culture bypassing the Buddhist period in China and instead modelling its style on the Qin-Han period when Buddhism (and the lotus culture) had not yet reached or taken root in China.

Having said that, lotus-associated seals and sealing *did* appear in certain Buddhist sealings such as the sealing works of Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya (*xinjing*; 心经), or sealing works by some Buddhist monks or devout scholars, such as Zhao Zhiqian (赵之谦) and Master Hongyi (弘一). The image of Buddha (sometimes Guanyin) seated on a lotus throne has remained a common motif. This, again, resulted from the Indian and thus Buddhist influence in China and East Asia, as some Tibetan seals in the following section support.

66 For the transmission of the lotus to China, see Jessica Rawson, *Chinese Ornament: The Lotus and the Dragon* (British Museum Publications Limited, 1984); Cheng Te-K'un, *Studies in Chinese Art* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1983); Susan Bush, "Floral Motifs and Vine Scrolls in Chinese Art of the Late Fifth to Early Sixth Centuries AD," *Artibus Asiae* 38 (1), reprint, 1976, 35.

LOTUS SEALS AND SEALINGS IN TIBET

Lotus seals and sealings are often found in Tibet, due to the influence of Buddhism. On the lotus seals and sealings, the lotus seat or throne was a major feature and subject for depiction. The term generally used for “seal” in Tibetan is *tham*, or *tham ka*, and it appears at the end of many inscriptions found on important official seals.

The trilogy of lotus–Buddhism–seal is vividly reflected in Tibetan Buddhist seals.⁶⁷ Here, I would like to introduce a few of them. Most extant official seals were bestowed by the central state of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties upon local governments and monasteries in Tibet, whether religious or administrative. One of the earliest is the jade seal of the Yuan Dynasty. It is nearly square in shape (6.1 × 5.8 cm) with a height of 5.5 cm, and at the bottom of the seal are three lotus pedestals. The word *sa* is inscribed on all three pedestals, probably referring to the Sakya Monastery (*Sajiasī*; 萨迦寺), or the three treasures (*sanbao*; 三宝) of Buddhism, or the three lotuses. In the center are four Sanskrit words yet to be deciphered, at the top are three treasures, and the aureole (halo) of flame and light serves as the background.⁶⁸ This seal, once in the possession of the Sakya Monastery in Shigatse (日喀则) and currently kept in the Potala Palace in Lhasa, presumably had a religious function (Fig. 24).

67 Ou Chaogui 欧朝贵 and Qimei 其美, *Xizang Lidai Cangyin* 西藏历代藏印 (A collection of Tibetan seals) (Lhasa: Xizang Renmin Chubanshe, 1991).

68 Ou and Qimei, *Xizang Lidai Cangyin*, 14.



Figure 24. Jade seal (Yuan Dynasty)

Four similar seals with lotus pedestals of the Karmapa (*Gamaba*; 噶玛巴) section were found in the Norbulingka (*Luobulinka*; 罗布林卡) and the Potala Palace.⁶⁹ The Karmapa, the largest sub-school of the Kagyu (*gamagaju*; 噶玛噶举), is one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The first seal was once held by the Black Crown, sometimes known as the "Black Hat Lamas" (*heimaoxi*; 黑帽系) of the Karmapa. With a knob of the *chi* (螭; one kind of Chinese dragon), the jade seal is 6.9 (L) × 5.8 (W) × 5 (H) cm in size. In the center are the characters for "Karmapa," at the bottom of the five-lotus pedestals, and on top of three small circles representing three treasures, and on the two upper corners of the light halo are two small circles of the same size, representing the sun and the moon (Fig. 25).

⁶⁹ Ou and Qimei, *Xizang Lidai Cangyin*, 49.



Figure 25. Jade seal with a knob of the *chi*

Also with a knob of the *chi*, the second jade seal, of a smaller size ($4.7 \times 4.7 \times 5$ cm), has a similar pattern, except for the three-lotus pedestals and the crescent moon (Fig. 26).⁷⁰ The first two are kept in the Norbulingka, while the other two are in the Potala Palace. The third is a jade seal, $6.2 \times 6.2 \times 4.3$ cm in size, and with a knob of the *chi* (the topmost one in Fig. 27 & 28). With a flame halo in the center of the sealing are characters in the Tibetan script for “Kamarpa.” On the top are three small circles representing the three treasures, to the left and right of the three treasures are two small circles, depicting the sun and moon, and on the bottom is a three lotus-pedestal.⁷¹ With a size of $4.2 \times 4.2 \times 6.5$ cm, the fourth one is of the same pattern, but it is a wooden seal, and belongs to the Red Hat Lamas (*hongmaoxi*; 红帽系) of the Karmapa. With a knob of pearl (*baozhu*; 宝珠), the major difference of the

⁷⁰ Ou and Qimei, *Xizang Lidai Cangyin*, 49.

⁷¹ Ou and Qimei, *Xizang Lidai Cangyin*, 50.

wooden seal lies in its characters, which have yet to be deciphered (the bottom one in Fig. 27 & 28).⁷² The script might be not standard, since the seal is made of wood, and this leads to speculation that the seal might be a late imitation of an original that was probably made of jade.



Figure 26. Jade seal with crescent moon

⁷² Ou and Qimei, *Xizang Lidai Cangyin*, 50.



Figure 27 & 28. Jade seal (top) and Wooden wooden seal (bottom)

Huayayin (花押印), or signature seal, refers to a person's stylized signature. Often small, sometimes with images, the design can be varied in style. Signature seals are also found in Tibet. Fig. 29 shows the signature seal of Dimu (or Démo), the regent of Tibet, with Tengyeling (*danjielin*: 丹杰林) as his official house in Lhasa. This iron seal was used in the warehouse in Tengyeling. Inside the two circles is the eight-petal lotus, and outside them is a combination of the sun and crescent moon.⁷³ Such a pattern is often seen in Tibetan seals.

⁷³ Ou and Qimei, *Xizang Lidai Cangyin*, 83.



Figure 29. Signature seal of Dimu

A portrait seal, made of iron and kept in the Norbulingka, provides a direct and vivid image of the lotus flower, rather than the simplified form or stylized symbol of the lotus. The lotus flower is placed in the center of the square, and on the lotus flower is the *vajra* (divine weapon), which has nine arms on each side (Fig. 30).⁷⁴ The lotus, representing the universal "ground," supports not only deities and celestial beings, but also sacred religious symbols and implements, such as the *vajra*. The relationship of the *vajra* to the lotus is that of the inseparable essence to the "universal substance."⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Ou and Qimei, *Xizang Lidai Cangyin*, 112.

⁷⁵ Ward, "The Lotus Symbol," 139.



Figure 30. Portrait seal in the Norbulingka

Three other Tibetan signature seals, in Bonn University, Germany,⁷⁶ quite similar to the Tengyeling one, share a similar style of lotus. The first one is a round seal (diameter: 1.8 cm), with an eight-petaled inverted lotus symbol, and in the center are two columns containing the words *phags pa*.⁷⁷ The lotus petals are almost triangular and have a black dot in their center. Inside the outer rim is a sun and a moon symbol at the top but it is without a lined rim (Fig. 31).

⁷⁶ "The Tibetan Seals Database Overview," Central Asian Seminar, Bonn University, Germany. <http://www.dtab.uni-bonn.de/tibdoc/index1.htm>. Accessed in July, 2018.

⁷⁷ "The Tibetan Seals Database Overview," Central Asian Seminar, Bonn University, Germany. <http://www.dtab.uni-bonn.de/tibdoc/php/dbseals.php?a=single&eintrag=453>. Accessed in July, 2018.

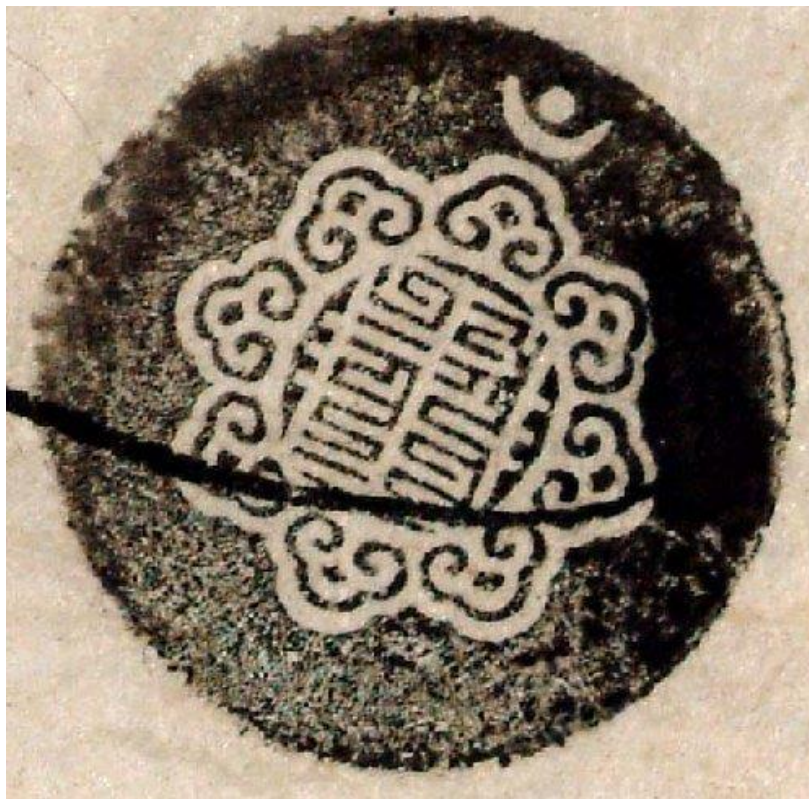


Figure 31. Portrait seal with an eight-petaled inverted lotus symbol

The second seal is also round and of the same size as the first. Two lined rims lie inside an outer rim, and on the inside rim is an eight-petaled lotus symbol with a black dot at each of the lower ends of the lotus. In the center are the words *la (?) tsa* (Fig. 32).⁷⁸

⁷⁸ "The Tibetan Seals Database Overview," Central Asian Seminar, Bonn University, Germany. <http://www.dtab.uni-bonn.de/tibdoc/php/dbseals.php?a=single&eintrag=454>. Accessed in July, 2018.



Figure 32. Portrait seal with an eight-petaled lotus symbol

The third seal is smaller, with a diameter of 1.5 cm. Inside the outer rim are two lined rims with a four-petaled lotus symbol. Each petal has an ornamental decoration. The center marks a circle with a threefold *dga' dkyi* (Fig. 33).⁷⁹

⁷⁹ <http://www.dtab.uni-bonn.de/tibdoc/php/dbseals.php?a=single&eintrag=458>.

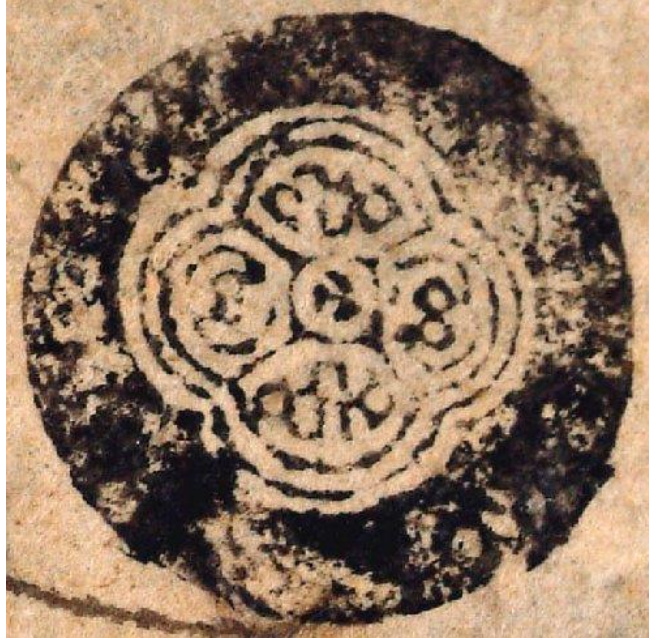


Figure 33. Portrait seal with a four-petaled lotus symbol

All these lotus-associated Tibetan seals, whether official or private, demonstrate their primary religious meanings and functions, while some of them must also have expressed administrative power. However, this more political power in any case was essentially derived from their religious significance, as Tibet in the period discussed here was a Buddhist realm.

REFLECTIONS: GLOBAL PHENOMENON, LOCAL REALIZATIONS

In world history, cultural diffusion has been accepted as the major way to spread and localize cultural elements such as ideas, styles, religions, technologies, languages, and so on, whether within a single culture or from one culture to another. The spread of Buddhism from India to East Asia and the Sinicization of Buddhism in China are probably the most illustrative cases of cultural diffusion and its localization. In the world of art, many similar phenomena are cross-civilizational, but, as here, are filled with local features.

Based on the chronological outline of seals and sealings across Afro-Eurasia, it is convincing, at least to the author, that seals and sealings were first invented in early Egypt, and later spread to India and China. Such a direction has also been supported by the current studies of lotus seals and sealings.

Archaeological discoveries have led to the conclusion that these kinds of seals and sealings, originally from the ancient Egyptian civilization, were adopted by many local cultures en route to East Asia.

The symbol, together with its major significance, attributes, and some of its forms, as illustrated in the lotus seals and sealings, originated in Egypt, and then spread to Mesopotamia, India, Tibet, Southeast Asia, and East Asia, including China. In Egypt, the “lotus” plant, which visualized life itself emerging out of water and seemingly resonating with the movement of the sun, was directly conceptualized as a solar deity, and interpreted as creation (of life, deities, kings, wealth, etc.), resurrection, and the energy force behind them, in addition to symbolizing purity. Creation and resurrection were commonly understood as birth and rebirth by various peoples across Afro-Eurasia. The blossoming and closing of the lotus flower, associated with the rising and setting of the sun, was naturally interpreted as the eternity of the solar deity. When Egyptian pharaohs appropriated the lotus symbol, their pursuit of resurrection immediately linked the lotus with royalty. The lotus–royalty association also spread to Mesopotamia, India, and China, as has been illustrated by the lotus diadem in the sealings in Iraq. Meanwhile, the lotus seat and throne were universally adopted by both secular kings and religious followers such as Brahminists and Buddhists. Indeed, the lotus as a seat or throne has been the most popular of all lotus motifs in Tibet and East Asia.

In addition to these major symbolic associations, some forms of the lotus symbol were also found in various local cultures. The concept of a naked child on a lotus, or a child born out of the lotus (and thus the lotus as a seat, pedestal, or throne), has its local counterparts in West Asia, India, Tibet, and East Asia. A male or female figure enjoying the scent of the lotus flower is an image frequently found in Egypt, India, and China. The image of holding a lotus in the hand is commonly manifested in depictions of Vishnu, Indra, Tara, Bodhisattva, and Amitabha Buddha in India and China. Indeed, *padmapani* (*lianhuashou guanyin*; 莲花手观音) was very popular in the Sena and Pala kingdoms in northeastern India, as well as in Nepal and Tibet. Fig. 34 “The Bodhisattva Padmapani Lokeshvara,”⁸⁰ a copper alloy with gilding and semiprecious stones, is a *padmapani* from Nepal, dating to around the eleventh to twelfth centuries. The most currently well known of all deities holding a lotus, of course, is

80 <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/38335>. Date: eleventh-twelfth century, dimensions: 58.4 cm in height; 25.7 cm in width; 12.1 cm in diameter. Accessed on March 1, 2020.

the Chinese Guanyin, the cultural and artistic diffusion of which association from Egypt to India and China has, unfortunately, so far been little noticed in the literature (Fig. 35 Avalokitesvara or Guanyin with a lotus bud in her right hand on lotus clouds, Dunhuang).⁸¹ With the examination of all these lotus-associated seals and sealings described here, the author concludes that it is a global phenomenon with a variety of local realizations, and proposes that this finding argues the need to examine Chinese art and culture from a much broader perspective.

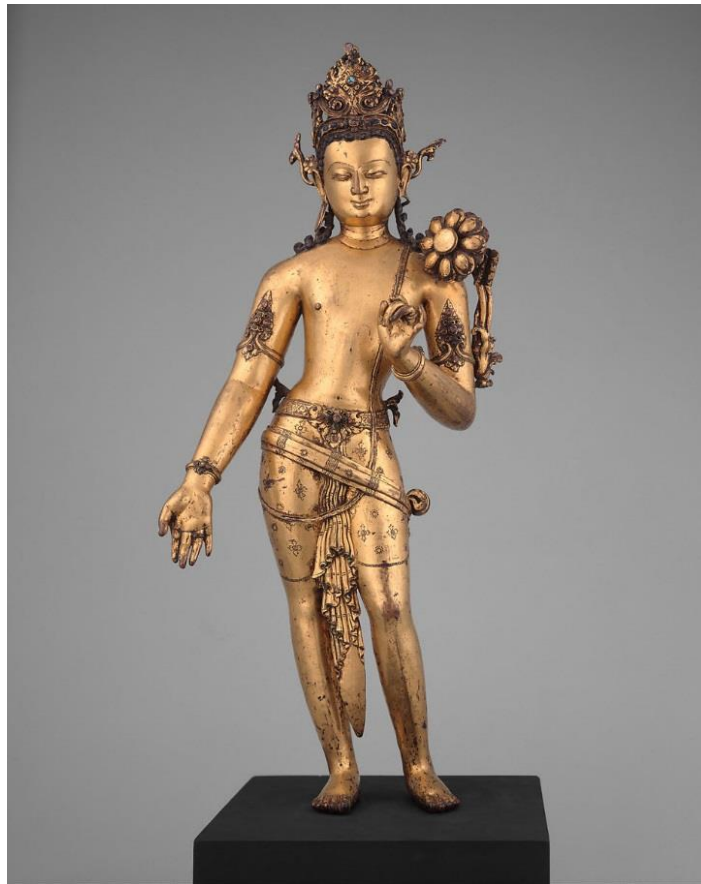


Figure 34. The Bodhisattva Padmapani Lokeshvara

⁸¹ <http://public.dha.ac.cn/content.aspx?id=737614695081>. Silk painting from the Dunhuang Caves, Northern Song (late tenth century), 84.1 cm in height, 61.2 cm in width, collection of Musée National des Arts Asiatiques–Guimet. Accessed on March 1, 2020.



Figure 35. Avalokitesvara or Guanyin with a lotus bud in her right hand on lotus clouds (silk painting)

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