Peasant Seals and Sealing Practices, c.1200-c.1500

Alister Sutherland
ahs20@leicester.ac.uk

Introduction
My project seeks to socially and culturally contextualise the use of medieval seals that belonged to rural English peasants from c.1200 to c.1500.

Research questions
- How can medieval peasant seals be used to explore peasant identity in England?
- How and why did peasants use seals to express occupations, familial relationships and connections, social and economic aspirations and divisions, piety and humour, and local and regional belonging?
- What do medieval peasant seals tell us about access to literacy by the lower social classes in the later Middle Ages and what was its social and cultural application?
- How and why did peasants use the written word?
- What was the significance of the seal in peasant use of the written word?

My approach
I will take an interdisciplinary approach that combines both documentary (the deeds) and archaeological evidence (the seals – matrices, wax impressions and casts) in a way that is sensitive to the theoretical approaches of material culture studies and I will treat the seals as agents within the culture that produced them.

I hope to implement a palimpsest approach of overlapping Portable Antiquities Scheme data, Duchy of Lancaster data and local manor data from regional record offices. Thus, three manors, one in a PAS area, one in a DL area and one in an overlap of DL and PAS data will be studied. The eastern English counties of Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex have been identified as research areas owing to their abundance of source material.

Why is this research important?
Seals are unique objects for the study of medieval peasants because they combined both text and image, were usually the result of choices made by their owner, and survive in their thousands across almost all of England. It is estimated that four-fifths of all personal seals belonged to non-elite individuals. Consequently, low-status seals possess enormous potential for insights into peasant life and mentalities. However, until recently, historians and archaeologists have ignored them, despite occasional calls for them to be explored in depth. Research has remained on the study of the minority of seals that belonged to members of the upper classes, as well as governmental, spiritual and urban institutions. By comparison, low-status seals have been condemned to small finds catalogues and the depths of archival store rooms.

Sources
Seals survive in three distinct forms that form the source-base of my research as:
1. Impressions made by individuals pressing a seal matrix into wax that was attached to contemporary documents, particularly deeds (Figure 1)
2. Metal alloy matrices unearthed during archaeological excavations or recovered by amateur metal detectorists (Figure 2)
3. Casts of impressions taken by antiquarians.

What I wish to achieve
I hope to situate peasant seals firmly within the historiography of the medieval period and demonstrate the importance and validity of applying theoretical approaches that illuminate the social and cultural significance of seals in the lives of both individuals and groups.