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Documents were central to the growing medieval administrative machine, and wax seals authenticated these documents, sealing the deal rather than signing on the line. Seals were a core means of articulating power, status, authority and dynasty, but they also give us insights into humour, love, and cultural aspirations, as well as the mechanics of granting, confirming, regulating and taxing. I love them because they offer a tantalising opportunity to link objects with specific people – strands of hair or the marks of teeth or fingers were sometimes left in the wax, underlining the how sealing became a very conscious representation of the individual.

Seal matrices were supposed to be destroyed or damaged upon the owner’s death, and some archaeological finds are indeed bent or incomplete. Many, like this example from Doune found in 2010 by a metal detectorist, are intact and were probably lost during the owner’s lifetime.

This matrix is made from silver, not copper-alloy or lead like most surviving examples. More unusually still, it is set with a delicately cut gem stone, a Roman intaglio depicting the Classical deity Juno.

Classical intaglios were sought-after items in the medieval period, part of an intense interest in gem stones and their magical, medicinal and spiritual properties. Some may have been chance medieval discoveries, found while ploughing around Roman sites, but a number of high-quality examples suggest there was an international trade in desirable antique gems. Some intaglio-bearing matrices clearly understand the classical iconography and comment upon it on the legend, while others reinterpreted pagan deities within a Christian context. On the Doune matrix the legend refers only to the seal’s owner, Thome De Lorin, meaning that, tantalisingly, we don’t know what he thought about this gem, an antique that was already around a thousand years old by the time he chose to use it to make his mark.