



Questioned Documents Section – 2006

J5 Making Serendipity Happen

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have increased awareness of the coordination, logistical, and equipment issues for a forensic document examination "in the field" by a team of experts with different specialties and sub-specialties, as well as the use of multi-field expertise to cross-verify results. Attendees will also learn about the methodology for documenting manufacturer information to demonstrate fatal anachronisms and anomalies in the source of materials used to create a document.

This presentation will demonstrate coordination, logistical, and equipment issues in team examinations in the field, and illustrate the documentation of significant information from manufacturers. It will also demonstrate the idea that even after an examination or a case is completed, if prepared for and open to it, new avenues for further research and proof can present themselves.

A border dispute between the Arab Gulf states of Bahrain and Qatar had been simmering, and sometimes boiling over, for generations when the case was finally brought before the International Court of Justice (ICJ). When Qatar submitted initial filings on the issues to the ICJ in 1996, Bahrain noticed numerous problems with many of the documents relied on by Qatar. Bahrain soon realized that it had been unavoidably tasked with determining whether these documents were authentic, and if not, proving it.

An international team of historians, legal experts, archival researchers, and forensic document examiners was assembled, and in September 1997 the team was given three weeks to complete an examination of the original documents. Because the documents would not be allowed out of the Court, equipment normally associated with a major crime laboratory had to be assembled and set up on site. Furthermore, because a full series of expert reports was required, facilities were set up in the 'team hotel' for writing and fully illustrating the findings reports.

Historians and archival researchers found distortions of well documented historical fact; letters written by non-existent personages; official letters written by people who were dead, or by school children yet to enter government service. Document examiners were able to determine that many of the documents had been written on recycled paper; that personal seals had been reused by a variety of people many years apart; that handwriting and word choice indicated something less than multiple authorship; and that letter formats differed from those of authentic documents.

But the case for proof was helped as well by two serendipitous events — one just after the original reports on the suspect documents were submitted to the Court, and the other a year after the case had been finally adjudicated. In both instances, the origin of some of the seals used on the documents came to light — once in a novelty boutique in Amsterdam and once at a street market in London. In the first, a commercial set of seals first produced in 1990 was found to match impressions on documents dating from 1860-1870. In the second instance, a group of stamps made and sold by a present day street vendor in London matched impressions on documents purportedly from a diverse variety of sources and dating from 1867-1938, matching both at the level of overall design and at the level of unique accidental manufacturing flaws.

While serendipity may have led to these discoveries, methodologically sound documentation was required to establish the significant details for use in evidence. These included interviews with individuals personally involved in the manufacture of the seals, as well as comparison of the questioned seal impressions with manufactured seals.

Age of Documents, Questioned Documents, Stamps and Seals