

Seals and Society in the Medieval World

Byzantine Studies Virtual Colloquium



Colloquiarchs: Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak, Eric McGeer, and Jonathan Shea

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection

October 29, 2021

9:00 a.m. – 4:15 p.m. ET

DUMBARTON OAKS

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Seals and Society in the Medieval World

To mark the completion of the Dumbarton Oaks Online Catalogue of Byzantine Seals in 2021, Dumbarton Oaks will be hosting a colloquium entitled “Seals and Society in the Medieval World.”

The principal aim of the colloquium is to explore the production, function, inscriptions, iconographic designs, and significance of seals by promoting comparisons and exchanges among scholars working within Byzantine, European, and Middle Eastern medieval contexts. The use and role of seals, documentary, diplomatic, literary, metaphorical, apotropaic, astrological, and medical, were contingent upon specific notions of materiality and representation. Seals were thus dynamic agents in cultural encounters.

The materials, manufacture, and types of seals in the cultures within the colloquium’s scope, as well as their meanings and usages, were quite different from one another. Western seals tended to display more complex images with simple inscriptions, whereas in the Byzantine world texts of varying length and complexity often accompanied rich iconographic content. Equally different are the contexts in which seals from the different parts of the medieval world are found today and studied. Byzantine seals tend to be found in museum collections or archaeological contexts (that is detached from their original documents) whereas western seals are found in archival repositories, with their studies more likely linked to the fields of diplomatics, literacy, and documentary practices. These differences have led scholars to take different approaches to the study and publication of seals.

Program

Friday, October 29

9:00 Welcome (**Nikos Kontogiannis**, Dumbarton Oaks)

9:10 Introduction (**Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak**, New York University and **Jonathan Shea**, Dumbarton Oaks)

Identity

Chair: John Duffy (Harvard University, Dumbarton Oaks)

9:30 – 9:50 **Christos Stavrakos**, University of Ioannina
Byzantine Seals and Identity: The Family Names

9:50 – 10:10 **Elizabeth New**, Prifysgol Aberystwyth University
Impressing People. Seals, Sealing, and the Representation of Identity in Medieval England and Wales

10:10 – 10:25 Discussion between Panelists

10:25 – 10:40 Q&A with the Public

10:40 – 11:00 Break

Iconography

Chair: Ioli Kalavrezou (Harvard University, Dumbarton Oaks)

11:00 – 11:20 **John Cotsonis (His Grace Bishop Joachim of Amissos)**, Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology
The Imagery of Byzantine Lead Seals

11:20 – 11:40 **Markus Späth**, Justus Liebig University Giessen
A Visual Universe. Image and Seal in Medieval Imperial Cities

11:40 – 11:55 Discussion between Panelists

11:55 – 12:10 Q&A with the Public

12:10 – 1:10 **Lunch Break**

The Poetics of Seal Inscriptions

Chair: Claudia Rapp (University of Vienna, Dumbarton Oaks)

1:10 – 1:30 **Mustafa Yıldız**, University of California, Berkeley
The Many Branches of the Purple: Poetics and Power in Byzantine Seal Inscriptions

1:30 – 1:50 **Nicholas Vincent**, University of East Anglia
Words Before Pictures: Seal Inscriptions in an Anglo-French Context, 1100-1250

1:50 – 2:05 Discussion between Panelists

2:05 – 2:20 Q&A with the Public

2:20 – 2:40 **Break**

Diffusion and Exchanges

Chair: Elizabeth Bolman (Case Western Reserve University, Dumbarton Oaks)

2:40 – 3:00 **Laura J. Whatley**, Auburn University at Montgomery
Diffusion and Confusion?: Seals and Sealing Protocols of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century

3:00 – 3:20 **Christopher Mielke**, Beverly Heritage Center
Tradition and Evolution: The Six Seals of “King” Mary of Hungary, 1382-1395

3:20 – 3:35 Discussion between Panelists

3:35 – 3:50 Q&A with the Public

Final Discussion

Chair: Dimiter Angelov (Harvard University, Dumbarton Oaks)

3:50 – 4:15 Final discussion and concluding remarks (**Eric McGeer**, Dumbarton Oaks)

Abstracts

Byzantine Seals and Identity: The Family Names

Christos Stavrakos, University of Ioannina

Byzantine seals are a completely reliable source, the data of which confirm, subvert or change the information of other written sources.

In the Byzantine Empire, seals served as a means of ensuring the secrecy, security, authenticity and quality guarantee of shipments (documents, letters, product packages, etc.), were also a *medium* of expression of identity of their users. The owner of a *boulloterion* always wanted to attribute his titles and positions on his seals accurately and clearly. The interest in the correct rendering of all these characteristics of the social identity of the individual was so great that in every change of title or office the Byzantines ordered a new seal.

In this context, the most important group of Byzantine seals are those bearing family names. The appearance of family names on Byzantine seals is directly related to the appearance of the first aristocratic families in Asia Minor, i.e. it is a consequence of a social phenomenon which is also associated with the increase of large landownership during the middle Byzantine period.

Based on chronological and artistic criteria and in combination with information from other written and archaeological sources we can associate seals with already known persons and reconstruct their careers in the administration of the Byzantine Empire.

This paper consists of two parts. In the first part we will describe the methodology of the basic research: i) reading and identification of rare or partly destroyed family names, and ii) methods and criteria of connecting seals with each other and attributing them to famous personalities.

In the second part we will describe in groups the characteristics (artistic, rhetoric, morphological or very personal ones) that express the social identity of the seal owners as they appear on the seals with family names. Finally, we will deal with the ways of expressing women's social identity.

Impressing People. Seals, Sealing, and the Representation of Identity in Medieval England and Wales

Elizabeth New, Prifysgol Aberystwyth University

This paper will consider the ways in which seals and sealing practices were used as vehicles for representation and expressing identity in medieval England and Wales. In English law free land agreements had to be validated under seal, as were a host of documentary exchanges, and by the later 13th century seal-owning villains were deemed acceptable substitutes for free men in some circumstances. This depth and breadth of seal ownership and participation in sealing sets England and Wales apart from much of Europe, and I will consider how this presented opportunities for those of the middling and lower levels of society, and the challenges it posed to the elites. I will also address the opportunities and challenges this wealth of material presents to modern scholars. However, the focus remains on the seals of the elites, who are considered to have had greater opportunities for individual representation. I suggest that the opposite is true, with the elites more constrained by the ‘body of conventional images with limiting impact on the expression of personal identity’ and those of more modest status freer to explore opportunities for individual expression through the motifs and text on seals, and in many instances in how they participated in the act of sealing.

The Imagery of Byzantine Lead Seals

John Cotsonis (His Grace Bishop Joachim of Amissos),
Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology

A vast number of Byzantine lead seals are known to survive, approximately 80,000 worldwide. This great quantity testifies to the fact that lead seals were in widespread use in Byzantium among all ranks of society: emperors; patriarchs; officials in all levels of the civil, military and ecclesiastical bureaucracies; and private individuals as well. Seals provide the largest number of surviving examples of sacred imagery from the Byzantine period as well as a continuous chronological record of such images, ranging in date from the 6th through the 15th century. They bear images of Christ, the Virgin, various saints, narrative scenes and crosses. With this vast body of religious figures, one can chart the popularity of sacred figures and saintly cults and their changing chronological frequencies as well as changes in iconography over time. In addition, there are much fewer specimens that bear the “portraits” of their owners and those depicting animals. The great wealth of

this material has also provided examples of images either unknown or rarely seen in other media. Many of these seals bearing images of holy figures also have inscriptions that include the names and titles or offices of their owners, information most often not known for the patrons of sacred images found in other media. Such a combination of image and self-identifying inscriptions permits an investigation into the social use of sacred imagery through various sectors of Byzantine culture and geographical regions. These data have been shown to reflect changes in Byzantine ecclesio-political policies; they have been employed to investigate the motives of iconographic choice; and they present a means of examining the relation between text and image. This rich body of material, uniting sacred images and identifying texts, offers not only a view of the broader visual piety of Byzantine society but also the means of discerning the complex construction and presentation of individual identity within the culture.

A Visual Universe. Image and Seal in Medieval Imperial Cities

Markus Späth, Justus Liebig University Giessen

The more the Western Empire lost its political coherence after 1250, the more its culture of sealing flourished. An increasing number of players demanded participation in an increasingly complex process of political decision-making, which included many sealed arrangements. The great need of visual presence in an unclear society therefore resulted in a rich diversity of imagery. As if magnified by a burning glass such a universe of seal imagery can be found in many of the numerous imperial cities of late medieval Germany. There, many individuals as well as institutions contributed to the political processes that kept the urban society running. Each of these players was in need of a seal image that had the potential to represent themselves at the same time in a distinct as well as a shared identity. The paper aims to analyze the universe of seal imagery by researching its links to the variety of contemporary visual cultures that particularly flourished in these urban environments.

The Many Branches of the Purple: Poetics and Power in Byzantine Seal Inscriptions

Mustafa Yıldız, University of California, Berkley

The use of metrical inscriptions is a distinctive feature of the Middle Byzantine seals. Especially prominent in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, this phenomenon was not independent of the contemporary literary trends and grew out of the epigraphic tradition of Byzantine material culture. One particular aspect of this development was the use of an elaborate and often archaic idiom with great propensity for lexical experimentation. Novel words like *porphyrauges* (purple-shining) and *Kommenophyes* (Komnenos-grown) had clear references to imperial power and aristocratic descent. Some of these terms are attested for the first time in the works of the court poets like Theodore Prodromos, who flourished under the Komnenian emperors John II and Manuel I. Prodromos's contemporaries and next generations of authors imitating his style popularized this new idiom. Many of the seals that featured such language were produced for the members of the extended Komnenos dynasty during the late 12th and early 13th centuries. In this paper, I aim to analyze examples from the vast corpus of the Dumbarton Oaks Catalogue of Byzantine Seals along with other contemporary inscriptions and demonstrate the connections between literature, epigraphy, and power in Byzantium. I also argue that the flowery style of these verses sat perfectly within the literary developments cultivated under the Komnenian emperors.

Words Before Pictures: Seal Inscriptions in an Anglo-French Context, 1100-1250

Nicholas Vincent, University of East Anglia

Perhaps because seals have tended to attract the attention first and foremost of art historians, and only secondarily that of the historians of text or politics, seal images have tended to obscure the importance of words on seals. Where there is a rich tradition of detecting secondary meanings to images, the tendency has remained to accept inscriptions literally at face value. My paper will explore the possibilities that arise when we search for secondary inferences not only to inscriptions but in many cases to the combination of text and image. Some such work is long familiar, for example with inscriptions that employ verse, puns, ambiguity (easily decoded or still mysterious), or other deliberately euphuistic devices. My paper will draw attention to a variety of familiar instances, whilst at the same time looking for new evidence, especially in the realms of Anglo-French politics and the

Anglo-French elite in the period roughly 1050-1280. How widespread was the use of quotation, or deliberate literary/intellectual allusion? How far down the social scale were such devices used? Can we detect any particular time-periods or geographical realms of influence in which such devices flourished? Above all, can we begin to compile a taxonomy of such devices equivalent to the rich taxonomies that already exist for seal images and their pictorial artistry?

Diffusion and Confusion?:

Seals and Sealing Protocols of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century

Laura J. Whatley, Auburn University at Montgomery

This paper will explore the iconography, materiality, and usage of seals in one of the largest international corporations of the Crusades, the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem. Founded around the year 1070 to administer medical care to pilgrims in the Holy Land, the Hospitallers developed a military role in the turbulent years after the foundation of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. By 1306, the Hospitallers' central convent had been relocated four times, from Jerusalem to Acre, Cyprus, and Rhodes, and there were Hospitaller priories and commanderies dispersed across eight *lingues* or nations (Provence, Auvergne, France, Italy, Aragon, England, Germany, and Castile). Seals were an essential aspect of Hospitaller bureaucracy and operations by the first half of the twelfth century. The second Master of the Hospitallers, Raymond du Puy (d. 1160), was sealing with a double-sided lead seal—the Master's *bullæ*—as early as the 1120s. The obverse of the *bullæ* depicts the Master kneeling in prayer before a patriarchal cross accompanied by the sacred letters α (alpha) and ω (omega), and the reverse shows the body of a man on a dais swathed in a shroud with a cross at his head and another at his feet as well as a hanging lamp and a flying censer. The body is displayed beneath an architectural framework or canopy comprised of three domes topped with crosses, certainly evoking the domed cross-section of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. This seal reflects important ideas about the Hospitaller's identity (or self-identification), and it provides important references to both sacred place and ritual in the Holy Land during the Crusades. Indeed, the iconography of the Master's *bullæ* provides interesting evidence for meaningful visual exchange between pilgrimage souvenirs (such as lead flasks) and Crusader seals, for example, and it underscores the role of the Hospitallers in facilitating pilgrim encounters with the holy places in Jerusalem. The Master's *bullæ* would inspire some of the seals used in

Hospitaller priories in western Europe, such as the seal (a matrix impressed in wax) of the Priory of St. Gilles in France. This paper will explore some of these connections and exchanges between Hospitaller seals in the Latin Kingdom and seals used in the western *lingues* in order to better understand how identity and authority was negotiated within such an expansive transnational corporation. By analyzing a very unusual thirteenth-century document, the *Ci dit des bulles que le maistre et les autres baillis del hospital bullent* (think medieval spreadsheet cataloging “known seals” in use at a particular moment), alongside the Order’s rules and statutes pertaining to seals, this paper will also shed light on the major logistical challenges of seals and sealing protocols in relation to the legitimacy and authentication of documents across time and place.

**Tradition and Evolution:
The Six Seals of “King” Mary of Hungary, 1382-1395**

Christopher Mielke, Beverly Heritage Center

Mary, Queen Regnant of Hungary from 1382 to 1395, has been treated in the historical record as an overshadowed daughter and wife, completely outshined by the men in her family and her younger sister, Jadwiga of Poland. Yet the material evidence of her life shows her as someone who took full advantage of her right to mint coins throughout her reign, an active patron of art, literature, and learning, a donor to the church, and a bibliophile. The material record and the written record offer completely different perspectives on her life as well as how she viewed herself. Her great seal and her signet evolve from the period of her mother’s regency (1382-1386) to the period where she rules jointly with her husband, Sigismund of Luxemburg (1387-1395). She makes use of dynastic saints, her natal family’s heraldry, and artistic programs that link her power as deriving from her father rather than her husband, as well as establishing her own identity. The six seals she used in her turbulent reign show how the Queen saw herself and how contemporaries were meant to view her—not as a neglected cipher, but as an ambitious, intelligent woman with agency of her own.