

Chapter 1

Byzantine Lead Seals as Expressions of Power and Identity

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The Byzantine *molybdeboulla*, conventionally referred to simply as seals, were small, round, coin-like disks made of lead, pierced horizontally by a channel. The seal impressions (σφραγίσματα) were produced on both faces of the disk using a pincer-like instrument known as a *boulloterion*, whose two jaws had been previously engraved in intaglio to serve as matrices. These *boulloteria*, typically fashioned from iron, have rarely survived, as they tended to perish from corrosion or were deliberately destroyed to prevent their misuse once their owners ceased to exercise their office or authority. By contrast, the lead seals themselves, whether remaining attached to documents or subsequently discarded, have survived in considerable numbers, providing a uniquely rich body of evidence for Byzantine administrative, social, and cultural history.

Each *boulloterion* was individually engraved. Regarding the manufacture of these instruments, we can only formulate hypotheses about the workshops and artisans involved, drawing on the techniques visible in the surviving material, which is fortunately abundant: well over 80,000 lead seals have come down to us today. Examination of seals from the same period shows that there are indeed contemporary specimens sharing similar epigraphic and iconographic features, suggesting production by the same workshop or even the same artisan. Most seals of a given period can be grouped into stylistic families based on similarities in engraving technique, particularly in epigraphy. In general, these groups do not differ greatly from one another, implying that most artisans were part of a shared tradition and were possibly concentrated in Constantinople, where dignitaries and officials regularly traveled to receive their salaries or titles from the emperor. Nevertheless, a non-negligible minority of seals display notable divergences in style and workmanship, indicating production either by inexperienced craftsmen or, more plausibly, by workshops based in the provinces.

This chapter examines the use of lead seals as material objects in Byzantine society. It addresses: (i) their function, (ii) the social groups that owned seals, (iii) the recipients and wider audience of lead seals, and (iv) the ways in which owners expressed their social and cultural identity, ideology, and power specifically through the use of these objects. While the manufacture of the blank lead disks and the engraving of the matrices were the tasks of artisans, the choice of legend and iconography was largely the decision of the seal's owner. As will be shown, lead seals functioned as a medium employed by the higher strata of society, intended to display the status and authority of their holders. They served to reinforce, legitimize, and reproduce the socio-political structures of the Byzantine Empire.

Lead Seals as a Means of Authority

The most evident function of lead seals was the certification of documents. Unfortunately, much of the Byzantine archival material has been lost, and today only a few dozen lead seals survive still attached to their original documents. The surviving evidence suggests that only a minority of documents were sealed. These documents typically included acts issued by state or church officials—such as orders, decisions, tax inventories, and court verdicts—as well as official or private acts that were later certified for their validity by other authorities.¹ Many early middle Byzantine

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documents (late ninth to tenth century) were not even signed when the official's seal was appended, demonstrating how crucial sealing had become for authentication during this period.² After the seventh century, lead seals attached to documents provide the only surviving testimony to their use. Thus, lead sealing served as an expression of authority.

Lead seals were also used for official correspondence, as can be inferred from the practices of the imperial chancery. The emperor employed lead seals for official letters addressed to higher officials or members of the Church hierarchy, such as metropolitans. Foreign rulers, by contrast, received letters sealed with gold, while all other recipients received documents sealed with wax. Similar practices were followed by the patriarchal chancery: only other patriarchs or metropolitans received letters from the Patriarch of Constantinople bearing a lead seal.³ Thus, sealing with lead was considered more prestigious than sealing with wax. While the use of a seal in itself expressed one's authority, the use of lead specifically conveyed respect for the recipient's high status. It may be surmised that officials, when corresponding with the emperor or other high-ranking figures, even for private matters, would likewise employ a lead seal, both as a mark of deference and as a means of reinforcing their own status. As we shall see, this practice had repercussions for the social milieu of the sealers.

Regarding the social status of the sealers, "who sealed," at first sight, one cannot fail to notice the variety of social groups represented on Byzantine seals: emperors, state and church officials, dignitaries, monks, private individuals, professionals, women, foreigners, and others. As far as we know, no law in Byzantium regulated who could seal documents, and thus a wide range of individuals is attested. However, only statistical analysis can enable us to grasp the extent to which lead sealing was diffused across different social groups and within Byzantine society as a whole.

For this purpose, I have chosen as a case study the collection of the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul, comprising approximately 1,500 lead seals. These seals have been found primarily in Constantinople and secondarily in various locations across Asia Minor and Thrace or have entered the museum through donations or confiscations. Unlike private collections, museum collections are generally free from selection bias favoring historically, artistically, or aesthetically notable pieces. Furthermore, unlike regional museum collections, which tend to reflect local contexts, the material from the Istanbul Archaeological Museum is not regionally or socially biased, since people from all provinces would have reason to communicate with the capital and its state services or powerful individuals. Indeed, the collection includes seals struck by officials with jurisdiction over areas ranging from Sicily, Italy, and Serbia to the easternmost provinces such as Antioch. Finally, the size of the collection is neither too small nor too large (in contrast, for example, to the Dumbarton Oaks collection with its 17,000 pieces, also primarily from Constantinople), and it has been recently and meticulously catalogued according to high academic standards by three leading experts in the field.⁴

<<Table 1.1 HERE>>

¹ For example, of the 69 documents in the archive of the Lavra Monastery on Mt. Athos dating from the late ninth century to 1204 (*Actes Lavra I*), which constitute the majority of surviving middle Byzantine documents, only the acts of state officials were sealed. All other private documents, including sales, donations, and promissory statements, or even the acts of the *protos* of Mt. Athos were not sealed.

² Oikonomides 1983, 147–148.

³ Pseudo-Kodinos, *De Officiis*, 175–176.

⁴ Cheynet, Gökyildirim and Bulgurlu 2012.

Table 1.1 presents the breakdown of these seals according to the social milieu of their owners. It becomes clear that approximately 40% of the seals belonged to officials of the state or the Church, representing different sectors, with civil officials significantly outnumbering military ones. A notable proportion (19%) comprises individuals who mention only their dignities on their seals. Although this is a large group, it may be supposed that many of these individuals were not actively holding office at the time but were nonetheless engaged in communication with officials for various purposes. At the same time, there is a substantial number of “private individuals” (30%), who are identified only by their personal names without any dignity or title. Some among them are women, who could not have sealed official documents, as they were excluded from holding office. The same applies to those associated with the monastic milieu, such as abbots and simple monks.

One possible answer to this problem is that these individuals also sealed their private correspondence or certified private documents. However, this solution presents certain difficulties. The first issue is that we have little evidence for the use of lead seals in private (as opposed to official) correspondence in Byzantium. In one known case, Eirene produced a seal in which she declared that she was writing to her husband, Michael Makrembolites, clearly in a non-official capacity: “Michael Makrembolites, receive the writings from your beloved partner, Eirene.”⁵ This example dates to the late thirteenth century, a period when the use of lead seals was declining in favor of wax sealing. It is therefore possible that this case reflects the influence of wax seals, typically associated with more private correspondence, on the traditionally official medium of lead sealing, as will be shown below.

In fact, there is evidence to the contrary: private correspondence was not generally sealed. Judging from the case of Egypt, clay seals were used for private correspondence and lead seals for official correspondence during the Ptolemaic period. However, the practice of sealing private letters disappeared altogether during the Roman period and late antiquity, being replaced by elaborate ink patterns.⁶ Nevertheless, this does not exclude the possibility that the practice of sealing letters resumed after the sixth century in the northern Mediterranean, coinciding with the period when the overall number of lead seals began to rise.

The second problem regarding private sealing concerns the existence of signet seals and wax sealing. Extremely few Byzantine wax seals have survived due to the perishability of the material; however, numerous signet rings and stamps have come down to us, only a few made of gold, but a considerably larger number of bronze or other materials.⁷ It is reasonable to assume that many more gold, silver, and bronze signet rings and stamps once existed but were later melted down to produce other types of jewelry once they ceased to serve their original function, unlike lead seals, whose negligible metal value made them less attractive for reuse. Furthermore, many signet rings and stamps were made of perishable materials such as wood or iron. In any case, the survival of hundreds of signet rings, compared to just eight known *boulloteria*, underscores the wide diffusion of signet rings within Byzantine society.

Legal evidence from the sixth century suggests that signet rings were used to certify the witnesses of a private act, such as a testament.⁸ The evidence of papyri from late antique Egypt (fourth to eighth centuries) suggests that private individuals,

⁵ Schlumberger 1884, 674 (no. 2); Wassiliou-Seibt 2011a, no. 1345. All translations are by the author.

⁶ Vandorpe 1997, 241–243.

⁷ Bosselmann-Ruickbie 2011, 117–125.

⁸ *Institutes*, II.X.5, Krüger 1867, 55.

including monasteries, were using clay or wax seals to certify their private documents.⁹ Private individuals may have continued during the middle Byzantine period to certify their acts using wax, a simpler and cheaper sealing material. In 1036, seven abbots certified the testament of Loukas, abbot of Galeagra. Although no seals survive on the testament, the original draft, still preserved in the archives of the monastery of Iveron, records the signatures on the reverse as described by a later scribe.¹⁰ However, many other surviving middle Byzantine testaments do not mention any sealing on behalf of the witnesses.

At the same time, evidence shows that low-level officials were expected to seal their petitions to the emperor with signet rings.¹¹ In this way, lower-ranking officials expressed their inferior status by using signet rings in their official correspondence with the emperor rather than lead seals, which, as already remarked, signified a higher status. Therefore, many private individuals may have used the less prestigious signet rings for sealing their documents or correspondence or might have entirely dispensed with the practice of sealing. Indeed, in most cases, and with the exception of signet rings made of gold, their owners were largely anonymous, mentioning only their name, or in just a few cases, also a lower title.¹²

The third problem with the idea of private sealing through lead is statistical. Individuals who do not mention any office or dignity on their seals are often classified as “private people.” However, their distribution across the centuries is uneven. A large proportion of such private individuals appears during the sixth and seventh centuries, a period when seals were generally simple, only sporadically mentioning a dignity or office and very rarely listing more than one. As seals became more detailed, the number of private individuals decreased over the course of the seventh century, began to rise slowly again from the tenth century, and peaked in the twelfth century. In our sample, no seals of private people are dated to the ninth century, and very few to the eighth and tenth centuries (see Table 1.2).

<<Table 1.2 HERE>>

During the eleventh century, there was a general increase in the number of seals, peaking in the second half of the century (see Graph 1.1). This period coincided with a rise in population and economic activity, while the Byzantine state achieved its greatest territorial expansion since the early seventh century. A larger state and population required more officials and greater administrative complexity. Furthermore, literacy levels and education progressively improved, which, alongside the growing importance of written culture, increased the need for sealing.

<<Graph 1.1 HERE>>

While practical factors account for the general increase in the number of seals, they do not fully explain the proportional rise in “private people” among sealers. The share of “private seals” grew from 10% in the tenth century to 33% in the second half of the eleventh century and reached 58% by the second half of the twelfth century. Conversely, seals belonging to officials became a minority, constituting only 11% in the twelfth century. The expansion of the urban economy, the population growth in Constantinople, and the frequent political shifts on the throne led to significant social mobility within the capital. The upper middle classes experienced a notable rise in status, a development that contemporaries, such as Michael Psellos, recognized. Psellos

⁹ Kotsifou 2012.

¹⁰ *Actes Iviron I*, no. 25.

¹¹ *Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos, De Administrando Imperio*, 53.145–149, Moravcsik 1967, 264–266.

¹² Bosselmann-Ruickbie 2011, 117–125.

praised Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos (1042–1055) for permitting individuals from non-aristocratic backgrounds to enter the Senate.¹³ The ascent of Constantinople’s urban elite paralleled the rise of civil administration, which gradually overshadowed the military administration in the provinces. The judge, for instance, soon became more influential than the strategos, with the former being regarded as the true governor of a *thema*.¹⁴

As the theory of the trickle-down effect suggests, the lower classes often imitate the consumption and fashion patterns of the upper class.¹⁵ By using a lead seal on the documents they issued, individuals sought to present themselves as possessing a higher status and greater authority than they actually held. However, by the end of the eleventh century, the military elite had consolidated its control over the government and state, significantly diminishing the political prospects of the upper middle class. This shift in power may have discouraged many from issuing seals, leading to a gradual decline in their overall usage.

Another issue regarding the use of lead seals for private correspondence concerns certain practices of seal owners. In the few surviving cases of seals on documents, it is noticeable that many officials did not include all, or sometimes any, of their offices or dignities on their seals. Some individuals went even further by omitting their names entirely, remaining completely anonymous. This practice will be examined in greater detail in the section on identity. However, for the time being, it is important to note that several of the so-called “private people” were, in fact, officials who simply chose not to list their titles on their seals, instead opting to emphasize other aspects of their identity.

Based on the evidence presented above, lead seals were primarily used for certifying official acts and securing letters from state and church officials, thus serving mainly as a means of expressing authority. Private correspondence, on the other hand, was generally sealed with signet rings or wax, both of which were considered less prestigious than lead seals, which were typically reserved for individuals of higher social standing.

However, I would not dismiss the possibility that lead seals were used occasionally for private correspondence, which can explain the limited lead sealing by certain social groups without any official capacity, such as elite women, professionals, and monks. Individuals within these categories may have had various reasons to communicate with authorities or other members of the elite. By using a lead seal, they could assert their high social status and their authority to engage in sealed correspondence. Opting for lead over other materials reinforced and ideologically affirmed their social position. In Byzantine society, lead as a sealing material was imbued with greater authoritative significance than more modest substances like clay or wax.

Moreover, one cannot rule out the possibility that the production and use of lead seals were subject to state regulation. Such a hypothesis would help explain the predominance of officials among those who used lead seals. At the same time, it does not exclude the likelihood that certain individuals of high social prestige, even without holding an official position, could have negotiated or secured permission from the authorities to commission a lead seal.

The third question, namely to whom the seals were addressed, their intended audience, is more difficult to answer, though some hypotheses can be proposed. With

¹³ Michael Psellos, *Orationes funebres*, Polemis 2014, 8.

¹⁴ Oikonomidès 1976, 148–150; Shea 2020, 39–123.

¹⁵ Bourdieu 1984; Simmel 1905.

the exception of a few surviving documents, the exact recipient of a sealed letter or document remains unknown. In cases where seals have a secure findspot, particularly those uncovered in archaeological contexts, it may be possible to establish a connection between the seal's owner and a specific location, institution, or even building. However, such examples constitute a minority. That said, the number of seals with known provenance is steadily increasing, thanks to more thorough and systematic archaeological reporting. Nevertheless, even in these cases, any identification of the seal's recipient remains speculative at best.

Based on the evidence discussed so far, the recipient of a lead-sealed document or letter was, in most cases, either a fellow official or a private individual engaged in dealings with the authorities—such as matters related to taxation or property. In both scenarios, the recipients and the general audience are unlikely to have come from the lower social strata; rather, they were typically members of the middle or upper classes.

The Design of the Seal: Between Tradition and Innovation

Regarding the fourth question, it is important to note that the design and content of a Byzantine lead seal were typically determined by the owner, rather than by the state or the artisan. The only exceptions are the relatively few seals issued by state institutions or those belonging to *kommerkiarioi*—commercial tax collectors—dating from the sixth to the eighth centuries. The collection of the Istanbul Archaeological Museum includes only three seals from state institutions: two from the imperial treasury (*sakelle*) and one from the *chartoularioi* of the *kenson*, all dated to the seventh century. Additionally, there are two institutional seals from the corps of lesser ecclesiastical judges of the patriarchate—the *ekkleziekdikoi* of Hagia Sophia—dating from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.¹⁶

By its very function, the seal operated as an external marker of identity, intended not for private use but as a form of public self-representation. Through inscription or iconography, the owner displayed on the seal those elements by which he wished to be recognized. Given the role of lead sealing, the owner's primary objective was to assert his authority and the legitimacy of his right to seal. However, as a personal emblem or trademark, the seal could also incorporate motifs and other features that publicly conveyed his religious or political loyalties, cultural inclinations, and social or political affiliations to the recipients of his correspondence.

Before delving deeper, it is essential to understand both the potential and the limitations concerning the content and design of lead seals over time. Several key constraints shaped their appearance: the small size of the sealing surface, typically ranging from 1.5 to 4 cm, the practical limitations of what an artisan could depict within that space, and the prevailing artistic conventions and fashions of each period.

In the sixth and seventh centuries, seals were relatively simple. They generally featured short inscriptions or monograms that included the name of the owner and, often but not always, a title. This title could be a dignity (such as *patrikios* or *hypatos*), a class of officials (such as *spatharios*, *kandidatos*, *chartoularios*, *notarios*, etc.), or, in some cases, a specific office (see Figure 1.1). Seals combining both an office or rank and a dignity were uncommon prior to the late seventh century. Iconographic elements were also limited during this period. The most frequent images were of a few select holy figures, primarily the Theotokos, while representations of animals, especially eagles, or mythical creatures were much rarer. According to Joachim Cotsonis, only about 24%

¹⁶ Cheynet, Gökyildirim and Bulgurlu 2012, nos. 2.18, 2.159–160, 6.8–9.

of seventh-century seals featured religious iconography.¹⁷ In our sample, seals with religious iconography form 19% of the total, while seals containing any iconography (i.e., including imperial portraits or faunal iconography) reach about 32% in total.

<<Figure 1.1 HERE>>

The art of seal engraving saw notable improvements towards the end of the seventh century. For example, a comparison of the detailed representations of the Theotokos on the seals of Theodosios, bishop of Athens, dated to the late seventh or early eighth century (see Figure 1.3), with those on the sixth or seventh century seals of Theodoros (see Figure 1.1) and Georgios (see Figure 1.2), is particularly revealing (see also Figure 1.9 in another case).

<<Figure 1.2 HERE>>

<<Figure 1.3 HERE>>

Monograms of names and titles were gradually phased out, as inscriptions became more regular in form and increasingly smaller in size, thereby allowing for the inclusion of longer legends. During this process, the structure of seal legends was standardized: they typically began with an invocation, followed—usually in this order—by the owner’s first name, any dignities and/or offices held, the place where the duties were exercised, and, from the tenth century onward, the surname.

Cruciform invocative monograms emerged in the second half of the seventh century and, by around 700, had come to dominate the obverse of lead seals. With the advent of Iconoclasm, figural iconography was significantly reduced. Between the mid-eighth and mid-ninth centuries, over 90% of lead seals featured on their obverse a cruciform invocative monogram, most commonly addressing the Theotokos (see Figure 1.4). In our sample of 99 lead seals datable to this period, only six lack such a monogram, and of those, half are imperial seals, which, in emulation of imperial coinage, consistently omitted invocations of any kind.

<<Figure 1.4 HERE>>

Following the end of Iconoclasm, the iconographic representation of holy figures gradually reappeared on lead seals. According to Cotsonis, religious iconography on seals dated to the late ninth or early tenth century accounts for approximately 15% of the total, with the majority depicting the Theotokos. Concurrently, the use of the cruciform invocative monogram declined and eventually almost disappeared, giving way to depictions of simple crosses on the obverse. These were typically accompanied by a circular invocative inscription, now consistently addressing the Lord.

<<Figure 1.5 HERE>>

Throughout the tenth century, the predominant decorative motif on the obverse of lead seals remained the cross, most commonly a patriarchal cross on steps embellished with fleurons (see Figure 1.5). In our sample, nearly half of the seals from this period feature a cross on the obverse. Meanwhile, religious iconography continued to grow steadily in prominence. It soon surpassed the levels observed in the seventh century and, by the second half of the tenth century, had overtaken the depiction of crosses as the most frequent iconographic element.

<<Figure 1.6 HERE>>

In contrast to the ninth century, when representations of the Theotokos dominated religious iconography on lead seals (87% compared to only 13% depicting saints), the tenth century saw a reversal of this trend. On tenth-century seals, saints

¹⁷ Cotsonis 2005, 58 (graph 3.2). All subsequent mentions in this section to the figures of religious iconography refer to this graph.

became the preferred subjects, appearing in 68% of cases, while depictions of the Theotokos dropped to 32%.¹⁸ This shift is even more pronounced in our sample: of the 42 tenth-century lead seals with religious iconography, only five (approximately 12%) feature the Theotokos.

At the same time, other iconographic motifs began to emerge, including various floral decorative patterns and faunal imagery. The latter was composed primarily of mythical creatures, such as griffins and manticores, as well as naturalistic animals including birds, lions, and peacocks. In our sample, such motifs remained a minority, not exceeding 10% of the total throughout the tenth century.

Religious iconography ultimately prevailed in the eleventh century, surpassing 80% of all lead seals and maintaining this level through to the end of the Byzantine period. The remaining 20% largely consist of seals bearing bilateral inscriptions without imagery, or imperial seals. During this period, depictions of the Theotokos once again rise to constitute approximately half of all seals with religious imagery. Notably, scenes from the New and Old Testaments, as well as compositions featuring more than one holy figure in the same frame, begin to appear with increasing frequency, whereas such representations had previously been extremely rare. Nevertheless, they remain a minority: in our sample of 802 seals from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, only eight feature narrative religious scenes, while 108 present multiple saints. Another significant development in this period is the gradual displacement of the formulaic legend, dominant since the late seventh century, by metrical inscriptions. These poetic legends typically focus on the identity of the seal owner (name, origins, office, and dignities), their religious devotion and connection to the holy figure depicted, or on the seal itself, sometimes imagined as a speaking or animate object.

Overall, this survey reveals that lead seals were, by nature, a relatively conservative medium in both content and design. The eighth and ninth centuries were characterized by a strong tendency toward uniformity, with minimal signs of differentiation. The seventh and tenth centuries, by contrast, show evidence of what might be termed “cautious differentiation,” primarily in terms of iconographic design rather than inscriptional content. It is only in the period from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries that we observe a notable increase in variety and individual expression, both in the visual motifs and in the composition of the legends, reflecting broader cultural and social shifts within Byzantine society.

This conservatism becomes even more apparent when one considers the limited range of iconographic types used for depictions of the Theotokos and the relatively narrow selection of saints represented on seals. Cotsonis has identified approximately 129 distinct saints across the seals in his sample, a remarkably small number when compared to the roughly 3,800 saints recorded in the Byzantine *Hagiologion*. The variety becomes even more restricted when we take into account that just five figures (St. Nicholas, Archangel Michael, St. George, St. Theodore, and St. Demetrios) account for two-thirds of all saintly representations.

The most frequently depicted types of the Theotokos on lead seals reflect this iconographic conservatism. The most common was the Episkepsis type (a bust of the Theotokos in *orans* position with a medallion of Christ on her chest), with 110 examples in our sample. This was followed by the Nikopoios (a bust of the Theotokos holding the medallion of Christ), and the Blachernitissa (a bust of the Theotokos in *orans* position without Christ), each represented by 40 examples. The Hodegetria type (the Theotokos holding Christ on her left arm) appears more rarely, with only 15 instances.

¹⁸ Cotsonis 2005, 69-71.

More elaborate iconography on lead seals, such as scenes from the Old or New Testament, was typically adopted by members of the higher elite. For them, such imagery served not only as a marker of piety or learning, but also as a means of distinguishing themselves while simultaneously reinforcing their integration within the established cultural norms of the elite.¹⁹

These findings correspond to broader artistic practices in other media. As Paul Halsall has observed, the range of iconography in Byzantine art was generally quite limited, with the notable exception of monumental church decoration, where ample space allowed for the inclusion of a wider array of saints and narrative scenes recognizable to a broader audience.²⁰ On lead seals, the range of iconographic variety was even more restricted than in other artistic media, owing both to the small surface area of the seal and to its primarily public and official, rather than private, function. Seal owners typically opted for simple, immediately recognizable imagery suited to the limited space, which meant that narrative scenes from the lives of holy figures were generally avoided, unless they depicted universally identifiable episodes such as the Crucifixion or the Dormition.

Lead Seals as a Means of Self-Representation

It becomes evident that in a medium so closely tied to authority and the projection of public identity, seal owners were generally reluctant to adopt innovative designs, particularly during periods when alignment with the established social and political order, as well as conformity to prevailing cultural norms, was essential for maintaining one's place within Byzantine society. This conservatism is especially understandable in light of broader social transformations. As the traditional senatorial aristocracy declined during the seventh and eighth centuries, a new service-based elite emerged in the eighth and ninth centuries. Often composed of provincials or even foreigners who had migrated into the empire, largely as a consequence of Arab expansion, this new elite derived its status not from ancestry, classical education, or landed wealth, but from imperial service, holding offices and dignities bestowed by the emperor.

From this perspective, it is hardly surprising that, beginning in the seventh century, the legends of seals increasingly featured official titles and dignities. The formula of address (invocation, personal name, and rank) eventually crystallized into the standard format around 700. The emerging service elite, whose status rested on imperial appointment rather than inherited privilege, consistently emphasized the offices and dignities conferred upon them by the emperor. These titles functioned as visible markers of distinction and legitimacy and the owners of seals displayed them on their seals (and likely in other media of elite self-representation as well), aligning their identity with prevailing cultural and administrative norms. Along with the insignia of one's office and dignity, the lead seal was the material par excellence that publicly proclaimed authority and functioned as a visible testament to one's integration into the imperial system and, by extension, to one's legitimate claim to elite status. The lead seal thus functioned not only as a practical tool of authentication, but also as a symbolic instrument that reinforced the established social hierarchy and contributed to the reproduction of inequality within Byzantine society.

Nevertheless, as previously noted, seal owners did not always include the full range of their titles or indicate their place of jurisdiction. This omission appears to have

¹⁹ Cotsonis 2009.

²⁰ Halsall 1999, 23–57.

been especially common in the earlier period (fifth to seventh centuries), when the brevity of seal legends often resulted in the exclusion of titles (whether ranks, offices, or dignities). In our sample, only 43 seals (approximately 23%) dated between the mid-sixth and mid-seventh centuries mention an office, most frequently belonging to bishops, or to state functionaries such as *skribon*, *koubikoularios*, or *chartoularios*. A further 44 seals refer solely to a dignity, while only two include both a dignity and an office. Geographical references were omitted even more frequently. It is particularly striking that, although a bishop could not exist without a see (even if only titular and not residing in the episcopal city), among the sixteen seals of bishops from this period in our sample, only one, the archbishop of Corinth, actually names his see.²¹

The practice of including one's titles evolved notably with the rise of the service elite, whose social status rested on the possession of state offices and dignities, as previously discussed. Simultaneously, advancements in the technical production of seals enabled more spacious and legible legends. In our sample, out of 83 seals dated to the ninth century, 66 include at least one office (with some listing more than one), 15 mention at least one dignity, and 48 feature both offices and dignities. The remaining two seals belonged to monastic communities (those of St. Petra and St. Zacharias). This trend continued well into the tenth century, as confirmed by the earliest examples of sealed documents preserved in the Athonite archives.

Traditions began to shift once again during the course of the eleventh century. As previously discussed, the increase in "private individuals" among seal users during this period can, at first glance, be correlated with the overall rise in the number of seals, suggesting that the practice of sealing was being adopted by members of social groups outside the formal state hierarchy. While this is certainly true to some extent, a more complex picture emerges upon closer examination. The proportion of these "private individuals", that is, people who did not mention any title on their seals, continued to grow even after the significant social transformations at the end of the eleventh century, when the military aristocracy and the Komnenian clan consolidated their hold on power.

At the same time, the practice of omitting some or all of one's titles was never entirely abandoned after the seventh century, even if it became more restricted between the eighth and tenth centuries. Many of these so-called "private individuals" undoubtedly held important offices and dignities yet consciously chose not to include them. A striking example is that of Ioannes Belissariotes, who, in his capacity as *megas logothetes* of the *sekreta*, the highest position within the central administration, authenticated a document in favor of the monastery of Patmos with his seal in 1196. At that time, he also held the dignity of *sebastos*, the most prestigious dignity available to those outside the imperial family. Nonetheless, the legend of his seal made no mention of either his office or his dignity, containing only an invocation for aid to the Mother of God.²²

This practice can be linked to the presence of numerous seals in which the owner did not even bother to declare any element of his identity, not even his name, choosing instead to remain entirely anonymous. Prior to the eleventh century, the most common means of producing an anonymous seal was by decorating both faces with iconography. The total number of such anonymous iconographic seals remains relatively small; our

²¹ Cheynet, Gökyildirim and Bulgurlu 2012, no. 6.25.

²² *Actes Lavra I*, no. 67: Δέσποινά μου Θεοτόκε βοήθει μοι τῷ σῷ δούλῳ Ἰωάννῃ τῷ Βελισσαριώτῃ ("My Lady, the God-Bearer, help me, your servant, Ioannes Belissariotes").

sample includes 110 examples bearing imagery on both sides, accounting for approximately 7% of the total (see Table 1.1 under the category “Anonymi”).²³

Various hypotheses have been proposed to explain the occurrence of anonymous seals: that they were pre-made seals used by public scribes drafting documents for illiterate individuals; that they belonged to monastic or charitable institutions; or that they were seals easily recognizable by contemporaries as associated with certain well-known high-ranking individuals. I hold serious reservations about the first hypothesis, but the latter two appear more plausible. Another possible reason for such anonymity may lie in the owner’s wish to present himself as humble—so modest, in fact, that he chose not even to inscribe his name on the seal. It is also worth noting that several literary works from the ninth and tenth centuries survive without attribution, such as the chronicles of the continuators of Theophanes and Georgios the Monk. In any case, there are two securely identified examples of anonymous seals with known owners: one belonging to a top-ranking official, Anna Dalassene, who acted as regent for her absent son, Alexios I; and another to a more modest provincial official, Theodoros Kladon, *protospatharios*, *epi tou maglabiou*, and *ek prosopou* of Thessaloniki.²⁴

The proliferation of metrical legends in the eleventh century introduced yet another means of remaining anonymous, this time without resorting to bilateral iconography. A number of individuals adopted neutral metrical legends or versified expressions of piety without any reference to their identity. Hundreds of such seals survive today. In our sample, 32 seals (or 2%) feature anonymous metrical legends. These might include wordplay involving the seal or simple expressions of piety, such as: ‘This holy martyr [St. Thekla on the obverse] is the seal of my words’.²⁵ Most of these seals playfully challenge the viewer, suggesting that the owner’s identity could be discerned by looking at the accompanying document or letter.²⁶ One such case is that of Symeon, *protospatharios* and *ek prosopou* of Thessaloniki. In a document he issued in 974 in favor of the monastery of Lavra, while his name is clearly stated in the text, his seal proclaims: “The document states my ancestry and my position.”²⁷ It gives the impression that people were merely required by law to use a lead seal for the certification of the document, while themselves were largely indifferent to use it as a medium of self-representation.

Anonymous seals are unevenly distributed across time. Only twelve date from before the eleventh century (1.8% of the total in this period), while 123 belong to the eleventh century and the first half of the twelfth century (16.3% of all seals dated in this period). When this observation is combined with the growing tendency to omit offices and dignities, which traditionally conveyed authority, it becomes clear that, for many individuals, the seal had become a secondary means of certification. It was likely overshadowed by the handwritten signature on the accompanying document or letter, which, unfortunately, has not survived in most cases. Thus, during the eleventh century, the seal’s function gradually shifted: from being primarily a tool of certification and the

²³ Cotsonis 2020, 6–8, with table 1. The number for the Istanbul Archaeological Museum is slightly miscalculated at 5.9%. Perhaps his number does not contain the anonymous iconographic seals included in the last chapter of the catalog (“Uncertain Seals”). However, regardless of the uncertainty concerning the identification of the holy figures depicted, which does not concern us here, they were anonymous with bilateral imagery and as such they have been normally accounted for in my calculations.

²⁴ Anna Komnene, *Alexias*, 102; *Actes Iveron I*, no. 2.

²⁵ Cheynet, Gökyildirim and Bulgurlu 2012, no. 9.14.

²⁶ One of the most common verses expressing anonymity is: Οὗ σφραγίς εἰμὶ τὴν γραφὴν βλέπων νόει (for example, Cheynet, Gökyildirim and Bulgurlu 2012, nos. 9.18–9.21). There are dozens of similar verses with small differences. On the types of these legends, see Wassiliou-Seibt 2011, 38–45.

²⁷ *Actes Lavra I*, no. 6: Γραφὴ παριστᾷ καὶ γένος μοι καὶ τύχην.

public display of authority, it evolved into a medium for expressing identity and social status.

The shift in self-representation on seals in the course of the eleventh century was clearly influenced by broader social transformations and the evolving values surrounding inequality and status in the material world, Byzantine society. Education and patronage of the arts and culture increasingly became important social markers for the elite, fostering a renewed appreciation for classical heritage and ideals. This cultural climate gave rise to a growing taste for epigrams, short dedicatory verses accompanying murals, encolpia, and other artistic media. Seal owners followed this trend, adopting metrical and more individualized legends that reflected their cultural refinement.

By the mid-eleventh century, the Byzantine elite had become more stable and, in many respects, evolved into a hereditary aristocracy, with traditions of holding power passed down through generations. While the elite continued to receive titles from the state, social power was now increasingly determined by ancestry and family prestige rather than by one's current position in the official hierarchy. In the twelfth century, membership in the imperial clan of the Komnenoi became the principal marker of high social standing. This affiliation conferred significant wealth, and the most prestigious offices and dignities were increasingly reserved for members of the imperial family.²⁸

As a result, those privileged to belong to the Komnenian clan underscored their relationship to the imperial house on their seals and often included their exalted titles. Conversely, other members of the lesser elite (those without direct ties to the imperial family) tended to emphasize personal piety or engage in wordplay in the legends of their seals. Nonetheless, they continued to highlight their lineage, frequently including their family names as a way of asserting their status within the aristocratic social order.

Lead Seals as Markers of Identity and Affiliation

While individualism is a key marker of identity in modern societies, in pre-modern contexts identity was primarily shaped by one's affiliation with a particular milieu, such as membership in a village or urban community, a social group or network, a clan, or a family. Individuals often expressed their preferred associations through their actions and the cultural forms they adopted.²⁹ In the case of lead seals, this dynamic is reflected in the selective use and combination of motifs, iconography, and legends, which could serve to signal the sealer's integration into, or identification with, a specific social, cultural or even political group.

The choice of a patron saint on a seal was often a complex and deliberate decision. Several factors could influence this selection, including homonymity, the prominence of local cults, or personal associations with a nearby church or monastery, such as a familial shrine. Bishops and abbots frequently, though not invariably, depicted the patron saints of their see or monastic institution. When the seal owner did not choose the Mother of God, the most common intercessor, homonymity often played a decisive role, especially when the namesake saint enjoyed widespread popularity.³⁰ Yet, beyond personal or devotional motivations, political considerations could also shape these choices. Jean-Claude Cheynet has shown that in the eleventh century, individuals sometimes selected particular saints to signal political allegiance. For example, the Archangel Michael was favored by members of the network surrounding Patriarch

²⁸ Hunger 1992; Volkoff 2019. On the metrical legends in general, see Hunger 1988; Wassiliou-Seibt 2011, 31–60.

²⁹ Taylor 1989.

³⁰ See Cotsonis 2008, 5–10.

Michael Keroularios, while St. Demetrios became a symbol of loyalty to Romanos IV Diogenes (1068–1071).³¹

Identity and affiliation were expressed not only through the choice of a specific saint but also through the broader combination of motifs and the overall design of a seal. In some early examples, the metropolitans of Tarsos in the seventh century adorned the obverse of their seals with a small bust of the Apostle Paul, who was himself a native of Tarsos, accompanied by an inscription identifying their see. On the reverse, they typically employed either a linear legend or a cruciform monogram of their name, with an inscription in the four quarters designating their metropolitan status (see Figure 1.7).³² This iconographic arrangement may have drawn inspiration from the seals of their ecclesiastical superiors, Patriarchs Makarios and Georgios of Antioch—another church associated with the Apostle Paul—whose seals from the second half of the seventh century display similar motifs (see Figure 1.8).³³

<<Figure 1.7 HERE>>

<<Figure 1.8 HERE>>

Another striking example comes from Andreas, the hymnographer and metropolitan of Crete during the formative period of Iconoclasm, himself a committed iconophile. Andreas died in 740 and was later venerated as a saint. On the obverse of his seal, he employed a rare depiction of St. Titos, the patron saint of the island, while the reverse bore a monogram of his first name accompanied by a circular metrical legend that identified him as the metropolitan of Crete and included a plea for Christ's aid: "Κρήτης πρόεδρος, Χριστέ, σῶζοις Ἀνδρέαν" ("Christ, preserve Andreas, the prelate of Crete").³⁴ Metrical legends prior to the tenth century are exceedingly rare and typically consist of scriptural quotations, primarily from the Psalms, thus the design of his seal is distinctive.³⁵

A few decades later, toward the end of the eighth century, another iconophile metropolitan of Crete, Stephanos, adopted a remarkably similar design on his seal. Like his predecessor Andreas, he depicted St. Titos on the obverse and employed a monogram of his name on the reverse, accompanied by a metrical legend closely modeled on that of Andreas. This choice is especially notable given that by the mid-eighth century, monograms incorporating names and titles had largely fallen out of use. Stephanos was thus deliberately copying the seal of Andreas, invoking both visual and textual continuity. Marie-France Auzépy has dated the earliest *Life of Andreas the Hymnographer* to the mid-eighth century, suggesting that Andreas's cult developed relatively soon after his death.³⁶ It is plausible that by the end of the eighth century, documents and letters bearing Andreas's seal were still circulating, and Stephanos sought to align himself with the memory and sanctity of his predecessor. Given that Andreas was venerated as a saint not long after his death in 740, it is even possible that

³¹ Cheynet 2008.

³² Eustathios (seventh century): Cheynet 2001, no. 45; Laurent 1963, V/2, no. 1538; Seibt and Wassiliou-Seibt 2022, no. 37. Theodoros: Zacos and Veglery 1972, no. 2965A; Cheynet 2001, no. 46; Nesbitt, Wassiliou-Seibt, and Seibt 2009, no. 15. Platon (second half of the seventh century): Sode 1997, no. 382; Zacos and Veglery 1972, no. 1307. Ioannes (second half of the seventh century): Zacos and Veglery 1972, no. 1258B. The only exception is Isidoros, probably from the end of the seventh or the beginning of the eighth century, judging from the epigraphy and the elaborate portrait of St. Paul: Cheynet 2001, no. 47.

³³ Makarios (c. 669–681): Cheynet 2001, no. 12; Zacos 1984, no. 56. The seals of Georgios could belong either to Georgios I (662–669) or II (684–702): Wassiliou-Seibt 2022, no. 24 (attributed to Georgios II, due to uncertainty about the existence of Georgios I); Zacos and Veglery 1972, no. 1099.

³⁴ Nesbitt and Oikonomides 1994, no. 36.8b; Zacos and Veglery 1972, no. 1293.

³⁵ See Wassiliou-Seibt 2011b.

³⁶ Auzépy 1995, 2–12.

Stephanos had known him personally and was consciously perpetuating his legacy through the design of his own seal.

There were numerous ways in which a sealer could articulate his social and cultural identity through the medium of the lead seal, whether via its legend or iconography. As a medium for the public presentation of self, the seal's inscription typically conveyed the sealer's principal markers of social status. In the earlier centuries, this centered primarily on the authority to issue documents and the individual's position within the official hierarchy. Over time, however, emphasis increasingly shifted toward lineage and family background. Other sealers, often those who ranked low on these social attributes, chose instead to highlight their piety, a key cultural value in Byzantine society, particularly among the elite. The owners of seals carefully selected religious imagery and motifs that reflected their devotion to specific saints, shrines, or theological ideals. Of particular interest to our discussion is the use of seals to signal one's integration into a particular social, political, or cultural milieu. In such instances, the seal operated not only as a means of authentication but also as a vehicle of affiliation and even propaganda, subtly asserting alignment with certain networks or ideologies. The following case study on the period of Iconoclasm, a movement that dominated Byzantine political life in the eighth and ninth centuries, will illustrate how such affiliations were conveyed through the iconographic and textual choices made by seal owners.

Lead Seals as Tools of Propaganda During Iconoclasm

The period of Iconoclasm offers a compelling case study for examining how seals were employed to signal political and ideological affiliations. This topic has been explored in depth by Cotsonis, who noted that only 4% of seals datable to the eighth or the eighth/ninth centuries, and 12% of those attributed to the transitional periods of the seventh/eighth or ninth centuries, display religious iconography. His analysis further revealed that an overwhelming 90% of seals dated to the eighth or ninth century, the height of Iconoclasm, belonged to ecclesiastics. Even in the preceding period (seventh to eighth century), more than half of the seals bearing religious imagery were issued by members of the clergy. In stark contrast, military officials of the same era almost never used religious iconography on their seals.³⁷ These findings become even more significant when contextualized within the broader demographics of our sample, in which ecclesiastics represent only about 9% of the total number of seal owners.

A closer re-examination of seals from the Iconoclast period—including both iconographic and non-iconographic examples—and a more precise chronological attribution to narrower timeframes reveal several noteworthy patterns. During the initial phase of Iconoclasm, particularly in the 720s to 740s, iconographic seals rapidly fell out of use. Only a few exceptions can be confidently dated to the middle of the eighth century. Among these are an anonymous seal, likely issued by a *diakonia* or confraternity, bearing the verse “He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord,”³⁸ the aforementioned seal of Andreas, metropolitan of Crete, and similarly

³⁷ Cotsonis 2015–2016, 278–300. There was only one strategos and one tourmarches in the seventh or eighth century (2% of the total). *Stratelates* and *strator*, whom Cotsonis places in the military administration, were simple dignitaries, while *stratelates*, in particular, was a senatorial dignity, mostly associated with civil administration.

³⁸ DO BZS.1955.1.4092 and BZS.1951.31.5.1395. The seal has been dated to the tenth or eleventh century, however, the two crosses on either side of the portrait of St. Stephanos depicted on the obverse of the seal, which is characteristic of portraits of holy persons until the period of Iconoclasm, the decorative motif above the inscription, distinctive to the eighth century, in addition to the epigraphy of the inscription, similar to the seal of Ioannes, *hypatos*, *chrysepsetes* and *archon* of *blatteion*

designed seals belonging to Ioannes, *hypatos* and *eparchos* of Italy, as well as to Petros and Damianos, archbishops of Thessaloniki and Cyprus, respectively.³⁹ These exceptions suggest that certain individuals or institutions, particularly ecclesiastical figures, continued to use religious motifs or scriptural references despite the prevailing iconoclastic climate.

The motif of combining religious iconography or, alternatively, a monogram (which may reflect iconoclast preferences) encircled by an inscription first emerges during this period and becomes particularly common under the reign of Leo III.⁴⁰ A good example is the seal of Ioannes, metropolitan of Gangra, which displays on one side a cruciform invocative monogram addressed to the Theotokos, surrounded by a circular inscription naming the owner and identifying his ecclesiastical office. The reverse features a standing saint with a short beard, holding a processional cross in one hand and what appears to be a book in the other. Flanking the saint are two domed structures, one topped with a cross, the other with a flame. Although the editor of the seal, Vitalien Laurent, was unable to identify the figure, the saint can be recognized as St. Kallinikos, who suffered martyrdom in Gangra by being burned in a furnace, the flaming structure on the right likely symbolizes this instrument of his death. The domed building on the left, marked by a cross, may represent the church in Gangra dedicated to his memory and housing his relics, where the patriarch Makedonios of Constantinople (495–511) was later interred.⁴¹ The object held by the saint is probably not a book but a reliquary containing his ashes.

This interpretation finds confirmation in a recently surfaced seal from an online auction, which includes a similar figure explicitly identified as St. Kallinikos (see Figure 1.9). This better-preserved specimen allows for closer visual analysis: the saint wears a short *chiton* with carefully articulated folds, while details such as his calf muscles and the wooden kindling beneath the furnace are rendered with notable precision. On the reverse, instead of a monogram, there is a bust of the Theotokos holding a medallion of Christ on her chest (the so-called Nikopoios type). Although the inscription does not specify the episcopal see of the homonymous metropolitan, the shared iconography and distinctive style strongly suggest that both seals belonged to the same individual. A third and rare depiction of St. Kallinikos survives on a lead seal issued by Theodosios, deacon, *kouboukleisios*, and *protonotarios*, most likely of the metropolis of Gangra, as Laurent has previously hypothesized.⁴² This seal, dating to the 830s–840s, falls toward the end of the second phase of Iconoclasm.⁴³

(Oikonomides 1986, no. 31, dated to 730/731), help us to date the specimen to the second quarter of the eighth century.

³⁹ Nesbitt and Oikonomides 1991, nos. 2.1 and 18.86; Metcalf 2004, no. 455. There are other seals with a wider dating range (such as the first half of the eighth century) but since they might predate the onset of Iconoclasm, they have not been taken into consideration here.

⁴⁰ The earliest dated occurrence is on one of the *boulloteria* of Georgios (the Syrian), *patrikios* and *genikos logothetes* (c. 705–711), although deprived of any iconography. He rather includes on the obverse a cruciform invocative monogram with a circular invocation and on the reverse a cruciform monogram of his name and a circular inscription with his titles, see: Zacos and Vegler 1972, no. 1478.

⁴¹ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, 161–162.

⁴² DO BZS.1951.31.5.1201 and BZS.1951.31.5.1239 (the two halves of the same *molybdoboullon*): Laurent 1963, no. 120.

⁴³ Similar epigraphy one can find on the seals of Theophobos, *exousiastes* of the Persians (McGeer, Nesbitt and Oikonomides 2005, no. 108.1 with correct reading by Seibt in his review on this volume in *Bsl* 36 (1975), 212), of Theoktiste, *patrikia zoste* and mother of the empress Theodora both from the 830s (Oikonomides 1986, no. 48), of Patriarch Ioannes II Grammatikos (Oikonomides 1986, no. 49) between 830–842, and of Theoktistos, *patrikios* and *logothetes* of the *dromos* from the 840s (Jordanov 2009, no.

Edition and Description of the Seal (Figure 1.9)

<<Figure 1.9 HERE>>

Auction Numismad 13 (08-09.03.2023), no. 1289

Diameter: 35 mm; Weight: 17.87 gr.

Obverse: Bust of Theotokos holding a medallion with Christ on her chest, flanked by crosses on either side. Inscription between two wreath borders:

+ΘΕΟΤΟΚΕΒΟΗΘΙΙΩΑΝΝΗΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛ<<Athena Ruby script HERE>>

+ Θεοτόκε βοήθι Ἰωάννη μητροπολίτη

Θεοτόκε βοήθει Ἰωάννη, μητροπολίτη

Reverse: St. Kallinikos with a short beard wearing a short chiton, holding a processional cross (right hand) and a kind of box (left hand). On his right side there is a church building and on his left side a furnace with fire burning on top. Inscription on either side of the portrait:

ΘΚΑΛΛΙ - ΝΙΚΟC:<<Athena Ruby script HERE>>

ὁ ἅγιος Καλλίνικος.

Another notable example of religious iconography during the early phase of Iconoclasm is the seal of Niketas, the second son of the usurper Artabasdos (r. 741–743). In his capacity as *komes* of the Opsikion, Niketas issued a seal bearing an image of the Theotokos on the obverse. Interestingly, Artabasdos himself did not alter the prevailing iconographic conventions on his official coinage or seals. He retained the potent cross introduced by Leo III, who had earlier removed depictions of the Theotokos from coinage around 720.⁴⁴

Among the most chronologically proximate examples from the mid-eighth century is the seal of Leon, metropolitan of Syllaion, which can be epigraphically dated to the period between the 730s and 750s.⁴⁵ The appearance of religious iconography on the seal of a metropolitan during a time of official iconoclastic policy may have contributed to the later tradition that Syllaion was a center of resistance to imperial Iconoclasm, even though two prominent iconoclast patriarchs, Constantine II (754–766) and Antonios I Kassimatas (821–836), had earlier held the metropolitan see of Syllaion.⁴⁶ These instances represent virtually all the extant seals featuring religious iconography that can be securely dated to the second quarter of the eighth century, during the initial phase of Iconoclasm, prior to the Council of Hiereia in 754.

Moreover, a closer examination of the individuals behind seals bearing religious iconography from the Iconoclast period proper, that is, from the mid-eighth to the mid-ninth century, underscores the observation made by Cotsonis regarding the predominance of ecclesiastical figures. These seals were issued almost exclusively by a narrow group of individuals, typically high-ranking church officials such as bishops, metropolitans, and abbots. Notably, many of the seal owners from the Iconophile interlude (787–815) and the early years following the restoration of icons in 843 are known from other sources to have actively supported the veneration of icons. Figures

839). Quite characteristic in this type of epigraphy are the large, wide forms of O and E and the still closed form of B with a sharp bottom line in the lower circle.

⁴⁴ Malatras 2021a, 421–423.

⁴⁵ Zacos and Veglery 1972, no. 1338.

⁴⁶ For the regions opposing Iconoclasm: Auzépy 2016, 125. For the two patriarchs who had served earlier in Syllaion: *Catalogue of Patriarchs of Constantinople*, 290–291.

such as Ioannes, archbishop of Ephesos,⁴⁷ Euthymios, metropolitan of Sardeis,⁴⁸ Sisinnios, bishop of Chalkis,⁴⁹ Niketas, bishop of Klaudioupolis,⁵⁰ Theophanes, bishop of Sora,⁵¹ were all participants in the Seventh Ecumenical Council of 787 and proponents of the Iconophile cause. Similarly, Theophilos, archbishop of Ephesos, was later persecuted under Emperor Theophilos (r. 829–842) for his adherence to Iconophile views.⁵²

During the Second Iconoclasm, or in the years immediately following the restoration of icons, Paphnoutios, bishop of Akragas (modern Agrigento in Sicily), issued a seal bearing an image of the Theotokos holding a medallion with Christ, flanked by two cruciform invocative monograms, a motif that disappears entirely from the sigillographic record after the mid-ninth century (see Figure 1.10). The epigraphy of the seal, with its elongated letter forms, places it in the second quarter of the ninth century, comparable to the seals of Aetios, *strategos* of the Anatolikoi (shortly before 838), and Patriarch Ignatios during his first term (847–858).⁵³ Akragas had fallen to the Saracens in 828, yet bishops continued to reside in cities under Muslim control, as seen in other instances. Notably, his superior, Gregorios Asbestas, archbishop of Sicily (in office c. 844–847), right after Iconoclasm, also made use of a similar depiction of the Theotokos.⁵⁴ Thanks to his presence outside the immediate sphere of imperial authority, Paphnoutios may have been able to employ such iconography even before the official restoration of icons in 843.

Edition and Description of the Seal (Figure 1.10)

<<Figure 1.10 HERE>>

Auction Inasta 80 (23.03.2019), no. 725

Date: second quarter of the 9th century

Obverse: Bust of Theotokos holding a medallion with Christ on her chest, flanked by two invocative cruciform monograms of Θεοτόκε and of βοήθει; wreath border.

Reverse: Inscription of four lines; wreath border.

+ΤΩC|ΔΔΛΠΑΦΝ|ΘΤΙΕΠΙCΚ|ΑΚΡΑΓΑ <<Athena Ruby script HERE>>

+ τῷ σῷ δούλ(ω) Παφνουτί(ω) ἐπισκ(όπω) Ἀκράγα(ντος)

Θεοτόκε βοήθει τῷ σῷ δούλῳ Παφνουτίῳ, ἐπισκόπῳ Ἀκράγαντος.

It becomes evident that the veneration of icons prior to Iconoclasm was not a widespread practice among the general population, but was largely confined to specific social groups, namely, senior ecclesiastics, abbots of monasteries, and certain civil officials. While the first two categories had a vested interest in promoting local cults and miraculous icons, all three shared a common link to the senatorial aristocracy, the principal custodians of late antique traditions and Graeco-Roman cultural heritage. It is precisely this social stratum that Brubaker and Haldon have identified as the main

⁴⁷ Seibt and Zarnitz 1997, no. 5.2.6.

⁴⁸ Zacos and Veglery 1972, no. 1332.

⁴⁹ Nesbitt, and Oikonomides 1991, no. 48.2.

⁵⁰ McGeer, Nesbitt, and Oikonomides 2001, no. 7.4.

⁵¹ Zacos and Veglery 1972, no. 1348A.

⁵² Nesbitt and Oikonomides 1996, no. 14.8.

⁵³ Malatras, 2021b, Excursus no. 1; Oikonomides 1986, no. 51.

⁵⁴ Rizzone 2012, 315.

opponents of Iconoclasm, suggesting that resistance to the iconoclast religious policy was deeply rooted in the values and identity of the traditional elite.⁵⁵

This situation shifted markedly with the rise to power of a new service elite, largely drawn from provincial backgrounds and, in many cases, of foreign origin. This emerging class was primarily engaged in military administration and increasingly distanced from the traditional senatorial aristocracy. During the reign of Leo III, likely in the 720s, a formal debate concerning the veneration of icons began to take shape, with the imperial position aligning with Iconoclasm. Contrary to later narratives of violent suppression, there was no widespread persecution of iconophiles or systematic destruction of icons at this stage,⁵⁶ a fact supported by the survival of several seals bearing religious imagery from precisely this period, as discussed above.

Nevertheless, the dominant trend was the disappearance of iconographic imagery from media associated with authority, such as seals. This absence may reflect an effort by officials to signal loyalty to the imperial cause or to avoid jeopardizing their standing within the state apparatus. The lack of a coherent or forceful response against Iconoclasm, coupled with the relatively swift removal of religious imagery from seals, suggests two important conclusions: first, that icons had not yet become an indispensable element of Orthodox identity; and second, that a significant portion of society was either indifferent to the controversy or, perhaps, broadly supportive of the iconoclast position. Enforcement of Iconoclast policy appears to have been particularly effective during the first phase of the movement, especially in the period between 754 and the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787.

During the period of the Iconophile interlude, the direction of propaganda was reversed. The limited number of individuals who employed religious iconography on their seals were chiefly those who actively supported and promoted the veneration of icons. This imagery, however, remained relatively rare for at least a century following the final restoration of icons in 843. It was only gradually that such iconography began to appear on the seals of a broader range of officials, with its usage steadily increasing thereafter. This pattern suggests that the iconophiles were engaged in a process of persuasion, attempting to re-establish and legitimize the veneration of icons within wider society. The ninth century, in particular, witnessed a significant outpouring of hagiographical and theological literature aimed at defending the practice. These texts not only articulated the theological foundations of icon veneration but also sought to redefine the role of monasticism within Christian life. Monks were celebrated as the “champions of Orthodoxy,” their resistance to Iconoclasm elevated as a model of faith and doctrinal steadfastness, thereby reinforcing the spiritual authority of monastic communities in the post-Iconoclast world.⁵⁷

The introduction of Iconoclasm also marked the end of one of the few remaining allegorical images associated with Christianity. Several seals from the sixth and seventh centuries featured the depiction of an eagle with outstretched wings on the obverse. While the eagle had long been employed in Roman iconography as a symbol of divine favor and imperial authority, it also acquired Christian connotations. Within a Christian context, the eagle could represent the faithful, symbolize spiritual regeneration, or serve as an allegory of the Resurrection of Christ and the baptism of believers.⁵⁸ Unlike the lamb or the fish, the eagle did not directly symbolize Christ and thus was not prohibited

⁵⁵ Brubaker and Haldon 2011, 642–663.

⁵⁶ Humphreys 2021, 344–350.

⁵⁷ Auzépy 2016, 271–288.

⁵⁸ Koltsida-Makre 2011, 414–415; Lianta and Papagiannaki 2022, 45–48.

by the Quinisext Council of 691/692, which banned symbolic representations of Christ in animal form.⁵⁹

Despite this, the motif of the eagle vanished entirely from seals after the first half of the eighth century, suggesting that the spread of iconoclastic ideas may have influenced its abandonment as a religious symbol. One of the latest known examples of this motif appears on the seal of a certain Adrianos, who styles himself as a “faithful servant of the Holy Trinity.” Epigraphically datable to the mid-eighth century, the seal features a distinctive representation of an eagle, its breast feathers rendered with large, dotted motifs. Above the eagle’s head is a cruciform invocative monogram enclosed within a circular wreath, two features that are rather unusual in the usual iconographic representation of the eagle, suggesting indeed a very late date.⁶⁰

Another notable issue arising from the evidence is the predominance of the Theotokos on seals bearing religious iconography. The Virgin Mary has long been regarded as the most powerful and popular intercessor with the divine, which helps to explain her prevalence on seals, a medium in which it was not possible to depict a broader repertoire of saints, as discussed above. According to the estimates of Cotsonis, the Theotokos appeared on nearly half of all religiously themed seals; this proportion rose dramatically to approximately 80% during the period of Iconoclasm.⁶¹ The cult of the Mother of God was evidently so strong that invocational formulae accompanying the images of saints often addressed the Theotokos, rather than the Lord through the interceding saint. This pattern suggests a kind of hierarchical intercession: from the petitioner to the saint, from the saint to the Theotokos, and ultimately from the Theotokos to the Lord.⁶²

Many iconophile sources accuse Emperor Constantine V of harboring particular hostility towards the veneration of the Theotokos, as well as of all saints regarded as intercessors with the divine. This animosity, however, was not formally expressed in the theological framework of the Iconoclastic Council of Hiëreia in 754, where the cult of saints and the place of the Theotokos were, at least nominally, affirmed. Nevertheless, such views may have been circulating informally within more radical iconoclast circles. It appears that Constantine V adopted these more extreme positions later in his reign, particularly after 765/766, when an imperial decree was issued denying the intercessory powers of the saints.⁶³

The study of lead seals can contribute to this argument. Recently, Joe Glynias has identified two trends employed by Iconoclasts on lead seals: the use of quotations from Psalms and invocations to the Holy Trinity. Quotations from the Psalms had an apotropaic character and functioned as an Iconoclast equivalent to the role of icons. Their appearance has been associated with the interest of the Iconoclast emperors in the Old Testament.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Cozma 2017.

⁶⁰ Zacos and Vegler 1972, no. 624.

⁶¹ Cotsonis 2005, 70–71.

⁶² For example, in the cases of Petros, bishop of Euchaita (McGeer, Nesbitt, and Oikonomides 2001, no. 16.4), whose seal bears a portrait of St. Theodoros, and Theodoros, archbishop of Cyprus (Nesbitt, and Oikonomides 1994, no. 38.16), whose seal bears a portrait of an image of saint who is likely St. Barnabas.

⁶³ For an analysis of the sources and the whole scholarly debate, see Krausmüller 2021, 466–477.

⁶⁴ Glynias 2018. Recently Wassiliou-Seibt 2021 revisited this topic, assembling the evidence and correcting several readings. She listed 19 individuals who used such quotations, to which should be added Stephanos, *chartoularios* of the Anatolikoi (see Malatras 2021b). Most of the seals with Psalm quotations are dated by her to the late seventh century and attributed to a circle of aristocrats close to Constantine IV (668–685), later persecuted by Justinian II. However, most of the holders were not of high rank: they mainly held the dignities of *hypatos*, imperial *spatharios*, imperial *strator*, or offices such as

Invocational formulas, such as “Theotokos, help,” began to appear on the legends of Byzantine lead seals around the middle of the seventh century and became widespread before 700. With few exceptions, these formulas were directed to the Theotokos. Invocations to the Lord, Christ, or the Holy Trinity remained exceptionally rare until the early eighth century. Among 175 seals with cruciform invocative monograms from the seventh to ninth centuries (where the type of invocation is identifiable) in the collection of the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, 91% are addressed to the Theotokos. In the same collection, only one monogram invokes the Holy Trinity (dated to the first half of the eighth century), two invoke Christ (both from the second half of the eighth century), and the remaining thirteen are addressed to the Lord (all dated to the eighth or the first half of the ninth century).

Invocations to the Lord appear on the seals of several prominent Iconoclast figures. These include the Iconoclast Patriarch Antonios I (821–837), as well as his successor and the last Iconoclast Patriarch, Ioannes Grammatikos, whose seal as synkellos and monk bears such a formula. Similar invocations are found on the seals of Theodosios, bishop of Ephesos, and Basileios Trikakabos, bishop of Antiocheia of Pisidia, both leading participants in the pro-iconoclastic Council of Hieria in 754. Leon V, the instigator of the second phase of Iconoclasm, used an invocation to the Lord on his seal as *strategos* of the Anatolikoi (811–813). Numerous senior state officials under Constantine V did likewise, including Gregorios Mousoulakios, *komes* of Opsikion, Michael Lachanodrakon, *strategos* of the Thrakesioi, Michael Melissenos, *strategos* of the Anatolikoi, two *genikoi logothetai*, and several others.⁶⁵ The only two seals in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum collection with invocations addressed specifically to Christ belong to high-ranking officials close to the emperor: Constantine, *domestikos* of the *exkoubitoi* (before 782), and Stephanos, *komes* of the imperial stables (mid-eighth century).⁶⁶ Notably, all seals bearing such invocations are iconoclastic in nature; none contains any religious iconography.

chartoularios, *notarios*, and *tourmarches*. Three *patrikioi* and *strategoi*, including Beser (killed during Artabasdos’s rebellion in 742), are epigraphically dated to the first half of the eighth century. Most of the seals share the design of a central monogram surrounded by a Psalm verse in circular inscription. The motif of a monogram, or an image of a holy person surrounded by a circular inscription, was not uncommon in the first half of the eighth century. The use of the genitive in some legends (e.g., Βησῆρ, πατρικίου) does not necessarily indicate a date before 700, as legends in genitive continued, albeit rarely, into the eighth and even ninth centuries. As a matter of fact, the use of compact block monograms for the owner’s name on many of these seals, monograms that were the dominant type used in the sixth century but had since declined or even disappeared, reflects a sense of traditionalism, a conscious revival of earlier forms, particularly those associated with the time of Justinian I. This traditionalist spirit was also evident at the court of Leo III and was expressed, among other ways, through the promulgation of the Ecloga. Besides, offices such as *tourmarches* and *strategos* do not imply a Constantinopolitan origin of the holders, to make them senatorial aristocrats. Similarly, the only other high-ranking holder, *patrikios* Razad, was of Arab origin and unrelated to this aristocracy. While some of these seals may predate Iconoclasm and the apotropaic use of Psalms was not invented by the iconoclastic emperors, the practice proliferated during the early iconoclastic period, especially among the emerging service elite rather than the traditional senatorial aristocracy. On the agency of words and epigrams on objects, see also Hostetler in this volume.

⁶⁵ Patriarch Antonios I: Oikonomides 1986, no. 45; Ioannes Grammatikos: Oikonomides 1986, no. 47; Theodosios, bishop of Ephesos: Zacos and Veglery 1972, no. 2467; Basileios Trikakabos: Auction Zeus Numismatic 24 (24.04.2022), no. 730; Laurent 1963, no. 255; Leon V: Nesbitt and Oikonomides 1996, no. 86.55; Gregorios Mousoulakios: Malatras 2021a, 424; Michael Lachanodrakon: dozens of seals have been found from him, see Cheynet 2019, no. 3.59; Michael Melissenos: Elam 2021, no. 2; Theophylaktos and Leon, *genikoi logothetai*: Zacos and Veglery 1972, nos. 2129 and 2541. Another *genikos logothetes* of the reign of Constantine V, Constantine, invoked Christ on his seal: Zacos and Veglery 1972, no. 785.

⁶⁶ Cheynet, Gökyildirim and Bulgurlu 2022, 2.182 and 2.192.

The mention of the Theotokos on seals reaffirmed her cult and her role as the primary intercessor, a role that had been questioned by certain radical Iconoclasts, including Emperor Constantine V. It is noteworthy that following the restoration of icons in 787, Michael Lachanodrakon, on his seal as *magistros* of the divine offices (*magister officiorum*), issued between 790 and his death in 791/792, adopted an invocation to the Theotokos.⁶⁷ This shift represents a significant compromise on the part of such a staunch Iconoclast, evidently motivated by a desire to maintain his prominent position within the imperial administration.

This observation regarding invocations to the Lord should not obscure the fact that, throughout the Iconoclast period, the majority of invocations continued to be addressed to the Theotokos. This reinforces the argument that only certain radical elements within the Iconoclast movement rejected the intercessory powers of the saints. Indeed, Patriarch Nikephoros accuses Constantine V of violating a promise made to the Iconoclast bishops, that he would not challenge the cult of the saints.⁶⁸ The continued resilience of the cult of the Theotokos during Constantine V's reign suggests that the more extreme strands of imperial propaganda failed to sway society at large. On the contrary, such radicalism may well have facilitated the eventual restoration of icons by sharpening the contrast between moderate opinion and imperial excess, thereby easing the path for reconciliation in a largely Iconoclast environment.

Concluding Remarks

Byzantine lead seals were an important medium through which individuals could publicly display their identity and status. Functioning both as authenticators of documents and as secure closures for correspondence, they operated predominantly within an official, rather than private, sphere. Their use was largely, though not exclusively, restricted to members of the elite, particularly those holding official positions, and thus they served as tangible indicators of power and authority. In this context, the choice of material was far from incidental. Lead, although less prestigious than gold, occupied a significant place within the hierarchy of sealing practices. Gold seals were reserved exclusively for the emperor and were employed only for the most important privileges or for correspondence with distinguished foreign rulers. Until the twelfth century, lead held a higher prestige than wax, a cheaper and simpler material typically used to authenticate private documents and letters or by officials of lower rank, even when acting in an official capacity. Thus, the materiality of a seal was deeply symbolic and closely aligned with the stratified nature of Byzantine society: gold for the emperor, lead for state officials, and wax for the broader population. The material from which a seal was made not only conveyed the authority of the sealer but also reflected the broader structures of social and political hierarchy.

Nevertheless, lead seals were at times employed by private individuals outside official contexts as markers of status. This broader use may have contributed to the notable expansion of lead sealing practices in the eleventh century, a period characterized by increased social mobility. However, this expansion affected the traditional association of lead seals with authority, as they became more aligned with the expression of social prestige than with official power. Even so, the use of lead seals remained confined to the elite strata of society, continuing to serve as potent symbols of elevated status.

⁶⁷ Cheynet 2019, no. 2.38.

⁶⁸ Patriarch Nikephoros, *Antirrhetici* II.4, Migne 1865, 330–374.

Because of their function, lead seals served a public rather than a personal role; yet they were not intended to address a general audience, but rather the specific network of the seal's owner, namely, correspondents or recipients of documents authenticated by the seal. In practice, the recipients of sealed acts and letters, the intended audience of these objects, belonged primarily to the upper class, and occasionally to the middle class: individuals who were literate or held sufficient social standing to merit receiving a sealed document, an official act of authority, even from a lesser state official. Thus, the use of lead seals closely reflected the material inequalities of the empire. Their usage remained confined to those segments of society that wielded political power or possessed the social connections necessary to engage in correspondence with other members of the elite.

As material symbols of one's position in society, the inscriptions and the iconography that lead seals contained indicated the authority and power of the owner to seal, that is the values that defined stratification in Byzantine society. Between the seventhth and the eleventh centuries, then, they contained the titles of the owner, one's place in the state hierarchy. Once one's ancestry became more important than the position in the state machine in the later eleventh century, sealers slowly ceased mentioning titles and focused instead on their family background and their affiliation to the prevailing cultural norms of the upper class.

Alongside position in the official hierarchy or distinguished ancestry, divine assistance was a crucial source of legitimizing authority in medieval society. For this reason, the legends on seals commonly invoked the protection and help of a holy figure, while later, some metrical legends explicitly stated that the holy figure acted as the actual sealer of the letters and documents.

However, the iconography and the legend of a seal were also associated with the public image that the owners wished to project to their private network of power and friends, to whom their seals were addressed. The images, motifs, and legends they chose often served as hints at their political, social, or cultural attitudes. They carefully selected these elements in order to display their devotion to a particular holy figure, their connection to a shrine, or their political and cultural affiliations. We have seen, for example, how the metropolitans of Tarsos copied a specific combination of motifs on their lead seals from their superiors, the patriarchs of Antioch. We have also seen how iconoclasts, without openly advertising their position, chose specific expressions of piety to indirectly signal their affiliation to their circle, at least to those at the top who were aware of these nuances. Similarly, we have seen how iconophiles used their seals as propaganda tools after their victory to reinforce and promote their position.

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