The Formulation of Urban Identity on Byzantine Seals

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THE FORMULATION OF URBAN IDENTITY ON BYZANTINE SEALS

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THE WORLD OF the ancient Mediterranean was characterized, over centuries, by a large number of cities with a high degree of autonomy. In late antiquity, however, the typical Greco-Roman *polis* experienced a constant decline, and, under the influence of invasion by other ethnic groups, in particular with the Slavic migration into the Balkans and conflicts with Persians and Arabs, most cities changed from *poleis* to being *kastra* (fortified inhabited sites). By the middle of the seventh century the eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire was extensively de-urbanized. Besides Constantinople, only a few cities (such as Thessaloniki, Ephesus, and Trebizond) were able to preserve traditional urban characteristics. This development resulted in fundamental changes to cities' administrative, economic, and social structures.[1]

From the tenth century on, however, cities gradually took on economic and cultural functions again. A self-confident aristocracy formed in these cities, playing an influential part in local politics and stimulating economic development by engaging in commercial production and trade (as has been shown for Rhaidestos, Thebes, and Monemvasia, among others).[2] In addition, members of the cities' upper classes increasingly concerned themselves with the social and cultural interests of the society. Religious lay brotherhoods, which formed in the middle of the eleventh century, not only administered religious cults and organized processions but—more importantly—provided reciprocal care. They also performed the commemoration

1 The transformation from *polis* to *kastron* was far more complex than outlined here: see Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, 92–124 and the addendum to the revised edition of 1997, 459–61, and "The Idea of the Town"; Brandes, "Byzantine Cities"; Liebeschuetz, *The Decline and Fall*; Wickham, *Framing the Middle Ages*, 591–692; Zavagno, *Cities in Transition*; and Magdalino, "Sixty Years of Research."

2 See Matschke, "Selbstverständnis," 171–79; Bouras, "Aspects of the Byzantine City"; Neville, *Authority in Byzantine Provincial Society*; Saradi, "The Byzantine Cities"; and, most recently, Haldon, "Die byzantinische Stadt."

of the dead, thereby making the increasing socio-economic stratification of the city visible (as in the well-documented case of Thebes).[3]

Yet, in contrast to western Europe—where, after the turn of the second millennium, some cities attained substantial military and economic strength and, in the form of communes, eventually achieved legal and administrative independence[4]—Byzantine cities never developed into similarly independent self-governing communities or city states. Although some cities (such as Larissa, Amaseia, Adrianople, and Thessaloniki) created their own legal customs and elements of a civic organization, ranging from civic institutions with designated responsibilities to peoples' assemblies and councils, which are assumed to have acted alongside the state representatives,[5] this does not indicate that these cities reached any real civic autonomy. It is important to establish, however, that Byzantine cities and their inhabitants did develop a distinctive civic culture and, to some extent, a civic consciousness, based upon growing economic and military power and the existence of local cults. The fact that cities were often referred to in terms that denoted their inhabitants as a collective unit arguably suggests the existence of a sense of community.[6] Seals, in particular, display this corporate terminology. For example, a twelfth-century seal of the Metropolitan Constantine of Thessaloniki bears an image of the city's patron, St. Demetrios, and (on the reverse) the metrical inscription Σφραγὶς προέδρου Θετταλῶν Κωνσταντίνου: "Seal of Constantine, *proedros* [metropolitan] of the Thessalians"—that is, of the people of Thessaloniki, and, by extension, the city itself (Figure 6.1).[7] At the same time, individuals inserted urban or regional toponyms in the formulation of their identities. With the widespread use of family names from the ninth century onwards, these made their appearance on seals as well.[8]

Historical works, chronicles, lives of saints, letters, and documents, as well as miscellaneous administrative and legal texts, provide important information about

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3 See Nesbitt and Wiita, "A Confraternity." Günter Prinzing has recently brought another confraternity to light: "Spuren einer religiösen Bruderschaft."

4 On this Western urban phenomenon, see, for example, Heers, *La ville au Moyen Age*; and Boucheron and Menjot, *La ville médiévale*.

5 See Matschke, "Selbstverständnis," 181–84 (Larissa, Amaseia), and 188–89 (Thessaloniki); Angold, "The Shaping of the Medieval Byzantine City," 21; and, most recently, Kontogiannopoulou, *Τοπικά Συμβούλια στις Βυζαντινές πόλεις*.

6 See Angold, "The Shaping of a Medieval Byzantine City," 20, 57; and Matschke, "Grundzüge," 57, and "Selbstverständnis," 180.

7 Nesbitt and Oikonomides, *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals*, vol. 1, 78–79, no. 18.81b: DO 55.1.5030; no. 18.81a: Fogg 2016. See Zacos, *Byzantine Lead Seals*, 236, nos. 428a–b, for two additional seals from the same boulloterion.

8 See Cheynet, "Aristocratic Anthroponymy." See also Stavrakos, *Die byzantinischen Bleisiegel*, nos. 12, 115, 220, 240.
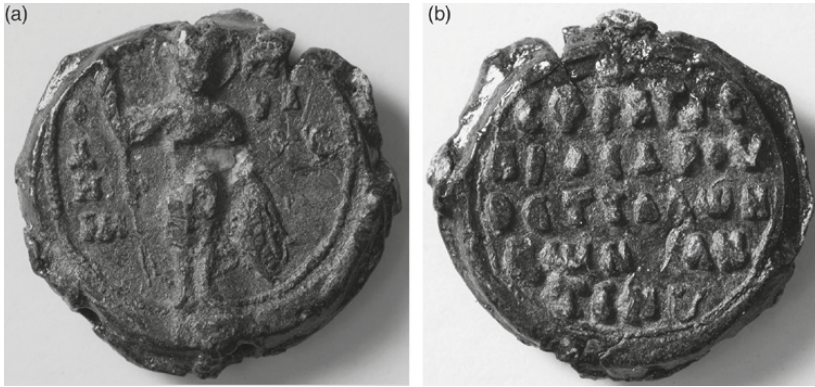
Figure 6.1. Seal of Constantine, *proedros* (Metropolitan) of Thessaloniki, twelfth century. Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington DC (DO 55.1.5030).

political and military history, financial and tax policy, administrative structures, and the internal development of individual cities, and thus enable a better understanding of the distinct character of the Byzantine city. The formation of a distinctive civic identity remains crucial for a city, however. Yet, with the exception of the capital, Constantinople, whose specific political and cultural self-identity is undisputed, and Thessaloniki, the second city of the empire,[9] the collective identity of other Byzantine cities has been widely neglected by prior research. Indeed, scholars have repeatedly questioned whether any urban self-conception or a civic identity existed at all in Byzantium.[10] This is, in part, due to the authors of literary and historical texts, who belonged predominantly to the literary elite of the empire and conveyed, first and foremost (apart from isolated remarks in letters, sermons, or autobiographical writings),[11] a self-conception typical of the capital, not of that of the provincial cities in which they lived.[12]

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9 Fenster, *Laudes Constantinopolitanae*; Kaltsogianni, Kotzabassi, and Paraskeuopoulou, *H Θεσσαλονίκη*.

10 See Matschke, "Selbstverständnis," 160.

11 See, for example, the letters and sermons of John Mauropous, Metropolitan of Euchaita in the Pontus region (eleventh century): Lagarde, *Iohannis Euchaitorum Metropolitae quae in Codice Vaticano 676 supersunt*, 135–36, no. 80; 160–65, no. 184; 207–9, no. 189. See also Angold, "The Shaping of a Medieval Byzantine City," 12. For authors referencing the city of Thessaloniki, see Kaltsogianne, Kotzabassi, and Paraskeuopulu, *H Θεσσαλονίκη*. On autobiographical texts in Byzantium, see Hinterberger, *Autobiographische Traditionen*.

12 See Matschke, "Selbstverständnis," 161–63.

By contrast, Byzantine lead seals, which have long been marginalized by researchers, offer much more direct and genuine access to the phenomenon of civic identity in Byzantium. These contain various kinds of information: images (mostly of the Virgin and of saints; occasionally also secular motifs), as well as inscriptions, which give the name, title, and office of the respective seal owner.[13] Byzantine lead seals thus bring to our attention a large number of individuals not attested in other sources, but they also pass down revealing details of their social, cultural, and political backgrounds. The frequently quoted number of surviving seals, 80,000, is not likely to be exaggerated; and the number of publications devoted to Byzantine lead seals, in the form of collection catalogues and essays, has risen markedly in recent decades. A large portion of the surviving Byzantine seals have still not been catalogued, however, or are known only through short descriptions in auction catalogues. In addition, new seals come to light every year during archaeological excavations.[14]

The images inscribed on seals were much more than mere decoration; they were a medium to convey identity with reference to a specific iconographic vocabulary. Quite a number of sigillographic studies have investigated the motivations that stimulated an individual's choice of iconography, such as homonymity, gender, family devotions, or official administrative positions.[15]

But whereas expressions of personal identity on seals have been studied, to some extent, the phenomenon of corporate identity in Byzantium still needs much further research. This research would illuminate membership in administrative and military units, church organizations, monastic communities, and, above all, the importance of corporate civic identities.[16]

From the twelfth century, at the latest, many urban communities in western Europe designed and used a corporate seal to certify that they functioned as

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13 On Byzantine sigillography, see, in general, Nesbitt, "Sigillography"; and Cheynet, "Introduction à la sigillographie byzantine."

14 For a complete index of all seals published recently in scholarly papers and auction catalogues, see the series *Studies in Byzantine Sigillography*. For modern catalogues of museum and private collections, see the articles cited in the previous footnote.

15 See especially Cotsonis, "Onomastics, Gender, Office and Images," and "Contribution of Byzantine Lead Seals." See also Cheynet and Morrisson, "Texte et image." Alicia Walker has recently dealt with Islamicizing stylistic and iconographic features on ninth- to eleventh-century Byzantine lead seals as a means of expressing one's personal identity: "Islamicizing Motifs."

16 Corporate seals have been intensively researched in studies of western Europe: see Späth, "Die Bildlichkeit korporativer Siegel," and "The Body and Its Parts"; and Groten, "Vom Bild zum Zeichen."

institutions with full legal and executive capacities. City seals show stylized architectural depictions of walls, gates, and churches—frequently those associated with the city's patron saint. Numerous studies have been dedicated to the semantic operations of these seals, as well as to the question raised by the ways in which these images were able to represent civic communities as seal-bearing institutions.[17] As noted above, cities in the Byzantine Empire never developed into autonomous city states. Consequently, such depictions are absent from Byzantine seals, and city seals proper were never issued in Byzantium. A few specimens, all dating back to the early Byzantine era, may allude to πόλεις (or urban communities) as corporate institutions. It is unclear, however, who exactly issued these seals, for which purposes they were used, and what the significance of their imagery and legends may have been. It has also been suggested that such seals may have belonged to ecclesiastical, rather than to civic, institutions. The first example in this small corpus is a seventh-century seal of the *koinon* (community) of Sinope on the Black Sea: τὸ κοινὸν πόλεως Σινόπης (Figure 6.2).[18]

Another specimen, also from the seventh century, is the seal of the *koinon* of the Dekapolis of Isauria in South Asia Minor,[19] an administrative district consisting of ten towns, with the capital at Germanikoupolis (Ermenek) (Figure 6.3).[20] Finally, there is a seal of Apameia and Antioch (Theoupolis), in the historical region of Syria, which may have belonged to an official who administered the two cities.[21]

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17 See, among others, Diederich, *Rheinische Städtesiegel* and "Zum Quellenwert und Bedeutungsgehalt"; and Bedos-Rezak, *Corpus des sceaux*, and "Towns and Seals," as well as *When Ego was Imago*, 231–52. See also Solway, ed., *Medieval Coins and Seals*, especially the chapters of Cherry ("Seals of Cities and Towns"), New ("The Common Seal"), McEwan ("The Formation"); and Späth ("Art"); Drös and Jakobs, "Die Zeichen einer neuen Klasse"; and Späth, "Zeichen bürgerschaftlicher Repräsentation."

18 Laurent, *Le corpus*, no. 423 (cf. W. Seibt's review in *Byzantinoslavica* 35 [1974]: 78). For a parallel specimen, see Zacos and Veglery, *Byzantine Lead Seals*, no. 2890 (DO 47.2.160), also in the addenda to Nesbitt and Oikonomides, eds., *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals*, vol. 5, 147, no. 110.1. Some of these scholars consider the possibility that the seal may have belonged to the church (or a religious institution) of Sinope (Laurent, Oikonomides, and Nesbitt). Jean-Claude Cheynet, in his commentary on the seal of the *koinon* of Dekapolis (see below), puts forward the opinion that both seals belonged to a civic institution.

19 Zacos and Veglery, *Byzantine Lead Seals*, no. 1173 (erroneously read as "Leon archon of Dekapolis"); re-edited by Nesbitt and Oikonomides, *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals*, vol. 5, 19, no. 7.1. There are two parallel specimens: Cheynet, *Sceaux de la collection Zacos*, no. 25; and Münzhandlung Herbert Grün, Auktion 11, no. 546.17 (=Münz Zentrum, Sale 80, 28-30 November 1994, no. 714, cf. SBS 6, 152). According to Cheynet, another seal with the same inscription, but arranged differently, is in the Bibliothèque national de France, Paris (no. 2929).

20 See Hild and Hellenkemper, *Kilikien und Isaurien*, 235–36; and Nesbitt and Oikonomides, *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals*, vol. 5, 19.

21 Nesbitt and Oikonomides, *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals*, vol. 5, 32, no. 9.19.
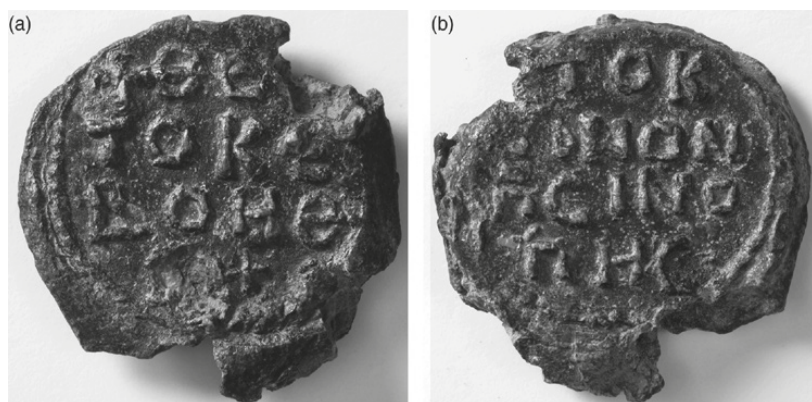
Figure 6.2. Seal of the *koinon* of Sinope, seventh century. Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington DC (DO 47.2.160).

Figure 6.3. Seal of the *koinon* of the Dekapolis of Isauria, seventh century. Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington DC (DO 55.1.2468).

Once again, it is difficult to say whether this seal, which dates to the sixth or seventh century, refers to a civic or ecclesiastical unit (Figure 6.4).

In contrast to these examples, there are various personal seals of a much later date that, on close examination, express a feeling of belonging to one's city, displaying clues that have gone unnoticed in previous research. A surviving example from the tenth century is the seal of one John, *protospatharios* and *strategos* (governing general) of Cherson (today Sevastopol in the Crimea). The obverse of this seal shows an unusual image: a two-winged city gate between two towers. Above the gate, a dome with a cross may perhaps depict a church. This image probably represents one of the main gates within the defensive wall of the

Figure 6.4. Seal of Apameia and Antioch, sixth to seventh centuries. Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington DC (DO 77.34.81).
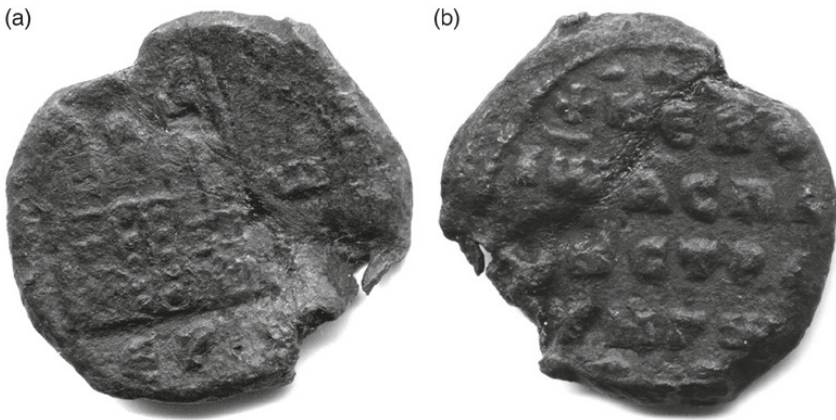

Figure 6.5. Seal of John, *protospatharios* and *strategos* of Cherson, tenth century. The Sheremetievs' Family Museum of Historical and Cultural Rarities, Kiev.

city, which was widely known to contemporaries and possibly stood in connection with a local cult (Figure 6.5).[22]

Another example is the seal of John Komnenos Dukas, emperor of Thessaloniki (1237–1242) and despot of Epiros (1242–1244) (Figure 6.6).[23] To the left, on

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22 Alekseenko, " 'Korsun'skie vrata." See also Angar and Sode, "Architekturdarstellungen," 36–37.

23 Zacos and Veglery, *Byzantine Lead Seals*, no. 115; Oikonomides, *A Collection*, no. 132. See also Angar and Sode, "Architekturdarstellungen," 40–41. On John Komnenos Doukas, see Varzos, *Η γενεαλογία των Κομνηνών*.

Figure 6.6. Seal of John Komnenos Dukas, 1240–1242. Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington DC (DO 55.1.4356).

the obverse, one can see John himself, standing beside the larger image of St. Demetrios, patron saint of Thessaloniki. On the right, in the background, is the city wall of Thessaloniki, with battlements. The saint has put his right hand on the right shoulder of the ruler in a way that conveys protection as well as legitimacy. The saint's outstretched left hand points to a structure, probably the saint's shrine, which was situated inside the city.[24] The iconography is reminiscent of a well-known seventh-century mosaic in the Church of St. Demetrios, in which the city's patron saint appears with his arms around a bishop and a lay donor, positioned on either side of him. In the background of this mosaic there is also a city wall with battlements, representing Thessaloniki.[25]

On both of these seals, the city is portrayed through its characteristic outer walls and with a structure that may represent a religious building. Urban architectural elements have been turned into symbols of self-identification, allowing the owner of the seal to express his attachment to his city. Similarly, an eleventh-century seal of Michael, bishop of Charioupolis (Thrace), shows on the obverse a building pierced with arched windows and covered with a dome raised from a drum and topped with a cross; this building has been identified as the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (Figure 6.7). That Michael did not choose a saint for his

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24 See www.doaks.org/resources/seals/gods-regents-on-earth-a-thousand-years-of-byzan tine-imperial-seals/rulers-of-byzantium/john-komnenos-doukas-1240–42 (Jonathan Shea). George Zacos and Alexander Veglery take the structure for a rectangular shield; Nicolas Oikonomides suggests that it could be one of the gates of Thessaloniki.

25 See Bakirtzis, Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou, and Mavropoulou-Tsioumi, *Mosaics of Thessaloniki*, 169–70, figs. 47–48.

Figure 6.7. Seal of Michael, bishop of Charioupolis, eleventh century. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Cabinet des médailles, Collection Seyrig, no. 292. Photo: Jean-Claude Cheynet.

seal, as was usually the case among Byzantine bishops (as we saw above), but, rather, the edifice of Hagia Sophia suggests that he had been a cleric there before his enthronement as bishop of Charioupolis. He clearly considered this earlier circumstance so significant that he referred to it by means of a miniature illustration of the cathedral church.[26] In this case, the depiction of the church can perhaps be related to a group of seals, ranging in date from the eleventh century through the fourteenth, which belonged to the *ekdikoi* (or *ekklesiekdikoi*), a tribunal (*ekdikeion*) of priests assigned to Hagia Sophia by emperor Justinian I. These seals depict the standing figures of the Virgin and of Justinian, who both support a model of Hagia Sophia covered with a disproportionately large dome. Michael is likely to have encountered these seals during his time at the Hagia Sophia, when he may have held the office of an *ekdikos*.[27] Nothing is known about the patron saint of Charioupolis, and not much about the city's churches and monuments either.[28] One may entertain the notion, however, that the central church in Charioupolis was also dedicated to Hagia Sophia, as was the case in other cities (such as Saint Sophia of Kiev), and even speculate that Michael may have chosen to represent an urban architectural feature on his seal.[29]

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26 Laurent, *Le corpus*, vol. 1, no. 335; Cheynet, Morrisson, and Seibt, *Les sceaux*, no. 239. See also Angar and Sode, "Architekturdarstellungen," 37–38. For a similar seal of the same owner, see Wassiliou-Seibt and Seibt, *Der byzantinische Mensch*, 78–79, no. 53.

27 For the seals of the *ekdikoi*, see Boutyrsky, "The Seals of the Great Church"; Cotsonis, "The Virgin and Justinian"; and Prinzing, "Das Bild Justinians I.," 16–17.

28 For Charioupolis, see Külzer, *Ostthrakien*, 308–10.

29 I am indebted to Olga Karagiorgou for pointing this out to me.

Every city in Byzantium was tied into a wide range of ideological, religious, and administrative institutions. Civic identity was often associated with a church, a monastic foundation, or a saint to whom a particular church was consecrated. Thus, bishops and metropolitans often included the patron of their see on their seals (with certain exceptions, as noted above). Accordingly, the archbishops of Thessaloniki would choose to display St. Demetrios on their seals, as can be seen on the seal of Constantine, the Metropolitan of Thessaloniki (Figure 6.1). Consequently, depictions of saints on seals may refer to important local cult traditions,[30] which were crucial for the formation of civic identity. Images of local saints therefore highlight the bond of the seal's owner (who may also represent a larger community, such as a church or a monastery) with a particular site. As we have seen, civic identity was also articulated through reference to a city's particular sights and architectural features: walls, gates, towers, churches, sacred places, and the saints connected with them.[31] Concurrent with this trend in the iconography of Byzantine seals, we can detect that citizens increasingly show pride in important buildings, albeit to varying degrees and in various places. The inhabitants of the city of Sparta/Lacedaemon in the Peloponnese, for example, are said to have erected a church on the old city's agora towards the end of the tenth century, at the prompting of St. Nikon the Metanoeite. In this context, it is important to note that the hagiographer, in his life of the saint, equated the deeds of the builders and craftsmen with those of Phidias and other famous artists of antiquity. Similarly, the reported donation of two ancient pillars for the construction of the church, by two city archons, may be read as a way of expressing consciousness of long-standing historical traditions and civic self-esteem.[32]

Civic identity could also be expressed in words. The noted rhetor Michael Italikos, who was Metropolitan of Philippoupolis (Plovdiv, Bulgaria) from 1143 to 1157,[33] used his seal to address the personified city in two twelve-syllable verses, extending over both sides of the seal. He hailed it as "City of Philip, the creature of

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30 See especially Cotsonis, "Saints and Cult Centers," and "The Contribution."

31 Architectural depictions on seals can possibly be related to a renewed interest in the iconography of architecture and microarchitecture in middle and late Byzantine art more generally: see Angar, "Stiftermodelle in Byzanz"; and Ćurčić and Hadjitryphonos, *Architecture as Icon*.

32 See Sullivan, *The Life of Saint Nikon*, chap. 38. I owe this reference to Matschke, "Selbstverständnis," 166n38; and Angold, "The Shaping," 16–17.

33 Nesbitt and Oikonomides, *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals*, vol. 1, 152–53, no. 68.2. On this seal, see also Wassiliou-Seibt, *Corpus*, vol. 2, no. 1807. On an earlier occasion, the same author reversed the correct order of the two verses: *Corpus*, vol. 1, no. 832; see Karagiorgou, "Apropos of a Corpus," 267–68. Many thanks to Olga Karagiorgou for drawing my attention to this discussion.

the apostles [i.e., Philip the deacon, known from the Acts of Apostles]," and tells the city that he is providing spiritual food to its (the city's) flock: that is, the citizens. This is another example that attests to a certain degree of civic pride and, consequently, of civic identity.

In contrast to what has often been assumed, then, Byzantine lead seals from the tenth century onwards offer evidence for the existence of some cities' distinct self-confidence and a sense of well-developed civic identity among their inhabitants. In addition to textual evidence, seals thus deserve to be considered more carefully as invaluable witnesses to the ways in which cities and collective identity were understood in Byzantine culture.

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Abstract In western Europe, from the twelfth century at the latest, many urban communities designed and used corporate seals to prove that they functioned as institutions with full legal and executive capacities. In contrast, Byzantine cities never developed into similarly independent self-governing communities or city states and, consequently, never used city seals. There are indications, however, that, from the tenth century on, Byzantine cities developed a distinctive civic culture and, to some extent, a civic consciousness based upon growing economic and military power and the existence of local cults. The article presents various seals used by individuals, which express a feeling of belonging to one's city—clues that have gone unnoticed in previous research. It is concluded that seals, with their rich iconographic, historical, and philological information, deserve to be considered more carefully as invaluable witnesses to the ways in which cities and collective urban identity were understood in Byzantine culture.