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THE SEAL OF PAUL, *OIKEIAKOS*, *DESPOTIKOS NOTARIOS*

(LATE 8TH/EARLY 9TH CENTURY)*

Recently Classical Numismatic Group offered at auction a seal bearing two rare administrative terms¹. The designations appear with a form of secondary decoration that is quite unexpected in view of the specimen's date. For these reasons Dumbarton Oaks gladly purchased the object and the present author happily publishes it here as a tribute to the interests and career of Prof. Irmgard Hutter.

The seal measures 32 mm. in diameter and weighs 21.31 g. On the obverse appears an invocative monogram reading Θεοτόκε βοήθει («Mother of God, help»); the inscription is completed by the phrase τῷ σῷ δούλῳ («your servant») (Pl. 1a). Several oddities are worth noting. The monogram is comprised of the letters Θ (in center), Κ (at left), Η (at right), Τ (at top), and Β (at bottom). The vertical and slanting bars that comprise the letter Κ are much thinner than the constituent parts of other letters, for example the vertical and horizontal bars of the letter Η. Letters in the quarters are of uneven height. Thus Τ, the first letter in the word appearing in the upper quarter at left, has been set much lower than the Ω which follows. The base of the lunate letter C is lower on the line than the base of its companion letter Ω. In the lower quarters we note that the V in the ligature ϝ ascends higher than the letter Δ which precedes it and the letters ΛΩ that follow. The design of the monogram is not entirely clear. Typically the letter Τ at top is surmounted by a small O, but exceptions are known². It is possible that the constituent parts of the monogram lack an *omicron*, but there seems to be a small, round letter along the upright shaft of the *tau*, slightly below the horizontal bar at top: a clumsily placed *omicron*?

* The seal is preserved at Dumbarton Oaks under the accession number BZS.2008.004.

¹ Mail Bid Auction 206, March 11, 2009, lot 420.

² See, for example, G. ZACOS - A. VEGLERY, *Byzantine Lead Seals*, I/2, Basel 1972, nos. 1652 (Theognostos imperial spatharios; 8th century, second half) and 2384 (Stephanos, 8th century, first half).

On the reverse appears an inscription of four lines (Pl. 1b):

ΠΑΝΛΩΨ|ΚΙΑΚΔΕCΠ|ΟΤΙΚΝΟΤ|ΑΡ:

Παύλω ὑκιακ(ῶ) δεσποτικ(ῶ) νοταρ(ίω)

The final letter is followed by a leafy stalk and a duck holding a fish in its mouth. The whole, like the monogram on the obverse, is encircled by a wreath border. The legend has several distinctive features. The *omicron* is elongated, rather than circular. Words are abbreviated. Abbreviation signs rise high on the line and their ends tend to curve.

The epigraphic characteristics of the letters on the obverse, specifically in the quadrants, compare quite favorably with the letter forms on the seal of a certain Gregory protonotarios of Sicily, a specimen that Seibt and Zarnitz have published and dated to the first half of the ninth century³. Here, as on our seal, the letters are of different height and thickness. Among seals that are firmly datable we note the design of *omicron* on an example of a seal used by Antony I, patriarch of Constantinople (821-837)⁴. As on the reverse of Paul's seal, the letter is pinched, resulting in an oblong shape. Abbreviation marks, rising high on the line, are found, for example, on a seal used in 831/832 by an imperial *kommerkiarios* of Thrace and Macedonia named Constantine⁵. When all the epigraphic characteristics of Paul's seal are considered together, we may conservatively conclude that this specimen dates no later than the first half of the 9th century. But the question is this: can we say that it dates before 815 and the Iconophile Reaction or between 815 and 843, the period of Second Iconoclasm? Before we discuss any refinement of date, let us first consider Paul's title.

After Paul's name the first word to appear is ὑκιακ(ῶ) – more properly οἰκιακ(ῶ). The word may be a noun or an adjective. Both usages occur in the *Taktikon Uspenskij* (842-843). The adjectival form (meaning «personal» or «household») appears in the phrase οἰκιακοὶ πρωτοπαθῆριοι, a designation that appears after «*anthypatoi* and *eparchoi* of the

³ W. SEIBT – M.L. ZARNITZ, *Das byzantinische Bleisiegel als Kunstwerk. Katalog zur Ausstellung*, Wien 1997, no. 2.2.3 (p. 83).

⁴ The seal has been published several times, most recently in *Catalogue of the Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and at the Fogg Museum of Art*, VI, ed. by J. NESBITT, with the assistance of C. MORRISSON, Washington, D.C. 2009, no. III.1.

⁵ N. OIKONOMIDÈS, *A Collection of Dated Byzantine Lead Seals*, Washington, D.C. 1986, no. 46 (p. 55). The seal is republished, with a clearer photograph, in *Catalogue of the Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and at the Fogg Museum of Art*, I, ed. J. NESBITT – N. OIKONOMIDÈS, Washington, D.C. 1991, no. 43.18.



a)



b)

Pl. 1. Washington, D.C., Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, Acc. No. BZS.2008.004 (seal of Paul, *oikeiakos*, *despotikos notarios*): a) obverse; b) reverse.

themes» and before the listing of «*protospatharioi* and *ex-strategoï*»⁶. The word appears as a noun in a later section where the Taktikon refers to *σπαθαροκανδιῶται καὶ οἰκειακοί*⁷. Further on, in the section where the Taktikon lists *spatharioi*, we find the phrase οἱ βασιλικοὶ σπαθάριοι οἰκειακοί⁸. Presumably «οἰκειακοί» is here used as an adjective. The term is found as a simple (plural) noun toward the end of the Taktikon: οἰκειακοί⁹. It is set between mention of imperial bodyguards (οἱ τοῦ μαγλαβίου) and persons attached to the service of the imperial dining room (οἱ ἀρτοκλῖναι).

To these literary references may be added a seal published by Zacos and Veglery¹⁰. The editors assign the specimen the general date «9th century». The obverse bears a cruciform invocative monogram reading (according to the editors): Κύριε βοήθει. The reason for hesitation is that letters at left and right are poorly imprinted and the letter at top appears to be an *omicron* and not the usual *rho*. Nonetheless the *beta* is clearly visible at bottom and, as the *beta* is formed with a double loop, we can be sure that the seal dates before 850. After this date the *beta* has the shape of the Latin capital letter R (R). In the angles appears the customary phrase: ΤΩ-ΣΩ|ΔΘ-ΛΩ. As on our seal the letters vary in size. On the reverse appears an inscription of four lines. The editors read:

..ΡΟ..|Α-ΣΠΑΘ|[Α]ΡΗΘΩΚ|ΗΑΚΩ:
 ..ΡΟ... (πρωτο)σπαθαρο(ω) (καὶ) (οἱ)κ(ει)ακῶ.

Except for the first line and the beginning of the second all the letters are reasonably discernible including the abbreviation sign (here backwards) for *καὶ* (Σ). We can be sure that the owner of the seal held the title of οἰκειακός. It is less clear if the owner was a σπαθάριος or (πρωτο)σπαθάριος. The reason for uncertainty is that the first *alpha* in line two lacks an abbreviation mark, raising the possibility that this *alpha* which the editors interpret as (πρωτο) may be the final letter (in the dative case) of the seal owner's name. In any event the Zacos seal corroborates the testimony of the Taktikon Uspenskij that the title *oikeiakos* was in use during the first half of the ninth century. But our seal takes

⁶ N. ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΔΗΣ, *Les listes de préséance byzantines des IX^e et X^e siècles*, Paris 1972, p. 51 (at line 27).

⁷ ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΔΗΣ, *Les listes cit.*, p. 53 (at line 24).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 57 (at line 22).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63 (at line 10).

¹⁰ ΖΑΚΟΣ - ΒΕΓΛΕΡΥ, *Byzantine Lead Seals*, I/2 cit., no. 2619 A.

the matter one step further: it links the title to a specific function, that of «scribe».

In the second half of the inscription on the reverse we are informed that Paul was a δεσποτικός νοτάριος. The adjective δεσποτικός, which is similar in meaning to βασιλικός, but by no means parallel, is found on a number of seals published in the catalogue of Zacos and Veglery. Among them are the seals of an anonymous *stratelates* and *despotikos meizoteros* (7th-century); a *despotikos meizoteros* (Niketas: 750-850); and a *despotikos notarios* (Gregoras: 8th century)¹¹. The latter bears on the obverse a cruciform invocative with the phrase ΤΩ-ΣΩ|ΔΘ-ΛΩ in the quarters; the editors read the whole as: Κύριε βοήθει τῷ σῷ δούλῳ. The reverse has an inscription (in the genitive case) of five lines:

ΓΡΗ[Γ]|[Ο]ΡΑΔΕΣ|ΠΟΤΙΚΟΝ|ΝΟΤΑΡΙ|[Λ]ϛ:

Γρηγοῤῃ δεσποτικοῦ νοταρίου.

The 8th-century date which the editors assign the specimen is fully justified by letter forms, as well as the use of tendrils surrounding the ligature ϛ at bottom. We will eventually want to examine the use of vegetation as secondary decoration on seals, but for the moment we will concentrate on the term *despotikos* and its meaning in the context both of our seal and the Zacos specimen. Among the eunuch servitors at the emperor's palace was the *pinkernes*, the imperial butler. This official was charged with providing the imperial table with a special wine, the δεσποτικός οἶνος¹². The *pinkernes* assured the availability of a type of wine that was the emperor's own wine. In the same sense a *despotikos notarios* was the emperor's personal scribe, a meaning that is underscored in the more elaborate phrase on our seal: *oikeiakos, despotikos notarios*, which may be rendered as «the emperor's own scribe».

Although the terms that appear on our seal are unusual, we add that the secondary decoration concluding the final line of the legend on the reverse is equally noteworthy. The final letter, *rho*, is followed by the depiction of a long, curving leafy reed. We use the word «reed» because the bird, in our opinion, is shaped like a duck and the thinness of the vegetal element in combination with the bird's profile projects an aquatic image. In the 8th century a popular form of ornament consisted of a cross flanked at right and left by a tendril. A datable example is the seal

¹¹ *Ibid.* I/1, no. 1095 and I/2, respectively, nos. 2247 and 1940.

¹² For discussion see ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΔΕΣ, *Les listes cit.*, p. 306.

of John *hypatos*, *chrysepsetes* and *archon* of the *blattion* (730/731 or 745/746)¹³. In this instance the tendrils are truncated. Long, tapering tendrils, resembling reeds (but without leaves) are found on an 8th-century seal published by Laurent. The specimen, which is preserved in the Vatican Collection, belonged to a certain John *asekrites*¹⁴. Closer in time to our seal is a specimen published by Zacos and Veglery. The obverse is decorated with a cruciform invocative monogram; in the quarters are set the customary phrase ΤΩ-ΣΩ|ΔΘ-ΛΩ. On the reverse appears a legend of four lines; with the inscriptions on the obverse the whole reads: Θεοτόκε βοήθει τῷ σῶ δούλῳ Γεωργίῳ νοταρίῳ, ἀμήν+. After the cross is set a single, long tendril that curves back upon itself and terminates with leaves. Zacos and Veglery date the specimen «9th century». The *beta* used at the bottom of the cruciform invocative monogram on the obverse is of the type in vogue before 850 and so we are inclined to date the specimen more narrowly to the first half of the century¹⁵. A lone tendril ornament is also found on another seal; it appears at the end of an inscription on the reverse identifying the owner as Theophanes patrikios, imperial protospatharios and logothete of the drome¹⁶. Zacos and Veglery assign the specimen to the «9th century (second half)», but because a double loop *beta* is found at the bottom of the cruciform invocative monogram on the obverse, as well as a wreath border, we are inclined to date the Zacos seal *circa* 850. Tendrils and palmettes were popular decorative elements on seals of the 8th century and the first half of the 9th century, but none that we have seen resemble the reed that we encounter on our «duck» seal.

The most noteworthy feature of our seal is the presence of a bird (in our opinion a duck) after the leafy stalk at bottom of the reverse. The creature is softly modeled and depicted naturalistically with tiny feet. The naturalism of the scene is enhanced by the leafy stalk set behind it and a fish which hangs suspended from the duck's mouth. From the 10th century survive numerous seals on which the obverse is decorated with a bird. See for example the lovely specimen published by Speck. The surface of the obverse field is occupied by a bird holding in its mouth a

¹³ ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΔΗΣ, *Dated Byzantine Lead Seals* cit., no. 31 (p. 43).

¹⁴ V. LAURENT, *Les sceaux byzantins du Médaillier Vatican*, Città del Vaticano 1962, no. 29 (p. 25).

¹⁵ ZACOS - VEGLERY, *Byzantine Lead Seals*, I/2 cit., no. 1924.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, I/3, no. 2510 A.

thin reed. The creature is framed from behind by a leafy branch¹⁷. Many more seals could be cited, but there is no point in multiplying references to examples well beyond the date of our seal.

We have established that our seal dates no later than 850. We know of no seal decorated with a bird dating from the later 8th century or first half of the 9th century. We have raised the question whether the specimen may be dated to the period of the Iconophile Reaction (787-815) or to the period of Second Iconoclasm (815-843)¹⁸. In our opinion the seal should be considered a product of the period of the Iconophile Reaction (787-815). The reed does not constitute a dating criterion. It is intended to aid in establishing the aquatic environment appropriate to a water bird. Far more telling is the term *despotikos*. We have seen that it is used on seals of the 7th and 8th centuries, in particular the 8th-century seal of Gregoras *despotikos notarios*. The Zacos seal confirms the general period in which the title *despotikos notarios* was in use. Nonetheless, the Dumbarton Oaks «duck» seal is later in date than the Zacos specimen and so we are inclined to assign our seal with the duck to the end of the 8th century or the beginning of the 9th century. If we are correct, then our seal provides a rare look at secular iconography in the period of the Iconophile Reaction.

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¹⁷ P. SPECK, *Byzantinische Bleisiegel in Berlin (West)*, Bonn 1987, no. 88 (p. 131).

¹⁸ The official attested on our seal is not listed in *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit*, Part I: (641-867), I-VI, ed. R.-J. LILIE - C. LUDWIG - T. PRATSCH - I. ROCHOW - B. ZIELKE, Berlin 1999-2002.