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# **Byzantine and Rus' Seals**

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# The Particulars of the Byzantine Administration in Taurica: Seals of the Stratores of Cherson

Nicholas ALEKSEIENKO

There is a large array of Byzantine lead seals originating from the ancient city of Cherson in the south-western Crimea. These finds provide valuable information on the city administration, its relations with state and church authorities, trade partners and contacts with different regions of the Byzantine Empire. According to the seals, Cherson was a provincial centre with some particular features, including a port, a centre of trade and church activities. It was the most important Byzantine outpost in the northern Black Sea area. Among over 2,000 seals from Cherson known so far, there are those of local administrators, dignitaries and church figures from Constantinople, as well as representatives of different Byzantine provinces.<sup>1</sup>

More than 400 seals belonged to officials of Cherson from different periods, particularly to *kyrs* and *archontes* (eighth and ninth century), *strategoï*, *ekprosopou*, *kommerkiarioi*, *protonotarioi*, *pateres poleos*, *ekdikoi*, and *proteuontes* (ninth to eleventh century). Recent discoveries make this list preliminary in nature, as new positions, such as *katepano* (late eleventh or the turn of the twelfth century) are added to it.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, these recent discoveries introduce two new seals, which are among the earliest discovered thus far. They were impressed by the same matrix. Belonged to *hypatos* Theodotos, the *archon* of Cherson, these are probably the earliest seals of local *archon* discovered thus far.<sup>3</sup> The obverse of the first seal is of an early type with an invocative monogram asking for divine help, but still without traditional tetragrams  $\tau\omega-\Delta\delta|\Lambda\omega-C\delta$  or  $\tau\omega-C\omega|\Delta\delta-\Lambda\omega$ . The owner's name is indicated in corners:  $\Theta\epsilon-O|\Delta O-\tau\omega$ , and dates from 700–750.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See catalogues: Sokolova 1983; Alekseienko 2012a, with pp. 239–241 listing particular publications on specific groups of seals discovered in Cherson.

<sup>2</sup> Alekseienko, Tsepkov 2012: 7–17.

<sup>3</sup> Alekseienko 2012b: 5–11, fig. 1.1–2.

<sup>4</sup> Šandrovskaia 1968: 244–253.

There are two more seals of Theodotos, the *archon* of Cherson, of similar type,<sup>5</sup> though his rank is different: *hypatos* and imperial *spatharokandidatos*. Since the rank of *spatharokandidatos* was the highest possible for the *archontes* of Cherson (the overwhelming majority of them were imperial *spatharioi*),<sup>6</sup> newly discovered seals might reflect the beginning of Theodotos' career.

It should be mentioned that these new finds show a specific spelling of the city name with *chi* instead of *sigma* in the second syllable: ΧΕΡΧΟΝΟC, probably because the carver of local origin was undereducated. Interchanged or displaced letters also occur on seals of other officials of Cherson, including those of the local *archon* and *strategos*.<sup>7</sup> Among the recent finds is a seal with the letters changed in the same way, that of *archon* and *hypatos* Zoilos, showing the final stage of the type with invocative monogram and tetragram ΤΩ-ÇΩ|Δδ-ΛΩ from the very end of the eighth or the early ninth century.<sup>8</sup> There are similar seals impressed by another pair of matrices, which contain the same error in its legend, and two more seals with correct spelling of the city name.<sup>9</sup> The name of Zoilos perhaps appears on seals of a *hypatos* and *kyr* of Cherson.<sup>10</sup> One might reasonably suppose that all these seals belonged to the same person who played an important role in Cherson and held different position during his career. The rare name of Zoilos appears on more seals of Cherson from the seventh to the ninth century,<sup>11</sup> looking like it was popular among local nobility, inherited by a grandson from his grandfather.

One more seal with the name of Zoilos seems to have been impressed by two reverse matrices of different persons (fig. 1). It is not a unique case in Cherson: a seal of *archon* and imperial *spatharios* Eustathios (late eighth or early ninth



Fig. 1. Seal of Zoilos, *hypatos* and *archon* of Cherson – Sergios, imperial *strator* of Cherson (lu. Tsepkov's private collection, Sevastopol)

<sup>5</sup> Alekseienko 2012a: 73, no. 1.1–2.

<sup>6</sup> Alekseienko 2012a: 73–114.

<sup>7</sup> Alekseienko 2012a: 75–76, no. 4 ; 127, no. 37.

<sup>8</sup> Alekseienko 2012b: 5–11, fig. 1.3.

<sup>9</sup> Alekseienko 2012a: 75–76, no. 4; 76, no. 5.1–2.

<sup>10</sup> Alekseienko 2012a: 116–117, no. 25.1–2.

<sup>11</sup> See: Alekseienko (forthcoming): nos. 3–7.



century) has the invocative monogram, which was poorly impressed by the re-striking of the seal, though the reverse legend indicates “*Constantine, imperial spatharios*.”<sup>12</sup>

The obverse legend of the seal under publication is the same as of the seal of Zoilos with the word ΧΕΡΧΟΝΟC previously discussed. The only exception is the letters on the latter seal, which are more coarse and heavy. Diameter: 18 mm.

On the reverse is a variant of five-line legend that never occurred in sigillography of Cherson:

+CЄPΓ..|BACIΛI|.CTPA[..ΩXЄ|.....  
+ Σεργ[ίω] βασιλι[κῶ] στρά[τωρ](ι) Χε[ρσόνο]ς].

The word “imperial” is written in full form (without abbreviation marks), therefore the seal of Sergios dates to an early period, possibly before the seals of Zoilos. The rank shown as CTPA[...]|Ω should not be interpreted as *stratelates* or *strategos*, despite the number of letters matching the latter case and *omega* as probable dative ending. However, it is known that imperial *strategos* was not possible for Byzantine seals. A more probable, yet unexpected, solution seems to indicate that it could be interpreted as *strator* in a misspelled form, when the carver supposed dative ending and put a final *omega* for necessary *iota*. In the sigillography of Cherson, the rank of imperial *strator* occurs only once, as a title of local *archon* Constantine,<sup>13</sup> whose seals date to the turn of the eighth or the early ninth century. The *strator*, as a position in the government of Cherson, addresses the question of specific features of local administration.

There are two more seals related to *thematic stratores*. The first shows a traditional invocative monogram on its obverse and a common legend with owner’s title on the reverse side (fig. 2). Diameter: ca. 20.5 mm. Impressed on a blank of smaller size, so the border steps out of the edge, it has a small hole in the centre. This stray find in Cherson remains unpublished and unparalleled.



Fig. 2. Seal of Sergios, imperial strator of Cherson  
(V. Filippov’s private collection, Tyumen)

<sup>12</sup> Alekseienko 2012a: 74–75, no. 3.1.

<sup>13</sup> Alekseienko 2012a: 76–79, no. 6–7.

*Obverse.* Cross-like invocative monogram (Laurent V) with a tetragram in its corners: ΤΩ-ΣΩ|ΔΘ-ΛΩ = Θεοτόκε βοήθει τῷ σῷ δούλῳ.

*Reverse.* Inscription of five lines:

.....|.ΑCΙΛΙΚΩ|CΤΡΑΤΟ|.ΩΧΕΡ|.ΟΝΟC  
[... β]ασιλικῶ στράτ(ω)[ρ](ι) Χερ[σ]όνοc.

Unfortunately, the owner's name is out of the blank, so only low ends of the letters survive, making a reliable reconstruction impossible. There might be Sergios, as on the seal discussed above, especially as both seals show very similar scripts. Particulars of the seal in question also indicate its early date, likely within the turn of the eighth or early ninth century.

Another seal (fig. 3) has its reverse legend almost the same as on the two latter seals, written in careless and sweeping letters, without abbreviation marks, with typically misspelled name of the city (ΧΕΡΧΟΝΟC). Surprisingly, its obverse shows a six-pointed cross floriata with a circular inscription asking for divine help instead of the already known monogram. Diameter: 20 mm; blank thickness: ca. 3 mm. It is impressed on a blank of smaller size, so the border steps out of the edge on either side. The blank is a bit deformed. Metal is missing along the canal at one side. This was a stray find in Cherson and is currently both unpublished and unparalleled.



Fig. 3. Seal of Sergios, imperial strator of Cherson  
(lu. Tsepkov's private collection, Sevastopol)

*Obverse.* A six-pointed cross floriata on steps within a border of large pearls. The flowering branches reach the low bar of the cross. There are traces of a circular legend with an invocation, but only its final *omega* survives: ...Ω = [Κύριε βοήθει τῷ σῷ δούλῳ].

*Reverse.* Inscription of five (?) lines:

.....|ΒΑCΙΑ..|.CΤΡΑ|..ΡΩΧΕ|.ΧΟΝΟ.  
[...] βασιλ[ικῶ] στρά[τω]ρ(ι) Χερ[ρ](σ)όνο[ς].

The so-called “nimbate” cross is well known on other seals of Cherson. Werner Seibt has offered convincing arguments that seals with a similar cross date to 866–900.<sup>14</sup> However, in the case in question, the cross contains two extra elements, flowering branches, from its base to the low crossbar. This type of patriarchal cross usually dates to 900–950.<sup>15</sup> A very similar cross occurs on a seal of a *strategos* of Cherson dated to 900–950 by Irina Sokolova,<sup>16</sup> although Professor Seibt suggests ca. 900.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, an extraordinary position of imperial *strator* existed in the *theme* of Cherson for at least one hundred years.

The term *strator* appears on Byzantine seals to indicate the rank, and is always followed by the person’s position or information about the ministry he belonged to, for example on seals of Basil and Constantine, imperial *stratores* and *archontes* of Thessalonike (800–1000) from the Dumbarton Oaks.<sup>18</sup> The position of *protostrator* (“first groom”), who managed imperial stables,<sup>19</sup> was first recorded under Constantine V (741–775), though in the eleventh century it also occurred among supreme Byzantine offices.<sup>20</sup> Although imperial *stratores* representing provincial administration did not appear earlier, P. Georgiev’s recent paper published the tenth or eleventh century bronze matrices discovered in Bulgaria, which were used to produce wax seals of a board of *stratores*.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the seals’ evidence on the position of imperial *strator* in Cherson still requires additional consideration and verification.

The evidence of new seals from Cherson proves that despite a considerable number of sources already in existence, new discoveries sometimes provide unexpected information, capable of solving old problems related to the shaping of local governmental structures. New discoveries also suggest new interpretations of previously known facts. The seals of *stratores* of Cherson from the ninth and tenth century underline the specificity of local administration and certainly indicate the position of emperor’s groom among other officials of Cherson, who presumably provided the troops and different embassies to the Empire’s northern neighbours with horses and forage.

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<sup>14</sup> Seibt, Seibt 1995: 92.

<sup>15</sup> Seibt 1978: 155–156, 184, 330–331, nos. 48, 70, 192; Sokolova 1983: 99.

<sup>16</sup> Sokolova 1983: 155, no. 30; cf. Alekseienko 2012a: 145, no. 56.1–2.

<sup>17</sup> Seibt, Seibt 1995: 92, n. 18.

<sup>18</sup> DOseals 1: 56–57, nos. 18.12–13.

<sup>19</sup> Siuziumov 1949: 26, 89.

<sup>20</sup> Bury 1911: 117–118; Gulland 1967: 478–497; Oikonomidès 1972: 337–338.

<sup>21</sup> Georgiev 2011: 189–206.

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## Abbreviations

- ADSV* *Античная древность и Средние века*
- ANS* American Numismatic Society
- AUM* *Архіў уніяцкіх мітрапалітаў. Дакументы да гісторыі царквы ў Беларусі XV – XIX стст. у фрондзе «Канцылярыя мітрапаліта грэка-уніяцкіх цэркваў у Расіі», склад. С. І. Паўловіч, Т. М. Мальцава. Мінск — Полацк 1999*
- AVAK* *Акты издаваемые Виленской Археографической комиссией 15 (Декреты главного Литовского трибунала). Вильна 1888*
- BAR IS* *British Archaeological Reports: International Series*
- BAS* *Amari M. Bibliotheca arabo-sicula, testi. Leipzig 1857. 1st appendix: Leipzig 1875; 2nd appendix: Leipzig 1887 (re-ed. 1982)*
- BCH* *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique*
- BF* *Byzantinische Forschungen*
- BI* *Боспорские исследования*
- BIAS* *Бахчисарайский историко-археологический сборник*
- BSI* *Byzantinoslavica*
- BZ* *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*
- CFHB* *Corpus fontium historiae Byzantinae*
- DDG* *Духовные и договорные грамоты великих и удельных князей XIV – XVI вв. Москва – Ленинград 1950*
- DOP* *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*
- DOSeals* *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art 1–6. Washington 1991–2009*
- GIM* *Государственный исторический музей*
- GRBS* *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*
- GVNP* *Грамоты Великого Новгорода и Пскова. Москва – Ленинград 1949*
- ИМК* *Институт исследований материальной культуры*
- IRAİK* *Известия Русского археологического института в Константинополе*
- JÖB* *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik*
- KhSb* *Херсонесский сборник*

- LbG* *Lexikon zur byzantinischen Gräzität besonders des 9.-12. Jahrhunderts*, ed. E. Trapp. Vienna 1994–2011
- LSA* Лихачёв Н. П. *Сфрагистический альбом* (manuscript at the Institute for the History of Material Culture archive: RA ИМК РАН, f. 35, op. 2, d. 444)
- MAIET* *Материалы по археологии, истории и этнографии Таврии*
- MEFRM* *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Moyen âge*
- MIA* *Материалы и исследования по археологии СССР*
- NE* *Нумизматика и эпиграфика*
- ODAZUM* *Описание документов архива западнорусских униатских митрополитов 1 (1470–1700)*. Санкт-Петербург 1897
- ODB* *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium 1–3*, ed. A. Kazhdan. New York – Oxford 1991
- PBA* *Приноси към българската археология*
- PG* *Patrologiæ cursus completus. Series græca*
- PIFK* *Проблемы истории, филологии, культуры*
- PLRE 3* Martindale J. R. *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire 3*. Cambridge 1992
- PmbZ* *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit*. Berlin – New York 1999–2013
- PSRL* Полное собрание русских летописей
- PVL* *Повесть временных лет*, ред. Д. С. Лихачёв. Москва – Ленинград 1950
- REB* *Revue des études byzantines*
- RIB* *Русская историческая библиотека*
- RGADA* Российский государственный архив древних актов
- RSBN* *Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici*
- SA* *Советская археология*
- SBS* *Studies in Byzantine Sigillography*
- SGE* *Сообщения государственного Эрмитажа*
- SGGD* *Собрание Государственных грамот и договоров, хранящихся в государственной коллегии иностранных дел 1–3*. Москва 1813–1828
- SSb* *Сугдейский сборник*
- TM* *Travaux et mémoires*
- TsT* *Царский Титулярник 1–2*, ред. Ю. М. Эскин. Москва 2007
- VV* *Византийский временник*
- ZRAO* *Записки Русского археологического общества*
- ZRVI* *Зборник Радова Византолошког института*

## Translation and Transliteration

This book discusses the seals reflecting one thousand years and belonging to different cultures, described by authors of different academic traditions, thus making the translation a complicated task. Our intention was consistency — although it is hardly possible to be consistent across all of the cases and despite these conditions. We tried to follow the *Chicago Style* as the guideline. As for the transliteration (Romanization), historical names of persons and places are given in the forms provided by the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* whenever possible. For modern names and toponyms of Bulgarian, Greek, Moldavian, Russian, or Ukrainian origin we applied the transliteration style of the Library of Congress designed for appropriate languages, except for those having traditional spelling or if we definitely know that the modern researcher prefers an alternative spelling of his / her name. Place names are transliterated according to Ukrainian system if they are located in modern Ukrainian territory, or Russian if they are in contemporary Russia, and so on. The names of administrative units are according to English form of appropriate place name rather than to Slavonic adjective derived from it (i. e. Kyiv *oblast*’, not Kyivs’ka). Words that are absent in English are *italicized*.