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### **Late Roman and early Byzantine seals from Cherson and its Environs**

The sigillographic evidence discovered in Cherson include traditional double-sided lead seals from the early Byzantine period (sixth and seventh centuries) and their predecessors from the fourth and fifth centuries, i. e. seals of typical appearance (cone or hemisphere) bearing an image on one side only. Some of them had already been introduced into the scholarly circulation (Sokolova 1991: 206, no. 12; Alekseienko 2010: 366–367, no. 1), but most of these finds are presented here for the first time. This lecture analyses seals from the National Preserve of Tauric Chersonesos (Sevastopol, Ukraine), State Hermitage Museum (Saint Petersburg, Russia), and materials from private collections (Sevastopol and Moscow). All these finds were discovered in different years both in the territory of Cherson and in its environs.

The new finds include seals bearing varied images, however traditional for this cluster of monuments, particularly of one or two emperors, portraits of private individuals, figures of pagan deities, allegorical scenes, monograms, and various species of beasts and plants. Now, we know ten cone-shaped and two double-sided seals capable of division into three groups according to the type of impression and appearance.

The first group includes artefacts with clear impressions of regular circular form, usually bearing an image within a linear or pearl border, well impressed, with visible fine details. This group primarily consists of seals with portraits of administrators (emperors) that probably had an official documental status. Besides, it possibly incorporates seals with portraits of other individuals, perhaps high-ranked, sometimes showing the owner's name (ΘEOCEBIOX), and seals with monograms (Christogram, ΦBACCOC).

The second group is the seals showing impressions of circular or oval contours. The overwhelming majority of their images are blurred; therefore, their identification is sometimes a problem. In comparison with the first group, here the impression is more depressed, with no border, and often off-centre. As a rule, the images are allegorical, showing plants (palm, pomegranate flower?), beasts (lion), and mythological scenes (Leda and the swan). A hypothesis states that prototypes or seal-matrices of these impressions were gemstones or metal rings with carved images on their panels. By all appearances, this type of seals was used by private individuals. Other specificities concern the backside design of such seals. Most of them have the truncated-cone-shaped backside and a canal for a cord that usually goes vertically in relation to the obverse image. However, there are cases with horizontal position of the cord. Regarding the images on late antique and early Byzantine lead seals from Chersonesos, there are parallels among gemstones, *tesserae*, and tokens from the same period.

Especially interesting for the history of Chersonesos are the finds in our third group, i. e. the earliest seals with images on both sides. These finds include two seals showing two fifth-century emperors interpreted by scholars as emperor Theodosius I's sons Arcadius and Honorius (Sokolova 2007: 19, no. 1) or co-emperors Theodosius II and Valentinian III (Seibt 1978: 51–52, no. 1). Reverse image on the seal is remarkable, too. Similar picture of Nike-Victory holding wreathes in hands is well-known on Byzantine seals with names of emperors Zeno (474–491), Anastasius I (491–518), Justinian I (527–565), and Justin II (565–578). Perhaps Byzantine sigillography inherited its origins from numismatics of the late Roman period. The image of Victory holding a wreath and a globe is well-known on gold *tremises* from Arcadius and Honorius to Zeno. The seals of Chersonesos probably present the earliest appearance of this sigillographic type on fifth-century late Roman seals and its wide distribution on Byzantine *molybdoboulloi* as long as the last quarter of the sixth century when it was replaced by an image of the Mother of God.

Therefore, early lead seals from Chersonesos-Cherson and its environs under study

uncover that the practice of applying well-known Byzantine *molybdoboulloi* for the needs of imperial political-administrative and trading-economical communication was deeply rooted there, originating from the fourth and fifth century and bearing typical elements of classical late Roman tradition in use of motifs and topics typical of the period.

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