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Reconstructing the Byzantine frontier on the Balkans (late 8th – 10th century)

The exact date of the creation of the themata Makedonia, Mesopotamia, Strymon, and Thessaloniki cannot be discovered with the help of the rare piece of information contained in written sources. But it is clear that these new administrative structures were built up in one and the same period in order to strengthen the Empire against the growing Bulgarian threat in the last two decennia of the 8th century. Integrating the written sources into the sigillographic data we can assume that the thema Makedonia was established in the late 8th century (*terminus ante quem* 789), the thema Strymon around 800, the thema Thessaloniki after 797 (the term of the last known Eparchos of Thessaloniki), and the thema Mesopotamia also around 800 (the first securely dated seal stems from the year 811/812).

The earliest Strategos of Thessaloniki is documented by a seal in Vienna from the late 8th/beginning of the 9th c., so the thema was created either during the reign of the empress Eirene (797-802) or at the beginning of the regency of Nikephoros I (802). A special problem is the thema of Neos Strymon, only mentioned in the Taktikon Escorial (971-975), and existing apparently only for a short period. Its creation is the result of the reconquest of territories by the Byzantine army in the upper Strymon region (beginning at the Rupel-pass and north of it); the old thema Strymon extended at this time south of the Rupel-pass up to the Aegaeis. But the region around the Rupel-pass had already been secured under Romanos Lakapenos (920-944) within the existing thema Strymon by creating a special kleisura Strymon under the command of a kleisuraches, probably after the Bulgars had crossed the pass, plundering the Strymon region and advancing as far as Nikopolis in Epirus. After Ioannes Tzimiskes had reconquered Bulgarian territories this kleisura became the nucleus of the newly established thema Neos Strymon.