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# Islamicising Motifs in Byzantine Lead Seals: Exoticising Style and the Expression of Identity

Alicia Walker\*

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*Among a relatively small number of ninth- to eleventh-century Byzantine lead seals with animal motifs, scholars have long recognised that some show Islamicising stylistic and iconographic features. Building from a recently completed catalogue of the 140 middle Byzantine (c. 843–1204) lead seals decorated with animal devices in the collections of Dumbarton Oaks and the Harvard University Art Museums, this article establishes criteria for distinguishing Islamicising animal seals and offers some possible explanations for why the owners of these seals chose to represent themselves via these motifs. It is proposed that exotic stylistic and iconographic attributes helped express the seal owners' social identities and aspirations.*

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In the Byzantine world, seals were used to validate objects, including letters, documents and containers of goods. Seal impressions were made in wax, clay or, in the case of imperial seals, silver or gold; but the vast majority of seal impressions preserved today were made in lead. A small

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**Acknowledgements:** The present study highlights some preliminary conclusions from an unpublished catalogue of middle Byzantine lead seals with animal devices in the collections of Dumbarton Oaks (DO) and the Harvard University Art Museums (HUAM) that I recently completed and is informed by comparative study of middle Byzantine exoticising lead seals in other collections. I thank John Nesbitt for his support and guidance of this project. Amanda Luyster and Cecily Hilsdale commented on earlier drafts of this article, and I am grateful to them for their insightful observations and suggestions.

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disk of this metal, usually measuring two to three centimetres in diameter, was cast in a mould. The resulting ‘blank’ was fitted with a channel running through the centre. A cord was wrapped around a folded letter, tied to the bottom of a document or affixed to a package of goods, and threaded through the channel of the blank seal. The blank was then pressed with a *boulloterion* (a device resembling a pair of pliers with clamps engraved with an image and/or inscription), which imprinted designs on either side of the seal and secured it to the string.<sup>1</sup> The resulting impressions commonly included the name, title and/or office of the owner, identifying the social echelon from which the object originated. A seal was the embodiment of its owner’s identity and authority and guaranteed the integrity of documents and objects put into circulation. Although lead seals are humble things, their owners were usually members of the elite: aristocrats, church officials or civil servants. A comparatively small number of lead seals belonging to individuals of lower social echelons are also preserved, including those of merchants, butchers and candle makers.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to inscriptions, seals commonly display iconographic motifs ranging from simple crosses or rosettes to elaborate portraits of the saints or the Virgin Mary. In some instances, particularly with seals belonging to members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the iconography was informed by an individual’s office.<sup>3</sup> But official regulation of seal imagery does not seem to have been the norm, nor does it apply to the laity or even the lower ranking members of the church.<sup>4</sup> For the majority of Byzantine seal owners, the choice of decoration was a matter of personal preference, and

<sup>1</sup> On the mechanics of Byzantine seals, see Oikonomides, *Byzantine Lead Seals*: 3–6.

<sup>2</sup> It is possible that non-elite seal owners were particularly successful in their trades, perhaps becoming leaders in their communities as a result. For seals that record professions, see Zacos, *Byzantine Lead Seals*.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Cotsonis, ‘The Virgin and Justinian on Seals of the Ekklesiekdikoi of Hagia Sophia’. Also see Cheynet and Morriçon, ‘Texte et image sur les sceaux byzantins’: 16, 21–22.

<sup>4</sup> In limited examples, social standing, civic affiliation, homonymity or profession may have informed the choice of seal design. For example, seals from cities that were homes to popular cult sites or were affiliated with a specific patron saint sometimes demonstrate a preference for that holy person, and some seal owners may have selected eponymous saints or saints of particular significance to their families. Nonetheless, constant deviations from larger patterns indicate that personal choice was an enduring and significant factor. Cotsonis, ‘Onomastics, Gender, Office and Images on Byzantine Lead Seals’; Cheynet and Morriçon, ‘Texte et image sur les sceaux byzantins’: 11–2, 15–7, 28–31.

in selecting a particular motif, the seal owner chose to associate himself or herself with that image.<sup>5</sup>

A comparatively small number of middle Byzantine (c. 843–1204) lead seals depict images of animals, both real and fantastic, as the primary iconographic element.<sup>6</sup> These animal devices came into vogue in the tenth century, with the trend tapering off by the middle of the eleventh century. Motifs on some middle Byzantine animal seals employ relatively naturalistic styles, and scholars suggest that they emulate Greco-Roman models, specifically antique coins and engraved gems.<sup>7</sup> But imagery on other middle Byzantine seals shows more abstract, ornamental features that scholars associate with the stylistic vocabulary of medieval Islamic art.<sup>8</sup> In general, these middle Byzantine ‘Islamicising’ seals are rendered in a linear, schematic fashion, usually with the animal in profile or in a splayed and unnaturally symmetrical, frontal pose; some are characterised by abstract, ornamental features, including geometric elaborations that detract from the natural form of the animals’ bodies.<sup>9</sup> Especially common are bands of beading on an animal’s wings or shoulders, or a tear drop motif on an animal’s haunches.

For instance, griffins in middle Byzantine seals—such as the tenth-century seal of one John, who held the rank of imperial *protospatharios*

<sup>5</sup> The fact that people tended to keep the same seal design throughout their lives, even when they replaced a *boulloterion*, suggests that the iconography of a seal was closely associated with personal identity. Oikonomides, ‘The Usual Lead Seal’; Cheynet and Morrisson, ‘Texte et image sur les sceaux byzantins’: 16–8, with notable exceptions, 18–20, 23–25.

<sup>6</sup> A comprehensive survey of animal devices in middle Byzantine lead seals is yet to be undertaken. Several scholars have, however, treated this material as a sub-topic of larger studies on sigillographic iconography or in relation to the holdings of specific collections. See especially, Schlumberger, *Sigillographie de l’empire byzantine*: 26–29; Zacos, *Byzantine Lead Seals*, vol. 2: 409–21; Walker, ‘Exotic Elements in Middle Byzantine Secular Art’: 46–125; Stepanenko, ‘Sasanidskie Obrazi’.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Oikonomides, *Byzantine Lead Seals*: 15–16; Seibt and Zarnitz, *Das byzantinische Bleisiegel als Kunstwerk*: 169.

<sup>8</sup> Cheynet and Morrisson, ‘Texte et image sur les sceaux byzantins’: 14; Galavaris, ‘Seals of the Byzantine Empire’; Shandrovskaia, ‘Pechati Epi Ton Barbaron’; Stepanenko, ‘Sasanidskie Obrazi’.

<sup>9</sup> In lieu of ‘Islamicate’, I employ ‘Islamicising’ to refer to objects that were not produced in the Islamic world or for Islamic users, but that nonetheless appropriate stylistic and iconographic features of Islamic artistic models. In his original formulation of ‘Islamicate’, Marshall Hodgson defines the term as ‘a culture, centered on a lettered tradition, which has been historically distinctive of Islamdom the *society*, and which has been naturally

(Figure 1)—are often rendered in a stylised fashion that is reminiscent of medieval Islamic and Byzantine Islamicising objects in a variety of media.<sup>10</sup> In other instances, an iconographic attribute or a particular type of fantastic animal associates the device with an Islamic model. The *senmurv*—depicted, for example, in a tenth-century seal belonging to a merchant named John (Figure 2)—is a composite, mythological beast formed from the head of an eagle, the fore-body of a lion and the tail of a peacock.<sup>11</sup> In Byzantine lore, the *senmurv* was said to have originated

**Figure 1**

Seal impression, Byzantine, tenth century, lead, diam. 16 mm. University of Birmingham, Barber Institute of Fine Arts: 197B



shared in by both Muslims and non-Muslims who participate at all fully in the society of Islamdom' (italics in original), and he subsequently reiterates the possibility that 'Islamicate' incorporated non-Muslim people and presumably things: "Islamicate" would refer not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and *even when found among non-Muslims*' (italics added). Hodgson, "Islamdom", "Islamicate", in Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*: 57–60 at 58 and 59. It is my opinion, however, that the term 'Islamicate' is most effective when limited to non-Muslim agents who were still members of 'Islamdom', for example, Christians or Jews living under Muslim dominion. In contrast, 'Islamicising' animal motifs in middle Byzantine lead seals were produced outside of Islamic political or cultural hegemony and reflect distinctly Byzantine interests and meanings. The term 'Islamicising' acknowledges that these motifs operated at a remove from their Islamic source and also emphasises that these stylistic and iconographic elements were actively appropriated by Byzantine users to serve their own purposes.

<sup>10</sup> Barber Institute, acc. no. 197B; Dunn, *A Handlist of the Byzantine Lead Seals and Tokens*: 4, no. 8. On the griffin in Byzantine and Islamic art, see Bouras, *The Griffin through the Ages*: 52–55; Otto-Dorn, 'The Griffin–Sphinx Ensemble'.

<sup>11</sup> Harvard University Art Museums (HUAM) acc. no. 1059.

Figure 2

Seal impression, Byzantine, tenth century, lead, diam. 23 mm. Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum



in Persia. Appearing commonly in the material and visual culture of the late antique Sasanian dynasty (224–651), the *senmurv* was later adopted in medieval Islamic works of art and architecture dating to the same period as the middle Byzantine lead seals decorated with animal devices.<sup>12</sup> Additional evidence for a connection between middle Byzantine seals and Islamic art is found in the beaded, circular borders that frame many animals and that represent a decorative device common in Islamic textiles, metalwork, stucco and wall painting, as well as in Sasanian, Chinese and Transcaucasian works of art.<sup>13</sup> Concentric, ornately beaded borders did not feature prominently in Byzantine seals prior to the late ninth century and are recognised as typical features of late ninth- and tenth-century examples.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Medieval Islamic animal motifs drew in part from the iconographic and stylistic repertoire of late antique Sasanian art. Animal devices were common in Sasanian seals and were the likely models for early Islamic seals, which employed animal motifs until at least the eighth century. Animal motifs are not attested, however, in Islamic seals in the ninth century or later, a fact which argues against seeing seals as the medium through which Islamicising animal motifs would have reached Byzantium in the late ninth and subsequent centuries. Regarding medieval Islamic seals, see Amitai-Preiss, 'Faunal Iconography on Islamic Seals'; Soucek, 'Early Islamic Seals': 245–52. For examples of the *senmurv* in Sasanian and medieval Islamic art, see Harper, 'The Senmurv'.

<sup>13</sup> Riboud, 'A Newly Excavated Caftan from the Northern Caucasus'; Meister, 'The Pearl Roundel in Chinese Textile Design'.

<sup>14</sup> Oikonomides, *A Collection of Dated Byzantine Lead Seals*: 155.

Islamicising motifs are also attested in middle Byzantine art more broadly, raising the possibility that middle Byzantine objects in other media—especially silk textiles and precious metalwork—likewise served as cross-cultural conduits for middle Byzantine seal imagery.<sup>15</sup> More often than not, however, exoticising forms in other media cannot be definitively associated with a particular patron because the objects on which they appear lack any conclusive indication of their owners' identities. For this reason, the evidence of Islamicising seals—which are frequently inscribed with the names, titles, offices and/or professions of their owners—informs the study of other exoticising works of middle Byzantine art by socially contextualising the taste for Islamicising motifs and styles. Furthermore, many exoticising luxury objects in other media have insecure chronologies. In contrast, there exists a developed—and still developing—set of criteria for dating lead seals, which in some instances can be conclusively verified by identifying the specific person who owned a given seal.

Previous scholars have recognised the existence of Islamicising imagery in animal seals, but few have attempted to explain the phenomenon in detail.<sup>16</sup> Taking the 140 animal seals in the Dumbarton Oaks (DO) and Harvard University Art Museums (HUAM) collections as a case study,

<sup>15</sup> See Parani, 'Intercultural Exchange in the Field of Material Culture in the Eastern Mediterranean': 349–71, esp. 355; Jacoby, 'Silk Economics and Cross-cultural Artistic Interaction'. The concentration of animal seals with Islamicising features in the tenth to early eleventh century fits well with André Grabar's characterisation of this period as one of artistic 'eclecticism', when the Byzantine court was particularly open to foreign models. Grabar did not cite lead seals in his discussion, however, focusing instead on architectural decoration and luxury portable arts, including enamels, textiles and metalwork, which are notoriously difficult to date. The comparatively secure chronology provided by lead seals offers significant support for Grabar's association of an 'orientalising' trend with the tenth to eleventh century. When considered in tandem with Islamicising motifs in other media of Byzantine art—such as textiles, manuscript illumination, ceramics and sculpture—seals represent a noteworthy current in the aesthetic preferences of elite members of middle Byzantine society. Grabar, 'Le succès des arts orientaux à la cour byzantine sous les Macédoniens'. Also see Hoffman, 'Pathways of Portability' and Walker, 'Exotic Elements in Middle Byzantine Secular Art'.

<sup>16</sup> See n. 6 above. When ventured, explanations are typically limited to individuals holding specific offices, especially the *epi ton barbaron*, who was responsible for managing foreign visitors to the court. For example, see Shandrovskaia, 'Pechati Epi Ton Barbaron'. I agree with earlier scholars who have seen animal imagery—particularly imagery of combatant animals—as particularly well suited to the demands of this office, but believe that different reasons might explain other instances of Islamicising animal imagery in middle Byzantine seals.



this article endeavours to account for how the exoticising character of middle Byzantine lead seals relates to the identities of the people who commissioned and used them. The discussion assumes that people's stylistic and iconographic choices are informed by and therefore express their identities, whether personal, geographic, professional, civic or ethnic.<sup>17</sup> I follow anthropological interpretations that see the diffusion of styles across geographic and cultural divides as evidence of the interaction of distinct groups, whose identities were defined in part by the social and physical boundaries that separated them, but also by the movement across and blurring of these distinctions.<sup>18</sup> Viewing the presence of Islamicising stylistic features in middle Byzantine lead seals as evidence of interactions among Byzantine and Islamic peoples during this period, I argue that this intercultural stylistic emulation was motivated by the interests and needs of the Byzantine seal owners, who chose to employ foreign motifs to convey particular aspects of their personal and/or group identities.<sup>19</sup>

The factor of personal 'taste' in the selection of seal decoration has caused some scholars to perceive seal iconography as falling within an inscrutable domain of individual aesthetic predilection. Yet under close scrutiny there emerge several separate trends that suggest a range of reasons for the selection of Islamicising styles and iconographies. While there is no single explanation for all Islamicising seals, most show two or more of these trends. Furthermore, some of these trends point to the possibility that stylistic and iconographic choices were tactical in the

<sup>17</sup> On this point, see especially Wiessner, 'Style and Social Information in Kalahari San Projectile Points'; with subsequent debate in Sackett, 'Style and Ethnicity in the Kalahari'; Wiessner, 'Style or Isochrestic Variation?'; *ibid.*, 'Reconsidering the Behavioral Basis of Style'. Also see Conkey and Hastorf (eds), *The Uses of Style in Archaeology*.

<sup>18</sup> Regarding the diffusion of styles as evidence of cross-cultural or cross-regional interaction and the methodological challenges inherent in the study of such phenomena, see Plog, 'Analysis of Style in Artifacts': 126–28, 137–39; Wiessner, 'Style or Isochrestic Variation?': 162; Walker, 'Patterns of Flight': 202–03.

<sup>19</sup> As Wiessner posits, style emerges from 'dynamic comparison of artifacts and corresponding social attributes of their makers. Stylistic outcomes project positive images of identity to others in order to obtain social recognition [...] [S]tylistic behavior presents information about similarities and differences that can help reproduce, alter, disrupt, or create social relationships'. Wiessner, 'Style or Isochrestic Variation?': 161. The theme of identity in medieval and ancient studies is experiencing a current surge in interest. See Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium*; Page, *Being Byzantine*; Hales and Hodos (eds), *Material Culture and Social Identities in the Ancient World*.

sense that the motifs were intended to convey the owners' social status and authority in a manner that was particularly attuned to their offices, court ranks or occupations and the experiences and responsibilities that they entailed.

My exploration of the personal tastes that seals express has been shaped in part by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of 'distinction': his understanding of how people convey social status consciously and subconsciously through aesthetic choice.<sup>20</sup> He sees the expression of 'taste' as an act that is both dictated and constrained by an individual's social position, but posits that it is nevertheless possible to exercise aesthetic expression in a strategic manner so as to stake a claim to membership in a particular social echelon. In relation to Byzantine lead seals, I find especially compelling Bourdieu's argument that the resulting 'distinctions' between individuals play out across dynamic 'social fields' of competitive practice.

Bourdieu offers a useful model for thinking about how seal iconography may have operated in the highly stratified hierarchies of the ninth- to eleventh-century Byzantine court, administration and economy. The Byzantine social world was clearly articulated, and individuals were made emphatically aware of their positions within it. At the same time, middle Byzantine society was potentially meritocratic, offering the possibility of social mobility through education and professional advancement.<sup>21</sup> In response to the scholarly tendency to view the factor of 'personal choice' in the selection of middle Byzantine lead seal imagery as imposing an interpretive dead end, Bourdieu offers a way of understanding 'aesthetic preference' as neither innocent nor inscrutable but rather as the legible product of an individual's location in, and movement through, complex fields of social competition in which acts of 'distinction' can be understood as strategic acts and highly individual processes.

In the remainder of this article, I first estimate the proportion of these Islamicising animal seals in relation to overall Byzantine seal production in order to gauge the extent of the phenomenon. Localising the interest in exotic iconographic and stylistic elements among specific geographic regions of the empire, as well as among particular dignities and offices of the middle Byzantine court and administration, I then offer some

<sup>20</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

<sup>21</sup> On these characteristics of the Byzantine court, see Magdalino, 'Court Society and Aristocracy'; Kazhdan and McCormick, 'The Social World of the Byzantine Court'.

suggestions regarding why members of these groups would have preferred exoticising motifs. I aim to demonstrate how Byzantine Islamicising seals relate to larger questions of the ways in which medieval visual culture operated in a social field to convey identity and to distinguish individuals through their stylistic and iconographic choices.

### Chronological, Social and Geographic Distributions of Middle Byzantine Exoticising Lead Seals

Lead seals have been recovered in large numbers throughout the former Byzantine Empire; more than 70,000 are held in European and North American collections.<sup>22</sup> They are rarely found during archaeological excavations; this is most likely because they were constantly melted during the medieval era in order to recycle the lead.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, sufficient numbers of seals are held in museums and private collections to support statistical analysis, which can yield some estimate of the relative popularity of different seal types at specific times and among particular social groups. For example, of the approximately 17,000 lead seal impressions in DO and HUAM, only 140, representing 121 matrices (c. 0.8 per cent of the total collections), date to the middle Byzantine period and depict animal devices.<sup>24</sup> Of this group, 70 seal impressions (c. 50 per cent of middle Byzantine animal seals in the collections; c. 0.4 per cent of the total collections) can be categorised as exoticising on the basis of their stylistic and/or iconographic attributes.<sup>25</sup> These statistics are, however, potentially misleading because seals with animal motifs are not distributed evenly across the whole of Byzantine history: they are instead concentrated in the middle Byzantine period.

<sup>22</sup> Cheynet and Morrisson, 'Lieux de trouvaille et circulation des sceaux': 106.

<sup>23</sup> Important exceptions include seals recovered from excavations at Corinth and Preslav. Davidson, *The Minor Objects*; Ćordanov, *Pečatite ot strategijata v Preslav (971–1088)*.

<sup>24</sup> A seal 'impression' is a physical object (in this case, a lead blank) pressed with the impression of a seal 'matrix' (the tool used to make the impression), known in the Byzantine world as a *boulloterion*. While each matrix is unique, a single matrix produced multiple impressions. Although very few Byzantine *boulloteria* are preserved today, these matrices can be reconstructed from surviving impressions. Regarding criteria for dating Byzantine lead seals, see Oikonomides, *A Collection of Dated Byzantine Lead Seals*.

<sup>25</sup> This is a conservative count. Additional seals depict animals that are usually rendered in an Islamicising manner, but which are too poorly preserved to allow for their stylistic details to be read.

A more accurate indication of the popularity of Islamicising animal motifs would therefore measure their presence in relation to middle Byzantine seals only: indeed, this calculation could be further limited to seals of the tenth century because c. 70 per cent of the 140 middle Byzantine lead seals depicting animal devices in the DO and HUAM collections dates to this period.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, seal production in the tenth century was marked by unusual variety and individuality of designs; seals with geometric decorations, elaborate crosses, female and male saints and other diverse motifs demonstrate an unprecedented surge in popularity at this time.<sup>27</sup> It is, however, currently impossible to restrict a survey in this way because the collections have not yet been fully published. Nonetheless, from this perspective, the numbers of Islamicising animal seals is more noteworthy than it first appears, because other categories of imagery are likewise attested in comparatively small numbers overall, but still constitute statistically significant bodies of material within the tenth century. The intensified diversity and specialisation of seal decoration at this time also suggests an increased individualisation of iconography, which may indicate that personal identity was closely affiliated with sigillographic iconography.

While it might be argued that the presence of Islamicising features in various media of middle Byzantine art indicates that foreign styles and iconography were absorbed into the middle Byzantine visual vocabulary and no longer recognised as ‘other’, their comparative rarity within the larger corpus of lead seals and the restricted period during which they are found suggest that Islamicising motifs, while popular among some groups and individuals, never dominated the mainstream. Their relative scarcity implies that they continued to be seen, on some level, as rare and exotic, and that people who chose to employ such motifs did so with these associations in mind. Furthermore, the clear concentration of Islamicising seals in the tenth century argues that they were a response to the socio-historical circumstances of that era rather than a lingering echo of earlier Byzantine–Sasanian artistic interactions or a passive reflection of a generic, intercultural visual language of luxury and prestige.

<sup>26</sup> The remaining middle Byzantine animal seals in the DO and HUAM collections are clustered in the late ninth century (c. 2 per cent) and first half of the eleventh century (c. 28 per cent).

<sup>27</sup> Cheynet and Morriison, ‘Texte et image sur les sceaux byzantins’: 13–14.

Among the 70 middle Byzantine animal seals in the DO and HUAM collections that record a title, 61 (c. 87 per cent) place the owner in the middle to low ranks of the court. The highest grade attested is *patrikios* (5 seals, c. 7 per cent), which was considered the lowest of the high court ranks and was positioned seventh out of the 19 orders documented in the *Kletorologion*, a late ninth-century (899) court protocol book listing dignities and offices. The document was produced under the *protospatharios* and *atriklines* Philotheos, whose duties entailed regulating the seating arrangements at imperial banquets.<sup>28</sup> The most common title among the 70 seals is *protospatharios*, which was the first of the lower ranks. Listed as the eighth out of 19 dignities in the *Kletorologion*, it is positioned immediately after *patrikios*. Twenty-eight of the 70 seals (c. 40 per cent) give the owner's title as *protospatharios*. The next most common dignity in the group is *spatharios*, found on 13 seals (c. 19 per cent). At eleventh out of 19 grades, *spatharios* was considered of modest standing. The remaining seals belonged to members of the lowest ranks of the court, including *spartharokandidatos* (10 out of 19).<sup>29</sup> Not a single seal belonged to a member of the imperial family or the court echelons populated by their closest associates.

Another significant aspect of the middle Byzantine animal seals in the DO and HUAM collections is geographic affiliation. Among the 25 seals of the group that include geographic designations, 9 are affiliated with the western regions and 16 with the eastern regions of the empire.<sup>30</sup> Yet all except one of the 25 seals is associated with a *theme* (a Byzantine administrative unit) or city located along a coastal zone, places where

<sup>28</sup> Oikonomides, *Les listes de préséance*: 88–99; Bury, *The Imperial Administrative System*: esp. 22, 26–28.

<sup>29</sup> The order of dignities cited here are those of the 'bearded' (i.e., non-eunuch) courtiers. Eunuchs had a separate order of eight dignities, which included two of the same titles: *patrikios* and *protospatharios*. Although additional research is required to determine how many middle Byzantine seals depicting Islamicising animal devices were owned by eunuchs, it is certain that some in the group were. Titles that appear on Islamicising animal seals which belonged—or possibly belonged—to eunuchs include: *patrikios* (first of 8 ranks); *praipositos* (second of 8); *protospatharios* (third of 8); *primikerios* (fourth of 8); *ostiaros* (fifth of 8); *spatharokoubikouarios* (sixth of 8); and *koubikouarios* (seventh of 8). Oikonomides, *Les listes de préséance*: 124–35, esp. 124–9; Bury, *The Imperial Administrative System*: 121–24.

<sup>30</sup> Here 'western' is defined as all territories on the European continent and 'eastern' as all territories on the Asian continent.

people would have come in contact with a broad range of individuals from other cultures as a result of connections across medieval waterways. Furthermore, although only 10 of these provincial seals show Islamicising motifs, all 10 are associated with eastern themes and cities.<sup>31</sup> Offices among this group include *strategos* (a military governor with regional economic, judiciary and diplomatic responsibilities) and *kommerkiarios* (a customs official responsible for collecting trade tariffs on goods circulating through a particular port or geographic area).<sup>32</sup> It is possible that these individuals selected motifs that they anticipated would communicate clearly with foreign colleagues and customers by means of a shared visual language of power and wealth that evoked the stylistic and iconographic vocabulary of luxury objects. In addition, two Islamicising seals in the DO and HUAM collections give the owners' occupation as *pragmateutes* (merchant), as well as the owners' first name. Although there is no indication of where they were trading, their clientele may have included people from different cultures with whom they could have best communicated via a visual language that expressed a common—or at least neutral—identity.<sup>33</sup>

### Islamicising Motifs in Middle Byzantine Visual Culture: Court, Commerce and the Spoils of War

Islamicising motifs on Byzantine lead seals can be categorised into two broad groups. In some instances, the motifs are attested in small numbers—sometimes as few as one or two examples—suggesting that their owners aimed for greater 'distinction' by using unusual motifs. In other instances, Islamicising types are preserved in higher numbers and among individuals of relatively varied social origin, indicating that these people may have conformed to broader aesthetic trends and assumed exotic imagery that was already prevalent within middle Byzantine visual

<sup>31</sup> They are Abydos: DO acc. nos. 55.1.4515 and 58.106.3580; Optimatoi: DO acc. no. 58.106.3975; Anatolikon: HUAM acc. no. 1904/2861 (the seal is in two parts, which are inventoried separately); Kibbyraiotai: HUAM acc. no. 2580; Korykos: DO acc. nos. 58.106.4484 and 58.106.5274; Armeniakoi: HUAM acc. no. 3292; Chaldia: DO acc. nos. 58.106.1843 and 58.106.3407.

<sup>32</sup> For the *kommerkiarioi*: DO acc. nos. 55.1.4515, 58.106.1843, 58.106.3407 and 58.106.3580. For the *strategoi*: HUAM acc. nos. 1904/2861 (the seal is in two parts, which are inventoried separately) and 3292.

<sup>33</sup> HUAM acc. no. 1059 and DO acc. no. 77.34.02.

culture. In both cases, the seal owners' aesthetic choices can be understood as gestures that were neither purely decorative nor socially innocent, but instead expressive of their identities and ambitions.

A key example of the more commonly employed Islamicising iconography is the peacock, particularly the frontally positioned peacock with spread wings. Appearing in 29 (or 21 per cent) of the 140 animal seals in the DO and HUAM collections, it is the most common motif in the corpus.<sup>34</sup> It is distinguished by its flat form and the bands of beading and/or rosettes on the wings, as in the eleventh-century seal of one Constantine, who held the middle level court rank of *protospatharios* (Figure 3), and was also a *topoteretes* (lieutenant) of the imperial fleet.<sup>35</sup> Similar characteristics are found in peacock motifs executed in marble at the tenth-century private monastery church of Constantine Lips in Constantinople (Figure 4) and in middle Byzantine ceramic tiles originating from the same city or its environs (Figure 5).<sup>36</sup> Ceramic architectural tile was not attested in

**Figure 3**

Seal impression, Byzantine, eleventh century, lead, diam. 24 mm.  
Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks Collection



<sup>34</sup> For discussion of peacock motifs in Byzantine monumental and portable art, see Gerstel and Lauffenburger (eds), *A Lost Art Rediscovered*: 56–57, 119–22, 258–9, 281.

<sup>35</sup> DO acc. no. 55.1.4484.

<sup>36</sup> For the Lips Monastery, see Grabar, *Sculptures byzantines de Constantinople (IVe–Xe siècle)*: 100–22; Macridy, Megaw, Mango and Hawkins, ‘The Monastery of Lips (Fenari Isa Camii) at Istanbul’: 264, Figure 41. For ceramic architectural tiles depicting peacocks, see Sharon Gerstel, ‘Ceramic Icons from Medieval Constantinople’, in Gerstel and Lauffenburger, *A Lost Art Rediscovered*: 42–65 at 56–57, figs 21 and 258–9, cat. nos. A.29 and A.30; and 281, cat. no. B.2.

**Figure 4**

Sculpture depicting a peacock from the Monastery of Constantine Lips, Byzantine (Constantinople), tenth century, marble



Constantinople prior to the ninth century, and some scholars argue that this material shows formal parallels with Islamic works of art, specifically Fatimid pottery and textiles.<sup>37</sup> It is possible that the frontal peacock motif was transmitted to Byzantium via these or other media and eventually adapted to seal decoration.

Yet these iconographic parallels alone do not explain the attraction of Islamicising motifs for seal owners. To understand this, we must look at the social and historical landscape of the middle Byzantine court. In the case of the architectural decoration at the monastery of Constantine Lips, for example, the founder's interaction with foreign cultures may have contributed to the selection of exotic motifs for the decorative programme of his foundation, a possibility that sheds light on how similar choices could have been made in the design of seals (see Figure 4).<sup>38</sup> The

<sup>37</sup> Cutler, 'Tiles and Tribulations': 161–67; *ibid*, 'The Parallel Universes of Arab and Byzantine Art': 638–48.

<sup>38</sup> For the most recent discussion of the monastery, see Marinis, 'The Monastery tou Libos': esp. 216–26.



Figure 5

Polychrome tile depicting a peacock from an iconostasis, Byzantine, tenth century, ceramic, h. ca. 33 cm, w. ca. 30 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre



church was not an overtly public building; it served—primarily, if not exclusively—the inhabitants and founder of the monastery. Therefore, its decorative programme, much like that of the seals, can be understood to express the preferences of its patron.<sup>39</sup> Constantine Lips held the rank of *patrikios* and the office of captain of the imperial bodyguard. He rose from humble origins to assume important positions at court and in the provinces, serving as an imperial delegate to Armenia, a long-standing client of the Islamic Abbasid dynasty (750–1258), and eventually marrying his daughter to an Armenian nobleman.<sup>40</sup> His familiarity with eastern locales and his family ties with regions closely connected to the Islamic world almost certainly exposed him to foreign artistic models and may have prompted his continuing interest in them. It is reasonable to speculate that the cosmopolitan identity projected by the exoticising iconography of

<sup>39</sup> Mango, 'Ninth- to Eleventh Century Constantinople: The Cultural Context': 10.

<sup>40</sup> Cutler and Kazhdan, 'Lips': 1232–33; Mango, 'Ninth- to Eleventh Century Constantinople': 9.

his church could have constituted part of the social image that Constantine Lips sought to cultivate.

In the case of most lead seals, it is impossible to achieve a similarly fine-grained analysis because we do not know who the individuals named on them were, beyond their association with specific titles and offices or with particular regions of the empire. Still, as noted above and discussed further below, when geographic affiliations and court titles are noted on middle Byzantine Islamicising animal seals, they indicate positions that entailed connections with foreign domains or objects that came from them. As a result of these circumstances, seal owners may have desired to convey an impression of cosmopolitanism similar to that found in the decorative programme of the monastery of Constantine Lips.

Animal motifs—especially of an Islamicising style—came into particular vogue in middle Byzantine textiles, which adorned both the bodies of courtiers and palace spaces.<sup>41</sup> From the tenth-century *Book of Ceremonies*, a text describing pageantry in the palace in Constantinople, we know that silk hangings and garments were an essential part of court rituals. The throne room of the Byzantine imperial palace, for instance, was decorated with textiles on special occasions. When a delegation from the Islamic city of Tarsus was received in 946, the doorways leading from the throne room to different areas of the palace were decorated with silk hangings, including ones decorated with peacocks, eagles, lions and griffins.<sup>42</sup>

Of course, animal motifs also featured prominently in the regalia of the emperor and his court. The most elaborate tunics worn by imperial courtiers were decorated with motifs of lions, eagles and griffins, the same animals that appear frequently on Byzantine seals. A frontispiece from a late eleventh-century imperial manuscript of the homilies of John

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, silk textiles of both Byzantine and Islamic origin: Evans (ed.), *The Glory of Byzantium*: cat. nos. 148 (*senmurv*); 149 (eagles, which resemble the frontal peacocks in Byzantine lead seals); 150 (griffin); 269 (birds and griffins); 270 (eagles, which resemble the frontal peacocks in Byzantine lead seals); and 271 (*senmurv*, elephant, winged horse). The cultural and chronological attributions of these textiles (i.e., Sasanian versus Byzantine versus medieval Islamic) have shifted dramatically over time and in many cases remain controversial today, a phenomenon that speaks to the interrelation of these medieval artistic traditions. On this point, see Jacoby, 'Silk Economics and Cross-cultural Artistic Interaction': esp. 212–13.

<sup>42</sup> Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, *De cerimoniis aulae Byzantinae*: 580–81 (bk. 2; ch. 15).

Chrysostom (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Coislin 79, fol. 2r) depicts the Emperor Nikephoros III Botaneiates enthroned and surrounded by courtiers, one of whom has been given a place of honour on the emperor's right and wears an elaborate tunic decorated with lions in roundels (Figure 6). Tunics were sometimes associated with individuals who held specific offices. Distinguished generals, for example, received tunics decorated with eagles in acknowledgement of their military service.<sup>43</sup> Other officials wore garments adorned with peacocks in conches

**Figure 6**

Frontispiece depicting Nikephoros III Botaneiates enthroned with courtiers, Homilies of John Chrysostom, Byzantine, c. 1071–1081, tempera and gold on vellum, ca. 42 x 31 cm. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France: Ms. Coislin 79, fol. 2r



<sup>43</sup> Regarding silk uniforms appropriate to different ranks of the Byzantine military, see Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, *Three Treatises on Imperial Military Expeditions*: 239–44; Cutler, 'Imagination and Documentation'.

on a purple ground or golden lions.<sup>44</sup> It must be noted, however, that the Byzantines never systematically employed heraldry (a fixed system of symbolic motifs associated with particular individuals and families), as was the convention in the medieval West.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, specific animals do not seem to have been prescribed as the exclusive emblems of particular offices or ranks of the Byzantine court. Still, we may hypothesise that because the more elaborate tunics embellished with complex patterns showing eagles, lions and griffins were worn by members of the court who enjoyed privileged status, these motifs were associated with social and political achievement. Formal parallels between animals depicted in silks and seals indicate that designs in these separate media drew on a common visual vocabulary, which included Islamicising motifs and styles.<sup>46</sup>

Ceremonial textiles may have been the property of the courtiers who wore them, but these garments were probably given to court officials at the time of their investiture and in recognition of their rank. For this reason they retained a direct association with imperial authority and were affirmations of courtly status.<sup>47</sup> The tenth-century Lombardian diplomat to Constantinople, Liudprand of Cremona, recounted the annual distribution of largesse at the Byzantine court during which aristocrats were given garments and bags of money from the emperor. He tells us that the ‘marshal of the palace’ (rector) received four cloaks as well as bags of money so heavy that he had to carry them on his shoulders; the ‘commander in chief of the army’ (*domestikos*) and ‘admiral of the fleet’ (*droungarios* of the *ploimoi*) received a number of cloaks and bags of money, equal to one another and of such great number that they required assistance to drag them away; 24 ‘controllers’ (*magistroi*) each received 24 pounds of gold and two cloaks; and the ‘patricians’ (*patrikioi*) each received 12 pounds of gold and one cloak. Liudprand also notes that following the *patrikioi*, the lower dignitaries—including ‘knights of the sword’ (*spatharioi*) of various ranks and chamberlains (*koubikoularioi*)—received gold ranging from

<sup>44</sup> Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, *Le livre des cérémonies*, vol. 1: 119, ll. 7–9 (bk. 1; ch. 32 [23]); and vol. 1: 169, ll. 18–19 (bk. 1; ch. 44 [35]).

<sup>45</sup> On the question of heraldry in Byzantium, see Ousterhout, ‘Byzantium between East and West and the Origins of Heraldry’.

<sup>46</sup> See n. 41.

<sup>47</sup> Kazhdan, ‘*Brabeion*’: 319. On medieval robes and their role in investiture and the expression of social status, also see Gordon, *Robes and Honor*.

seven to one pound, depending on rank; he does not mention, however, that they received cloaks.<sup>48</sup>

At the Byzantine court, as Liudprand's account attests, silks indexed social accomplishment, rank and imperial preference; their function as markers of social distinction was constantly and publically performed through ceremonial presentation and display. It is important to highlight, however, that Liudprand does not record the emperor's bestowing garments on those holding ranks below *patrikios*. In other words, the members of the lower echelons of the court were apparently not granted the textiles that likely displayed animal motifs. Although impossible to prove, it is worth considering that these lower ranking courtiers may have emulated the motifs found on these illustrious textiles in their seals as a means of staking a claim to the visual markers of courtly status. The idea of a self-promoting attitude in seal design finds support in the fact that—as outlined earlier—Byzantine animal seals in the DO and HUAM collections which record a title consistently belong to members of the middle to lower echelons of the court.

There were a number of different ways Islamic works of art reached Constantinople and other territories of Byzantium in the late ninth and tenth centuries, and these means of transmission could have inflected the meanings of Islamic objects circulating in the court as well as Islamicising motifs appropriated in Byzantine visual and material culture, including lead seals. For instance, members of the court may have encountered foreign works of art obtained by the emperor through diplomatic exchanges.<sup>49</sup> A variety of well-known historical accounts record the extravagant gifts exchanged between Byzantine emperors and Islamic rulers beginning in the ninth century, and these objects were displayed in the treasuries and halls of the imperial palace in Constantinople.<sup>50</sup> Both the foreign origin and the power of the royal donor would have enhanced the value of these objects and increased their prestige in the eyes of Byzantine viewers. From

<sup>48</sup> Liudprand of Cremona, *The Embassy to Constantinople and Other Writings*: 155–56 (bk. 5, ch. 10). Also see Oikonomides, 'Title and Income at the Byzantine Court': 200–02.

<sup>49</sup> Regarding Byzantine–Islamic artistic cross-cultural exchange, including through diplomatic relations, see Cutler, *Image Making in Byzantium, Sasanian Persia, and the Early Muslim World*; Walker, *The Emperor and the World*: esp. 80–107.

<sup>50</sup> See especially Ibn al-Zubayr, *The Book of Gifts and Rarities*: 98–101, 108–09, 112–18; par. 72, 73, 82, 91, 98, 101, 105; Grabar, 'The Shared Culture of Objects'.

inventories of diplomatic gifts exchanged between middle Byzantine and Islamic courts, we know that some of these objects, especially textiles, were decorated with images of animals, including peacocks, eagles and lions.<sup>51</sup>

In addition, Islamic objects came to the capital as trade goods. According to the early tenth-century Byzantine commercial law code, *The Book of the Eparch*, which was used in regulating the markets of Constantinople, members of the court were granted privileged access to so-called *baghdadikia* (objects imported from Islamic regions to the capital), a term that seems to have referred especially to textiles.<sup>52</sup> For this reason, Islamicising motifs may have held a particular association with an exclusive market in luxury goods and the social standing necessary to acquire these objects. Furthermore, there was dynamic commercial traffic between Byzantine and Islamic merchants during the tenth century, even during times of war, and individuals involved in this trade may have used on their seals the exotic motifs found on the objects and materials in which they trafficked.<sup>53</sup>

Finally, emulation of Islamic artistic models may have been spurred in part by increased military contact between Byzantine and Islamic polities.<sup>54</sup> As already noted, the majority of Islamicising animal seals, about 70 per cent, date to the tenth century. This period was marked by the rapid decline and subsequent fragmentation of the Abbasid Empire, and from the middle tenth century, the Byzantines made significant advances along their own eastern frontier, encroaching on territories that had previously been under the authority of the Abbasids or their clients.<sup>55</sup> As a result, Islamic objects were seized as spoils of war and eventually made their way to Byzantium in the possession of returning generals and soldiers. Descriptions of imperial triumphs that were celebrated following the

<sup>51</sup> Ibn al-Zubayr, *The Book of Gifts and Rarities*: 100–01, 109, 112, 117; par. 72, 82, 91, 105. Also see Cutler, ‘Exchanges of Clothing in Byzantium and Islam’.

<sup>52</sup> Dujčev, *To Eparxikon Vivlion*: 29–30, 239–40.

<sup>53</sup> For recent reconsideration of Byzantine–Islamic economic relations along the eastern border of the empire in the middle Byzantine period, see Durak, ‘Political Borders and Economic Zones’.

<sup>54</sup> Shepard, ‘Emperors and Expansionism: From Rome to Middle Byzantium’.

<sup>55</sup> Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium*: 310–57.

conquest of formerly Islamic regions mention the exotic works of art that were claimed as trophies. Following the conquest of Islamic Crete in 961, for example, the victorious general (and later emperor) Nikephoros Phokas marched through Constantinople displaying booty that included:

*A vast amount of gold and silver...as well as barbarian coins of refined gold, garments shot with gold, purple carpets, and all sorts of treasures, crafted with the greatest skill, sparkling with gold and precious stones.*<sup>56</sup>

Individuals involved in these expeditions may have returned with foreign works of art or developed tastes for exotic styles during military sojourns abroad, perhaps employing these objects as a sign of the symbolic conquest of the peoples and territories from which the works of art derived. Those whose careers were advanced by their military success could have expressed their new status and social aspiration by selecting imagery that legitimised their claim to accomplishment and rank. This access to foreign works of art also may have encouraged a fashion for exotic styles at court. Appropriating Islamicising styles and iconography for a seal could in turn have advertised the owner's affiliation with this elite level of society and its cosmopolitanism.

The pervasive presence of Islamic works of art at the capital and court, as well the different routes by which they arrived there, would have likely led to the proliferation of Islamicising iconography and styles in Byzantine art and the assimilation of some motifs into an elite visual vocabulary of luxury and social prestige. Among the exoticising devices found on seals and other materials of middle Byzantine art, the frontally posed peacock appears frequently and in diverse media. Other relatively common animal types include griffins (13 out of 140 or c. 9 per cent; see Figure 1) and *senmurvs* (8 or c. 6 per cent; see Figure 2) as well as a bird with a distinctive ribbon around its neck (11 or c. 8 per cent) and peacocks shown in profile (5 or c. 4 per cent). But it would be a mistake to think that these emblems were so generic or deeply assimilated that they would have lost their exotic associations. Indeed their *familiar difference*—the way these motifs connoted 'other' artistic traditions and cultures but in a manner that was part of a Byzantine artistic language of power and

<sup>56</sup> Leo the Deacon, *The History of Leo the Deacon*: 81; also see 76, 79, 82, 84.

prestige—may have made them attractive to individuals who were inclined to assert their cosmopolitanism while simultaneously conforming to an established Byzantine visual vocabulary of social status.

In contrast to the Islamicising sigillographic motifs that appear in relatively large numbers, some exoticising iconography is attested in only limited examples. Among the rarest motifs in middle Byzantine animal seals is the mantichore (numbering 3 out of 140 or c. 2 per cent), a composite animal with the body of a lion and the head of a human, as seen on a tenth-century seal belonging to Photios, an imperial *protospatharios* (Figure 7).<sup>57</sup> Photios was also an *epi ton oikeiakon*, a position that associated him with the imperial household and may have involved responsibility for overseeing the emperor's personal treasury, and a *kommerkiarios* (a tax collector) for the eastern *theme* of Chaldia. The mantichore on the seal wears a crown with the distinctive *prependoulia* (pendants) of Byzantine imperial regalia. Yet the surface decorations on the creature's body create a stylised effect that recalls Islamic works of art. The mantichore was an ancient, mythical beast associated with India. The ninth-century Byzantine bibliophile and courtier Photios records an account from the fourth-century BCE historian Ktesias, who described the mantichore as a beast with the head of a human and body of a lion.<sup>58</sup> Its tail was said to emit venomous spikes, although in the Byzantine seal, the

**Figure 7**

Seal impression, Byzantine, tenth century, lead, diam. ca. 25 mm.  
Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks Collection



<sup>57</sup> DO acc. no. 58.106.1843.

<sup>58</sup> Freese, *The Library of Photius*: 112 (bk. LXXII).



end of the tail is instead shaped like a snake or dragon. The mantichore was known for its viciousness. Said to devour humans, its name was translated into Greek as *anthropophagos*, or man eater.

The strongest visual analogue for the mantichore motif is found in a fourth-century Sasanian seal, which shows the same striking profile, bound hair and headpiece, although the crown is simpler than in the Byzantine example (Figure 8).<sup>59</sup> In Sasanian seals, this animal is identified as either a *lamassu*, a winged bull with human head that was understood as a protector, or as a *gopatshah*, a half-bull, half-human deity. The Sasanians were conquered by early Islamic armies in the seventh century, but their art and culture experienced an afterlife in the medieval Islamic world, especially during the Umayyad (661–750) and Abbasid (750–1258) dynasties, the second of which completed the absorption of Sasanian territories in the eighth century. Sasanian traditions were also revived among the various independent Islamic polities of Persia in the tenth century, such as the Samanids (819–1000). Although preserved in Sasanian models, the motif may have been transmitted to Byzantium after the end of the Sasanian dynasty by a subsequent Islamic group, or, if drawn from Sasanian models, it may indicate a simultaneously exoticising and archaising impulse on the part of the seal owner.

**Figure 8**

Seal, Sasanian, fourth century, chalcedony, 20 x 17 mm. London, British Museum



<sup>59</sup> Bivar, *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum*: pl. 14, EH 8. For additional comparanda in Sasanian seals, see *ibid.*: pl. 14, EH 5–7 and EJ 1–10; and Gignoux and Gyselen, *Sceaux Sasanides de diverses collections privées*: pl. XXII, 40.36–40.40.43.

This motif is particularly interesting because of the way in which it alters the Sasanian–Islamic model to align it with a Byzantine iconographic system: in other words, the *lamassu* or *gopatshah* is transformed into a mantichore. The rarity of the motif in Byzantine art and the fact that it was recorded by Photios suggest that it reflected the seal owner’s familiarity with obscure, and therefore exclusive, artistic and literary traditions. In this regard, the presence of the exoticising motif might be an expression of the owner’s rarified knowledge of eastern cultures and engagement with traditions that extended beyond the luxuries of the court or the triumphalist fads prompted by the influx of war booty.

A final point regarding the chronology of middle Byzantine animal seals is worth noting. The surge in Islamicising iconography in the tenth century corresponds with a period of weakness in Abbasid control of its western border with Byzantium: this may help to explain why Islamic art was circulating more extensively in Byzantium, and also why Byzantine seal owners would have been more inclined to appropriate foreign iconographies and styles, which represented not only cosmopolitan luxury but also, and more importantly, Byzantium’s recent military expansion into formerly Islamic territories. In other words, the Abbasids’ weakness and the subsequent erosion of their authority in military and political terms may have contributed to Byzantine appropriation of an Islamicising visual vocabulary, and may have inflected the meaning that these foreign motifs conveyed, especially among members of the imperial court and administration. Furthermore, the eventual shift in Byzantine power and the loss of the upper hand in military relations with Islamic groups by the late eleventh century may help to explain the sharp decline and rapid disappearance of exoticising iconography in Byzantine seals by this time: to continue to use motifs associated with foreign political, military and cultural groups that were becoming dominant over Byzantium in the second half of the eleventh century would have transformed former signs of triumph into emblems of subservience.

## Conclusion

Lead seals stated an individual’s official, public position in the Byzantine hierarchy through the inscription of office, rank or profession. But they also afforded the possibility of making more subtle and open claims to social identity and status through the personal selection of imagery. The

fact that the choice of iconography in lead seals was a matter of individual taste need not impose an interpretive dead end on the material. In surveying possible explanations for seal owners' motivations in selecting Islamicising motifs, it becomes apparent that exoticising stylistic and iconographic features could be effectively employed in situations where there was a desire to convey association or familiarity with the foreign objects and cultures from which these attributes ultimately derived. Whether seal owners selected Islamicising devices as a sign of military triumph, to conform with cosmopolitan courtly fashion or to convey a common cultural association so as to facilitate trade or diplomacy with foreigners, these seals raise the possibility that the Byzantines employed exotic stylistic and iconographic features to construct and project aspects of their personal and professional identities and aspirations. The interpretations suggested in this article must remain speculative, however, awaiting a comprehensive survey of all existing lead seals. Such a catalogue will one day allow a full assessment of the number and types of Islamicising seals, their statistical relationship to the larger corpus of middle Byzantine (and especially tenth-century) seals and the complete range of social affiliations articulated in their inscriptions.

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## Illustrations

**Figure 1** Seal impression, Byzantine, tenth century, lead, diam. 16 mm. University of Birmingham, Barber Institute of Fine Arts: 197B. © Barber Institute of Fine Arts.

**Figure 2** Seal impression, Byzantine, tenth century, lead, diam. 23 mm. Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Bequest of Thomas Whittemore:

1951.31.5.1059. © Imaging Department, President and Fellows of Harvard College.

- Figure 3** Seal impression, Byzantine, eleventh century, lead, diam. 24 mm. Washington, DC., Dumbarton Oaks Collection: 55.1.4484. © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection.
- Figure 4** Sculpture depicting a peacock from the Monastery of Constantine Lips, Byzantine (Constantinople), tenth century, marble: 4329. © Istanbul Archaeological Museum.
- Figure 5** Polychrome tile depicting a peacock from an iconostasis, Byzantine, tenth century, ceramic, h. ca. 33 cm, w. ca. 30 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Objets d'art: AC84. Photo: Martine Beck-Coppola, © Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.
- Figure 6** Frontispiece depicting Nikephoros III Botaneiates enthroned with courtiers, Homilies of John Chrysostom, Byzantine, c. 1071–1081, tempera and gold on vellum, ca. 42 x 31 cm. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France: Ms. Coislin 79, fol. 2r. © Bibliothèque Nationale de France.
- Figure 7** Seal impression, Byzantine, tenth century, lead, diam. ca. 25 mm. Washington, DC., Dumbarton Oaks Collection: 58.106.1843. © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection.
- Figure 8** Seal, Sasanian, fourth century, chalcedony, 20 x 17 mm. London, British Museum: O.A. 14. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

