The Mother of God, "Stabbed with a Knife"

George P. Galavaris

Dumbarton Oaks Papers, Vol. 13. (1959), pp. 229-233.

Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0070-7546%281959%2913%3C229%3ATMOG%22W%3E2.0.CO%3B2-0

Dumbarton Oaks Papers is currently published by Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University.

THE MOTHER OF GOD, "STABBED WITH A KNIFE"

GEORGE P. GALAVARIS

THIS paper is concerned with four unpublished Byzantine lead seals belonging to the Dumbarton Oaks Collection.

The first, which is in excellent condition, is 2.6 cm. in diameter, 4 mm. thick, and weighs 14.8 grams (fig. 1). It shows on the obverse a figure of the Mother of God standing frontally. She holds in front of her breast a medallion containing a bust of Christ. Her face is very well preserved, and surrounded by a halo. The figure of the Mother of God is not accompanied by any of the familiar epithets. Instead, there is the following legend in two columns:

M̄-P Θ̄Ȣ
HMAXAI/PωΘEICA
Μ(ήτη)ρ Θ(ε)οῦ ἡ μαχαιρωθεῖσα

The Mother of God, "Stabbed with a knife." On the reverse is this invocation in five lines: +ΘK̄ERO/HΘEITωCω/ΔȢΛωΠETPω/ΔIAKONωKAI/XAPTOΦY/ΛAKI. Θ(εοτό)κε βοήθει τῷ σῷ δούλῳ Πέτρῳ διακόνῳ καὶ χαρτοφύλακι. "Mother of God help thy slave, Peter deacon and chartophylax."

The second seal (fig. 2), formerly in the collection of Mr. Howland Shaw, is an exact duplicate of the first, but is not as well preserved. It is 2.4 cm. in diameter, 4 mm. thick and weighs 12.9 grams.

The third seal (2.4 cm. in diameter, 3 mm., thick, and weighing 7.7 grams) presents the same type of the Virgin on the obverse and the same epithet with a slight difference in the arrangement of the letters (fig. 3):

M̄-P Θ̄Ȣ
HMAXAIPω/ΘEICA

The invocation on the reverse reads: ΠETPON/ΠANAΓNE/XAPTOΦYΛ(A)/KANCKE/ΠOIC. Πέτρον, Πάναγνε, χαρτοφύλακαν σκέποις "Most pure, protect Peter the chartophylax." This is a metrical inscription, such as is often found on Byzantine seals.[1] The invocation on the first two seals is also of a very common type.[2] Furthermore, all three legends make it clear that these seals belonged to the same person.

The fourth seal (fig. 4) (2.3 cm. in diameter, 1 mm. thick and weighing 6 grams) has the same type of the Virgin and inscription on the obverse:

(M̄-P) Θ̄(Ȣ)
HMA(X)AI/PωΘEICA

The reverse, however, reads: (Θ)K̄EROH(Θ)/EIK̄ω̄NΔIA/KONωKAI/XAPTOΦY/ΛAKITHCM/E(ΓA)Λ(HC) EKKΛ(H)/CIAC. (Θεοτό)κε βοήθει Κωνσταντίνῳ διακόνῳ καὶ χαρτοφύλακι τῆς Με(γά)λ(ης) Ἐκκλ(η)σίας. "Mother of God help Constantine, deacon and chartophylax of the Great Church."

Palaeographically the inscriptions of the first three seals can be matched by dated seals of the eleventh and twelfth centuries (especially the letters E, ω, C, A).[3] Stylistically the elegant stance and good proportions of the figure of the Virgin on the first two seals call to mind certain eleventh-century coins, for example those of Constantine X Ducas.[4] An eleventh or twelfth-century date seems, therefore, very probable. The fourth seal cannot be dated on stylistic grounds because of its poor state of preservation. But the lettering of the reverse (note especially the M) suggests the thirteenth century.

---

[1] K. Konstantopoulos, Βυζαντιακὰ μολυβδόβουλλα τοῦ ἐν Ἀθήναις Ἐθνικοῦ Νομισματικοῦ Μουσείου (Athens, 1917), pp. 421ff. Cf. V. Laurent, "Bulletin de sigillographie byzantine, 1930," *Byzantion*, VI (1931), pp. 815ff., *idem*, "Les bulles métriques dans la sigillographie byzantine," Ἑλληνικά, IV–VIII (1931–1935), *passim*.

[2] G. Schlumberger, *Sigillographie de l'Empire byzantin* (Paris, 1884), pp. 31ff. Cf. Laurent, *Byzantion*, VI (1931), p. 785.

[3] N. Lichačev, *Istoričeskoe značenie italogrečeskoj ikonopisi. Izobraženija Bogomateri* (St. Petersburg, 1911), pl. IV, 16. G. Schlumberger, "Sceaux byzantins inédits," *Revue des études grecques*, IV (1891), p. 124, no. 54.

[4] Lichačev, *ibid.*, fig. 76.

If the legends on the reverse of these seals are of a common form, the same cannot be said of the iconographic type of the Virgin. According to Kondakov, this type of Virgin, holding a medallion, is called the Nikopoios, and he distinguishes this from the Blachernitissa in which Mary appears with hands raised either as a half figure or in full length.[5] It seems, however, that the Virgin of these seals is merely a variant of the Blachernitissa type showing Mary as a full length standing figure holding the medallion.[6] There are few known examples of this variant on seals, and hitherto all of them have been of the sixth and seventh centuries.[7] The seals under discussion, being of much later date, are consequently of some interest.

As to the epithet Μαχαιρωθεῖσα, "stabbed with a knife," this is unique, as far as published material goes, and herein lies the major importance of the seals.

The epithets given to the Mother of God are a valuable source of information concerning Byzantine religious life, history, and folklore. To give a comprehensive list of them would scarcely be possible here. However two large categories can be distinguished: 1. *Theological* epithets, mainly derived from hymnography, such as Ὁδηγήτρια, Ἐπίσκεψις, Χώρα τοῦ Ἀχωρήτου, etc.[8] 2. *Popular* epithets, which sometimes describe a particular iconography of the Virgin, such as Γλυκοφιλοῦσα, Γαλακτοτροφοῦσα, etc., or are related to miracle-working icons as, for example, Πορταΐτισσα, Τριχεροῦσα, Ἀντιφωνήτρια.[9] The epithet on our seals is a new addition to this second category.[10]

Inasmuch as sacred representations on seals were usually modelled after famous icons,[11] our problem is to identify a miraculous image to which this epithet applied.

The numerous legends relating to miraculous icons often refer to acts of agression or iconoclasm that call forth a response from the supernatural force embodied in the icons,[12] and in such cases the icons may talk,[13] suffer,[14] be

[5] N. Kondakov, *Ikonografia Bogomateri*, II (St. Petersburg, 1915), pp. 66ff. For a brief discussion of the Blachernitissa type see C. Cecchelli, *Mater Christi*, I (Rome, 1946), pp. 216ff. (to be used with caution; cf. A. Grabar's review in *Cahiers archéologiques*, 8 [1956], pp. 259ff.). M. Vloberg, "Les types iconographiques de la mère de Dieu dans l'art byzantin," *Maria; études sur la Sainte Vierge*, II (Paris, 1952), pp. 413ff. G. Soteriou, Χριστιανικὴ καὶ Βυζαντινὴ εἰκονογραφία, Θεολογία, XXVII (1956), p. 11. E. Coche de la Ferté, "Decors en céramique byzantine au Musée du Louvre," *Cahiers archéologiques*, IX (1957), pp. 192ff.

[6] The suggestion that the iconographic type of the Virgin holding a medallion is a variant of the Blachernitissa was first proposed by P. Dethier: see Schlumberger, *Sigillographie*, p. 37, note 1, and more recently V. Grumel, "Le 'miracle habituel' de Notre-Dame des Blachernes à Constantinople," *Echos d'Orient*, XXX (1931), pp. 129–146, esp. 144–145. It seems best to reserve the term Nikopoios or Kyriotissa for the Virgin holding the Child in front of her, one hand supporting His leg, the other resting on His shoulder: see A. Xyngopoulos, Κατάλογος τῶν εἰκόνων Μουσεῖον Μπενάκη, (Athens, 1936), p. 8, pl. 17A. Cf. O. Wulff, *Die Koimesiskirche in Nicäa und ihre Mosaiken* (Strassburg, 1903), p. 256ff., esp. p. 260.

[7] See examples in Konstantopoulos, *op. cit.*, p. 78, no. 275. Schlumberger, *Sigillographie*, pp. 418, 420. P. Delatte, *Le culte de la Sainte Vierge en Afrique d'après les monuments archéologiques* (Paris, 1907), pp. 84–127. Cf. G. Schlumberger, "La Vierge, le Christ, les saints sur les sceaux byzantin de Xe, XIe, XIIe siècles," *Mémoires de la Société des Antiquaires de France*, 5e série, IV (1883), p. 2. To these examples we may add one more from the unpublished collection of seals of the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection: the seal (inv. no. 3130) that belonged to the well-known Bardas family and dates probably from the twelfth century.

[8] For epithets of the Virgin in hymnography see S. Eustratiades, Ἡ Θεοτόκος ἐν τῇ ὑμνογραφίᾳ (Paris, 1930).

[9] Soteriou, p. 13. For popular epithets see P. Koukoules, Ἐπίθετά τινα τῆς Θεοτόκου, Ἡμερολόγιον Μεγάλης Ἑλλάδος, X (1932), pp. 431, 444. Cf. J. Themelis, Περὶ τῶν ἐπωνυμίων τῆς Παναγίας, *Actes du IIIe congrès international d'études byzantines* (Athens, 1930 [1932]), pp. 311–314; Timothy of Jerusalem, Αἱ ἐπωνυμίαι τῆς Παναγίας, Νέα Σιών, XLIV–LI (1952–1956), *passim*.

[10] For epithets of the Virgin appearing on seals see Schlumberger, *Mémoires*, pp. 15ff.

[11] Cf. Hodegetria, Hagiosoritissa, Atheniotissa etc.

[12] E. Kitzinger in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 8 (1954), pp. 83–149, esp. pp. 87ff.

[13] Cf. the stories of speaking icons told in Mt. Athos, G. Smyrnakes, Ἅγιον Ὄρος (Athens, 1903), *passim*.

[14] Cf. the weeping icons, *Itinéraires russes en Orient*, trans. by B. de Khitrowo (Geneva, 1899), pp. 89, 226. Ebersolt, *Sanctuaires de Byzance* (Paris, 1921), p. 22.

wounded,[15] or shed blood.[16] Usually those who strike the icons are unbelievers. John of Damascus, quoting from the writings of Athanasius Sinaita, speaks of a Saracen who shot an arrow at a representation of St. Theodore, whereupon blood flowed from the figure of the Saint.[17] There is a famous story of an icon of Christ at Beirut which was similarly wounded by unbelievers and which shed blood and water.[18] It is among such icons that we should seek the prototype for our "stabbed" Mother of God.[19]

In the outer narthex of the parecclesion of St. Demetrius of Alexandria in the monastery of Vatopedi on Mt. Athos, there is an icon of the Virgin called Ἐσφαγμένη, or the "slaughtered Virgin." It was struck not by an unbeliever, but by a deacon or sacristan (the story varies) in a fit of anger, because his appointed task of cleaning the candlesticks in front of it every morning made him late for meals. To his horror blood gushed from the wound. The story may be found in many books about Mt. Athos,[20] and although it has no connection with the seals under discussion here, the type of the "slaughtered Virgin" does suggest an analogy.

The fine execution of these seals indicates that they were probably made in Constantinople, and therefore it is reasonable to assume that they copy a Constantinopolitan icon. Many such miraculous images in the capital of the Empire were shown to pilgrims.[21] The scribe Alexander who visited Constantinople in 1393 saw one in the monastery of Theotokos Peribleptos, founded by Romanus III Argyrus (1028–1034).[22] "The image of the Holy Virgin," he writes, "was transfixed by a Jew ... and the blood that issued from it can be seen to the present day."[23]

More detailed is the account of Anthony, Archbishop of Novgorod who, on his visit to Constantinople in 1200, saw a "stabbed" icon in the church of St. Sophia. He says: "We kissed the image of the Most Holy Virgin holding Christ. A Jew struck this Christ in the neck *with a knife* and blood flowed out..."[24] The same story is told by an anonymous English pilgrim who visited Constantinople a few years before the Latin conquest, and it is found also in Nicolaus Thingeyrensis' catalogue of the relics that existed in Constantinople in 1157.[25] The first of these two texts reads: *in ipso loco* [in the church of St. Sophia, at the place of the "Samaritan" well][26] *in angulo est imago sancte sanctarum Dei genitricis Marie, que portavit in ulnis suis Dominum nostrum Ihesum Christum, quem percussit quidam Judeus* cum cultello *in guture et continuo exivit sanguis et aqua.*[27] According to Nicolaus

[15] See Pseudo-Athanasius, *Quaestiones*, PG, 28, 621.

[16] Cf. the story of the Virgin's icon at Alexandria contained in a homily attributed to Theophilus, Patriarch of Alexandria: W. H. Worrell, *The Coptic Manuscripts in the Freer Collection* (New York, 1923), pp. 370 ff. Detailed information on these icons, the dating of the relevant texts, and general information on the magic properties of images are to be found in Kitzinger, *op. cit.*, pp. 96 ff.

[17] *De imaginibus, orat. II, PG.* 94, 1393.

[18] *Pseudo-Athanasius, PG*, 28, 796 ff.; Kitzinger, *loc. cit.*

[19] It is interesting to note that in western art, as early as the Gothic period, there are representations of the Virgin stabbing herself. See *La Vierge dans l'art français*, ed. Art et Style (Paris, 1950), pl. 38. Cf. E. Mâle, *L'art religieux de la fin du moyen âge en France* (Paris, 1931), pp. 122 ff.

[20] Smyrnakes, p. 434. G. Soteriou, Ἅγιον Ὄρος (Athens, n. d.), p. 144. R. Dawkins, *The Monks of Athos* (London, 1936), p. 361.

[21] See anonymous Russian pilgrim, *Itin. russes*, p. 229. Ebersolt, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

[22] R. Janin, *La géographie ecclésiatique de l'Empire byzantin. Le siège de Constantinople*, III, *Les églises et les monastères* (Paris, 1953), p. 229.

[23] *Itin. russes*, p. 163.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 87.

[25] I am gratful to Dr. Cyril Mango of Dumbarton Oaks for bringing these two texts to my attention.

[26] The "Samaritan" well was in a chapel called the Holy Well (Ἅγιον Φρέαρ) attached to St. Sophia. For the location of the chapel see E. Antoniades, Ἔκφρασις τῆς Ἁγίας Σοφίας, II (Athens, 1908), pp. 169 ff. For a different view see E. Mambury, "Topographie de Ste.-Sophie. Le sanctuaire et la soléa, le mitatorion, le puits sacré. Le passage de St. Nicolas, etc.," *Atti del V congresso intern. di studi bizantini, Studi bizantini e neoellenici*, VI (1940), pp. 197–209. Dr. Mango who has dealt with this problem in his forthcoming study on the Chalke believes that Antoniades' view is the correct one.

[27] S. G. Mercati, "Santuari e reliquie Constantinopolitane secondo il codice Ottoboniano latino 169 prima della conquesta latina (1204)," *Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia*, XII (1936), pp. 143 ff.

Thingeyrensis, the Jew threw the icon into the "Samaritan" well, but his sacriligious act was miraculously discovered and the image was restored to its former place. As for the Jew, he was converted to Christianity.[28] Thingeyrensis writes: *Imago S. Mariae cum Jesu Christo, filio ejus; cuius iugulum Judeus quidam cultello vulneravit, et manavit sanguis.*[29] None of these texts specifies how the Virgin held the Child, and it cannot be stated definitely that she was of the Blachernitissa type; yet, if their accounts are taken literally, the statements that the stabbing was done with a knife, rather than with a spear or an arrow as in other instances, justify the epithet μαχαιρωθεῖσα, and suggest that our seals copy the famous "stabbed" icon in St. Sophia, to which Peter and Constantine, the deacons and chartophylaces, may have been particularly devoted.

But who are Peter and Constantine? Their titles show that they were chartophylaces of the Oecumenical Patriarchate, members of the clergy of the church of St. Sophia. This dignity, denoting the chief of the patriarchall ibrary and archives, eventually became one of the most important in the patriarchal hierarchy.[30] Andronicus II (1282–1328) added the title μέγας in order further to dignify the rank of chartophylax.[31] Thus, the absence of this epithet from our seals, apart from other factors, limits the search for Peter and Constantine to the period before Andronicus II. Since no comprehensive work on Byzantine prosopography has as yet been published, the solution of our problem must be sought by direct consultation of the sources, and particularly of patriarchal documents, many of which are signed by chartophylaces. Among the signatories of a synodic declaration of the patriarch Nicholas III (1084–1111), issued on November 15, 1086 or 1101 (indiction 10) is Πέτρος ὁ εὐτελὴς διάκονος καὶ χαρτοφύλαξ τῆς ἁγιωτάτης τοῦ Θεοῦ Μεγάλης Ἐκκλησίας.[32] This date agrees with that which I have proposed on independent grounds for the first three seals, so it is quite likely that their owner was the deacon and chartophylax of this document.

The same Peter is also known from another document dated 1092,[33] in which he solves certain difficulties of canon law. The answers he provides betray some novel ideas about salvation through Grace and an unusual view of confession, according to which the penitent should not enumerate his sins to God, especially if they are of a carnal nature. For, Peter believes, if the sinner recites his transgressions, his soul will be defiled; it is enough for him to invoke the name of the Lord.[34]

In a patriarchal document of Germanus II (1222–1240) entitled "Notice of the Most Holy Patriarch Germanus against John, the Metropolitan of Naupactus," dated July 1235, we find the following signature: Ὁ χαρτοφύλαξ τῆς ἁγιωτάτης τοῦ Θεοῦ Μεγάλης Ἐκκλησίας Κωνσταντῖνος ὁ Αὐληνός.[35] In this instance, too,

[28] The same story was told about an icon concerning Christ also located in the chapel of the Holy Well. See the Greek text in F. Combefis, *Historia haeresis monothelitarum, sanctaeque in eam sextae synodi actorum, vindiciae* (Paris, 1648), pp. 648–657; E. von Dobschutz, *Christusbilder*, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur, N.F., III, (Leipzig, 1899), pp. 216**–219**. Cf. Antoniades, *op. cit.*, pp. 179ff.

[29] *Exuviae sacrae Constantinopolitanae*, II (Geneva, 1878), p. 215.

[30] A discussion of the title and duties of the chartophylax may be found in Ch. Demetriou, Μελέτη περὶ τοῦ χαρτοφύλακος τῆς ἐν Κωνσταντινουπόλει Μεγάλης τοῦ Χριστοῦ Ἐκκλησίας (Athens, 1924). F. Dvornik, *Les légendes de Constantin et de Méthode* (Prague, 1933), pp. 52ff. Cf. L. Bréhier, *Le monde byzantin, les institutions* (Paris, 1949), pp. 501ff.

[31] Dvornik, *ibid.*, p. 56.

[32] *PG*, 119, 864. Cf. V. Grumel, *Les regestes des actes du patriarcat de Constantinople*, 1, 3 (Bucharest, 1947), pp. 43, 44. E. Gedeon, Πατριαρχικοὶ πίνακες (Constantinople, 1890), p. 342. For the chronology of the patriarchs see V. Grumel, *La chronologie*, Traité d'études byzantines, I (Paris, 1958), pp. 436ff.

[33] *PG*, 119, 1093ff. Gedeon, *ibid.*, p. 347. Concerning the Peter of this document, V. Laurent ("Les bulles métriques dans la sigillographie byzantine," Ἑλληνικά, V [1932], p. 163) has raised the question whether Peter was the owner of the twelfth-century seal described by Schlumberger (*Sigillographie*, p. 394) with the seated Hodegetria on one side, and the legend (Πέ)τρος μοναχὸς καὶ μέγας οἰκονόμος on the other. To answer this question in the positive one would have to assume a promotion of Peter from chartophylax to great oeconomus.

[34] *PG*, *loc. cit.* Cf. G. Ralles, M. Potles, Σύνταγμα κανόνων, V (Athens, 1855), pp. 369–373.

[35] *PG*, 119, 797, 801. Cf. F. Cabrol, H. Leclercq, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de*

the date of the document agrees with the one suggested for the fourth seal which bears the name of Constantine, and it is possible that he is in fact the Constantine Aulenos of the patriarchal document.

Whether or not these suggested identifications prove to be correct, the fact remains that the owners of our seals were connected with the church of St. Sophia, where textual evidence indicates the existence of a "stabbed" icon. This connection leaves no doubt that the "stabbed" icon of that church was the prototype of our seals, though we do not know why Peter and Constantine, the deacons and chartophylaces of the patriarchal church, chose as their personal device an icon then existing in St. Sophia. The fact that, of the four seals pertaining to the same ecclesiastical office, the last is at least a hundred years later than the first three suggests, however, that the choice of this iconographic type was not dictated by purely personal reasons. It may be that, as the Virgin and Child on a θῶκος was the emblem of the patriarchs, and as the Virgin receiving the church of St. Sophia from Justinian was the device of the presbyters of that church,[36] so the "stabbed" Virgin was the protectress of the chartophylaces of the Great Church. This remains, however, merely a suggestion, because another chartophylax of the Great Church, whose seal was published by Schlumberger, chose as his device the seated Virgin and Child flanked by an archangel and a saint.[37]

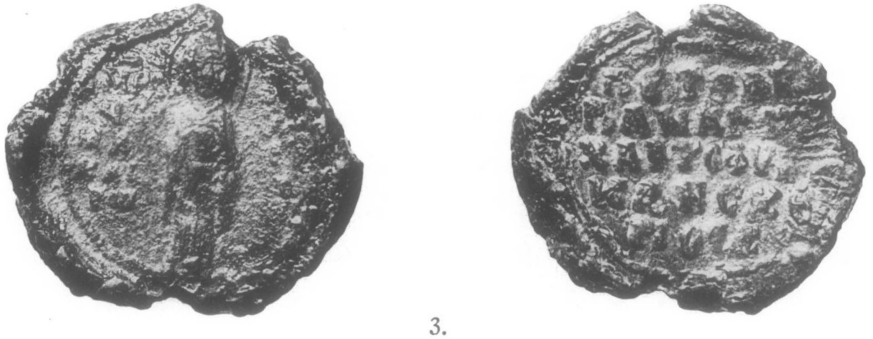
liturgie, III, 1, 1017; V. Laurent, "Les bulles métriques dans la sigillographie byzantine," Ἑλληνικά, IV (1931), p. 344.

[36] I hope to discuss on another occasion the seals of the Constantinopolitan patriarchs and those of the presbyters of the church of St. Sophia from the point of view of iconography.

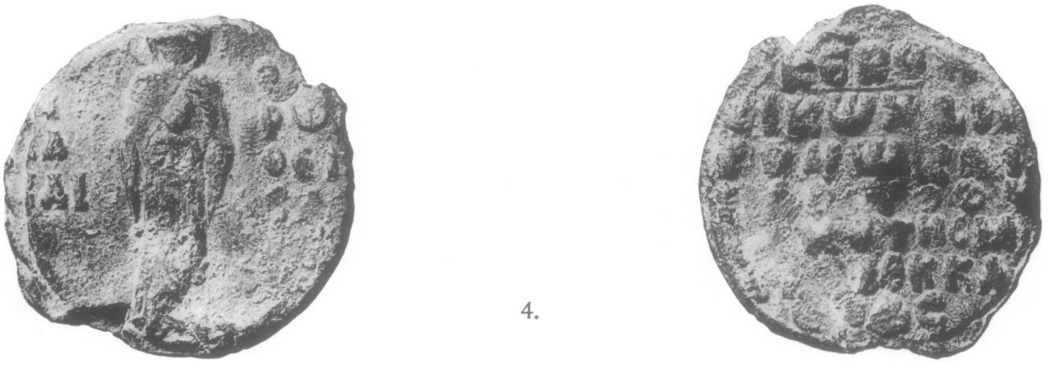
[37] Schlumberger, *Sigillographie*, p. 130. A more precise description in Konstantopoulos, *op. cit.*, p. 184, no. 702.

1.

2.



3.



4.

Washington, D. C., Dumbarton Oaks Collection
Lead Seals (enlarged twice)