The Sphinx of Slav Sigillography – Type Dorogichin Seals in Their East European Context

An Introduction
In the territory of the Byzantine Commonwealth seals were a mass product: the total number of their finds (now in the care of various collections across the world) has been estimated at around sixty thousand. We have evidence that Byzantine seals entered the territory of the Kiev Rus’ en masse; moreover, with time seals came to be produced for the secular and the church authorities also on the territory of Rus’. In this respect the territory of the Byzantine Empire and of the Kiev Rus’ differ significantly from the territory of “Latin” East-Central Europe; here, the number of seal finds is much smaller: for example, from the territory of Piast Poland we have only a very small number of early medieval seals (dated to the twelfth century). A very special type of seal that we can trace to Rus’ is type Dorogichin. It takes its name from the early medieval Rus’ town of Dorogichin (today, Drohiczyn, Siemiatycze county, podlaskie voivodeship, eastern Poland). The iconography of type Dorogichin seals includes the ducal insignia, or alternately, a geometric design, or a schematic image of a Christian saint, or of a beast; smaller than “ordinary” seals, type Dorogichin seals have a diameter of around 10 millimetres and the form of two flat, approximately circular pieces of lead, pressed together; originally, between them there used to be a piece of string; today its presence is intimated by two holes in the seal. Type Dorogichin seals enter the scholarly record in 1864; at this time their first specimens were retrieved from the River Bug. Many more continued surfacing until the early twentieth century. Despite several studies made during the nineteenth and the twentieth century by Polish and Russian researchers the function of the Dorogichin seals still remains a puzzle; in fact, to quote a fitting description proposed by Karol Bolsunowski, an early twentieth century Polish researcher (1838–1925) who studied the seals, they are “a Sphinx of sigillography”.

1 The present text was written within the project The Sphinx of Slav Sigillography - Dorogichin Seals in their East European Context (NCN, No. 2013/11/B/HS3/02052; implemented at the University of Rzeszow Institute of Archaeology.).


3 Suchodolski 2011.

4 Musianowicz 1957, Musin 2012.

2 Bolsunowski 1902. See also Siemianowska 2010.
At present the number of Dorogichin seal finds from Czermno stands at around a thousand. The seals recovered at Czermno in 2010 and 2011 have a well documented context of discovery; this makes them invaluable for our research. One highly revealing circumstance is that at Czermno almost all of the lead seals, including type Dorogichin, were recovered from the marshy valley of the Huczwa River rather than from the site of the former stronghold.

In this situation the approval was sought – and given – by the Dumbarton Oaks Center, followed by the site of the former stronghold.

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The seals from Czermno, pending their publication in a catalogue form, their study made within a broad European (Rus') comparative context. The typological analyses and the catalogue will use input from metallographic analysis of seals recovered in Poland (Czermno, Drohiczyn) and in East Europe (Russia). Additionally a catalogue of Dorogichin seal finds from East Europe is now being developed by Alexandr Musin, Sergey Toropov and Olga Tarabadrina under the guidance of Peter Gaydukov, the leading authority on their subject. The Sphinx of Slav Sigillography - Dorogichin Seals from Czermno in their East European Context. Implemented by German, Polish and Russian researchers this project involves a scientific analysis of a comprehensive corpus of the Dorogichin seals from Czermno, pending their publication in a catalogue form, their study made within a broad East European (Rus') comparative context. The typological analyses and the catalogue will use input from metallographic analysis of seals recovered in Poland (Czermno, Drohiczyn) and in East Europe (Russia). Additionally a catalogue of Dorogichin seal finds from East Europe is now being developed by Alexandr Musin, Sergey Toropov and Olga Tarabadrina under the guidance of Peter Gaydukov, the leading authority on their subject. The Sphinx of Slav Sigillography - Dorogichin Seals from Czermno in their East European Context. Implemented by German, Polish and Russian researchers this project involves a scientific analysis of a comprehensive corpus of the Dorogichin seals from Czermno, pending their publication in a catalogue form, their study made within a broad East European (Rus') comparative context. The typological analyses and the catalogue will use input from metallographic analysis of seals recovered in Poland (Czermno, Drohiczyn) and in East Europe (Russia). Additionally a catalogue of Dorogichin seal finds from East Europe is now being developed by Alexandr Musin, Sergey Toropov and Olga Tarabadrina under the guidance of Peter Gaydukov, the leading authority on their subject.

In parallel to these activities, a scientific analysis of seal finds from Czermno, Drohiczyn; in the north-east: Beloozero). The seals now in the National Museum in Cracow are likely to be finds from Drohiczyn but their closer context of discovery is not known. The analysis of this group is now in progress; the seals have been sorted, measured and weighed. This was followed by cataloguing and photographing. The seals from the Numismatic Cabinet fall into several groups:

1. So-called ducal seals, featuring the bident – two-pronged symbol of the Rus' rulers.
2. With a figure in a bust presentation, head covered, accompanied by a bird – an eagle
3. With a schematic representation of a human face
4. With a Cyrillic inscription
5. With various other symbols – a cross, circle, dot, swastika, etc.

2. The Dorogichin seals in the national museum in Cracow

The Numismatic Cabinet of the National Museum in Cracow has 1019 Dorogichin seals in its collections. Many of them are incomplete, with only a fragment of the original design surviving. Around 40% of this group are very poorly preserved and illegible. The seals were donated to the Cabinet in the early twentieth century by private collectors:

1). Adolf Sternschuss (1873-1915): Doctor of Law, counsellor of the government treasury in Cracow and Lvov, member of the board of the Numismatic Society;
2). Walery Kostrzębski (1828-1899): senior assayer at the Warsaw Mint (1850 to 1867), numismatist and collector, member of numismatic societies in Warsaw and Cracow.
3). Władysław Dawidowski (late nineteenth-early twentieth century), member of the Cracow Numismatic Society.

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3. The Dorogichin seals. Some of the findings from the research made between 2013 and 2015

In 1996 Perkhavko listed 40 locations in his list of the Dorogichin seal finds. In the years that followed metal detectors were introduced on a wide scale - and went on to revolutionize numismatics. Many new finds of the Dorogichin seals were added to the record, some representing variants not known earlier. Here is a true story to show how metal detectors can assist the study of the lead seals: during the excavation season of 2013 at Czermno, the archaeological material in site 3 was passed through sieves with a relatively fine mesh; many artefacts were recovered, including a fragment of an encolpion and an incomplete lyre-shaped buckle; but not a single lead seal was retrieved. Lead seals are really small and, when covered in dirt, are easily overlooked, even by the most dedicated student trainee.

In contrast, a metal detector survey made only a few metres away brought in several leads. At the present stage of research we may claim that the finds of Dorogichin seals concentrate mostly in the border zone of Rus’ principalities (in the west: Drohiczyn, Czermno; in the north-east: Beloozero). We expect the study of the corpus of seal finds from East Europe to confirm this; we also hope to specify the links between these seals and the major political and commercial centres, because – and this is intriguing - some seal finds have been recorded in the smaller rural settlements as well.

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8 Seal finds from Drohiczyn are now in the collections of several other museums in Poland: the State Archeological Museum in Warsaw, the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography in Łódź, the Podlasie Museum in Białystok, the Regional Museum in Drohiczyn and the Archaeological Museum in Cracow. See Musianowicz 1957, Hanc-Maikowa 1988, Pawlata 2010, Liwoch 2015.

8 Dobat 2013.
4. The Dorogichin seals. Some remarks about their possible function

As was mentioned earlier, the discussion about the function of the seals has a long tradition. There is some evidence from the late medieval iconographic record on a lively trade in animal skins by Rus’ merchants. This commerce is confirmed also by written accounts handed down by travellers from Latin and Muslim Europe. William of Rubruck (c. 1220 – c. 1293), a Flemish Franciscan missionary, recorded that: “The ordinary currency of the Russians is the skins of squirrel and miniver”. The mission after 30 Years of Liberal Metal Detecting in Archaeology – I. F., M.W.
Makarov 2012...

The more recent research findings have confirmed the widespread use of the “fur money” in Rus’. There is evidence from archaeozoology analysis of bone remains of fur-bearing animals discovered at early medieval settlement sites in the territory of northern Rus’; there is evidence also from quite a different class of objects too. Thanks to a breakthrough made in 1999 it is now safe to interpret wooden cylindrical objects, some with inscriptions and/or with a princely heraldic emblem recovered since 1951 at Velky Novgorod as wooden seals (at present, more than forty have been recorded)! V. L. Yanin has noted that “The cylinders were used as markers for sacks filled with part of the collected revenues, showing that the sack belonged to the Prince, to the Church or to the tax-collector himself, who, in accordance with the Russkaya Pravda, received a specific percentage of the sums he collected. Such sacks could have contained fur pelts and other valuables”. The wooden seals may be dated with some confidence to the eleventh century; the Dorogichin seals are likely to have been introduced sometime later. If this chronology is confirmed, then we would have proof that A. E. Musin was correct to claim that: “this archaic tradition [using wooden seals – I. F., M.W.], presumably rooted in Scandinavia, was replaced in the late eleventh century by the Dorogichin seals, inspired by the Byzantine tradition”.

In view of the findings from the latest research, we propose to link the Dorogichin seals with fur money, very likely with commerce, possibly the collecting of taxes, rather than with diplomacy.

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Liwoch R. 2015, Plomby typu drogichyńskiego z Drohiczyna nad Bugiem w Krakowskim Muzeum Archeologicznym, Materiały Archeologiczne XL, 237-244.
Musin A. E. 2012, Auf der Suche nach der Vergangenheit: Dorohičiner Plomben als Indikatoren mittelalterlicher Gren-

10 For fur trade in East Europe see Martin 1986.
13 Lewicki 1956.
14 Makarov 2012.
15 Yanin 2006, p. 203.
16 Musin 2012, p. 259.


Selected Dorogichin seals (before conservation treatment); 1–6: Photo by M. Wołoszyn; computer design I. Florkiewicz; 7–10: Photo by MNK; computer design A. Bochnak.

1–6 Czermno, Tyszowce County, Lubelskie Voivodeship, Poland (The seal finds are at present in the Regional Museum in Tomaszów Lubelski; subsequently, MT: 1 – Inv. No. MT/1912/19; 2 – MT/1912/38; 3 – MT/1912/46; 4 – MT/1912/54; 5 – MT/1912/82; 6 – MT/1912/78); 7–10 Drohiczyn, Siemiatycze County, Podlaskie Voivodeship, Poland (The seal finds are at present in the National Museum in Krakow; subsequently, MNK: 7 – Inv. No. MNK VII-V-3008; 8 – MNK VII-V-3024; 9 – MNK VII-V-5373; 10 – MNK VII-V-3035).