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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 thousand¹. We have evidence that Byzantine seals entered the territory of the Kievan Rus' en masse; moreover, with time seals came to be produced for the secular and the church authorities also on the territory of Rus'².

In this respect the territory of the Byzantine Empire and of the Kievan 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)³.

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 1864⁴; 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

researchers⁵ the function of the *Dorogichin* seals still remains a puzzle; in fact, to quote a fitting description proposed by Karol Bołsunowski, an early twentieth century Polish researcher (1838-1925) who studied the seals, they are "a Sphinx of sigillography"⁶.

1. The Dorogichin seals in modern research

The number of *Dorogichin* seal finds is estimated at present at approximately fifteen thousand. Most of them date from the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, their context of discovery is mostly unknown. The largest group of *Dorogichin* seals is now in the care of museums in Russia; a smaller series is held by various museums in Poland.

Another group of *Dorogichin* seals are finds from archaeological excavations made during the twentieth century.

1996 Valerij Perkhavko published a list of forty localities where lead seals had been discovered; only a small number of these find-sites are in the territory of the Volga Bulgaria and in Lithuania; the rest cluster in the territory of Kievan Rus'. The total number of these seals finds is estimated by Perkhavko at close to fifteen thousand; out of this number, no less than twelve thousand (or 80% of the series) come from Drohiczyn, twenty-five hundred (17%) - from the territory of northern Rus'. Only 3% were discovered in the southern and the western territory of Rus'. Additionally, the number of *Dorogichin* seals recorded in western and southern Rus' is never higher than 10 in a given site.

The situation in Poland used to be similar until the discoveries made at Czeremno in eastern Poland. Alarmed by the destruction of the archaeology of the early medieval settlement complex at Czeremno at the hands of treasure hunters in 2010 and 2011 the university archaeologists Andrzej Kokowski and Marcin Piotrowski, assisted by Artur Troncik from Lublin, made a metal detector survey and made a scatter pattern study of archaeological objects.

The harvest from this project has been an impressive series of twenty-five hundred archaeological objects, of which the most notable are two silver hoards and a group of 404 *Dorogichin* seals⁷. Over times, some more seals were recovered from amateur collectors.

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 Rzeszów Institute of Archaeology).

The Project is realized in an international cooperation: the key player is the Centre for the History and Culture of East Central Europe (GWZO) at the Leipzig University (Project *The Elbe Marches, Poland and Bohemia from the 10th to the 12th century*; Project coordinators: Prof. Dr. Ch. Lübke, Prof. Dr. M. Hardt). M. Wołoszyn is taking part in the project implementation in the period 2014-2019.

² Nesbitt 2008, p. 150, Yanin 1970, Yanin – Gaydukov 1998, 2015, Bulgakova 2004, Ivakin – Khrapunov – Seibt (eds.) 2015.

³ Suchodolski 2011.

⁴ Musianowicz 1957, Musin 2012.

⁵ Ershevskiy 1985, Perkhavko 1996, Beletskiy 1999, Zakharov 2005.

⁶ Bołsunowski 1902. See also Siemianowska 2010.

⁷ Piotrowski – Wołoszyn 2012, Bagińska – Piotrowski – Wołoszyn (eds.) 2012.

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 National Science Centre in Cracow, to study this extraordinary series of seals within the project: *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 is an interdisciplinary project and brings together specialists from many fields of research, including metallography (Aldona Garbacz-Klempka) and history (Adrian Jusupović: a historian specialized in Ruthenian palaeography).

In parallel to these activities, a scientific analysis is being made of the largest series of *Dorogichin* seals in Poland, now in the care of the National Museum in Cracow⁸.

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.

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 Rurikid 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.

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 numismatics⁹. 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 seals.

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.

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.

⁹ 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' merchants¹⁰. 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"¹¹. For us, the most relevant report is the one given by Abū Hāmid al Andalusī al-Gharnāfī (1080-1170). Around 1150, this native of Andalusia visited Kievan Rus' and recorded the following piece of information about fur money: "For their dealings among themselves they use old squirrel skins with no hair that cannot be used for anything [...] The workers string eighteen skins together with strong thread, forming a single bundle. At the end of the thread, they attach a piece of black lead, sealed with a die stamp bearing the image of the king. They charge a single skin out of the bundle in order to seal up the rest. No one may refuse to accept them, either when buying or selling"¹².

The Polish Arabist, Tadeusz Lewicki was the first to recognize that the piece[s] of "black lead" stamped with "the image of the king" described by Abū Hāmid al Andalusī al-Gharnāfī, could be type *Dorogichin* seals¹³. 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'¹⁴; 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 Veliky 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"¹⁵.

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"¹⁶.

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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¹⁰ For fur trade in East Europe see Martin 1986.

¹¹ Jackson P. – Jackson P. – Morgan D. (eds.) 2009, p. 204.

¹² Lunde P. – Stone C. (eds.) 2012, pp. 75-76.

¹³ Lewicki 1956.

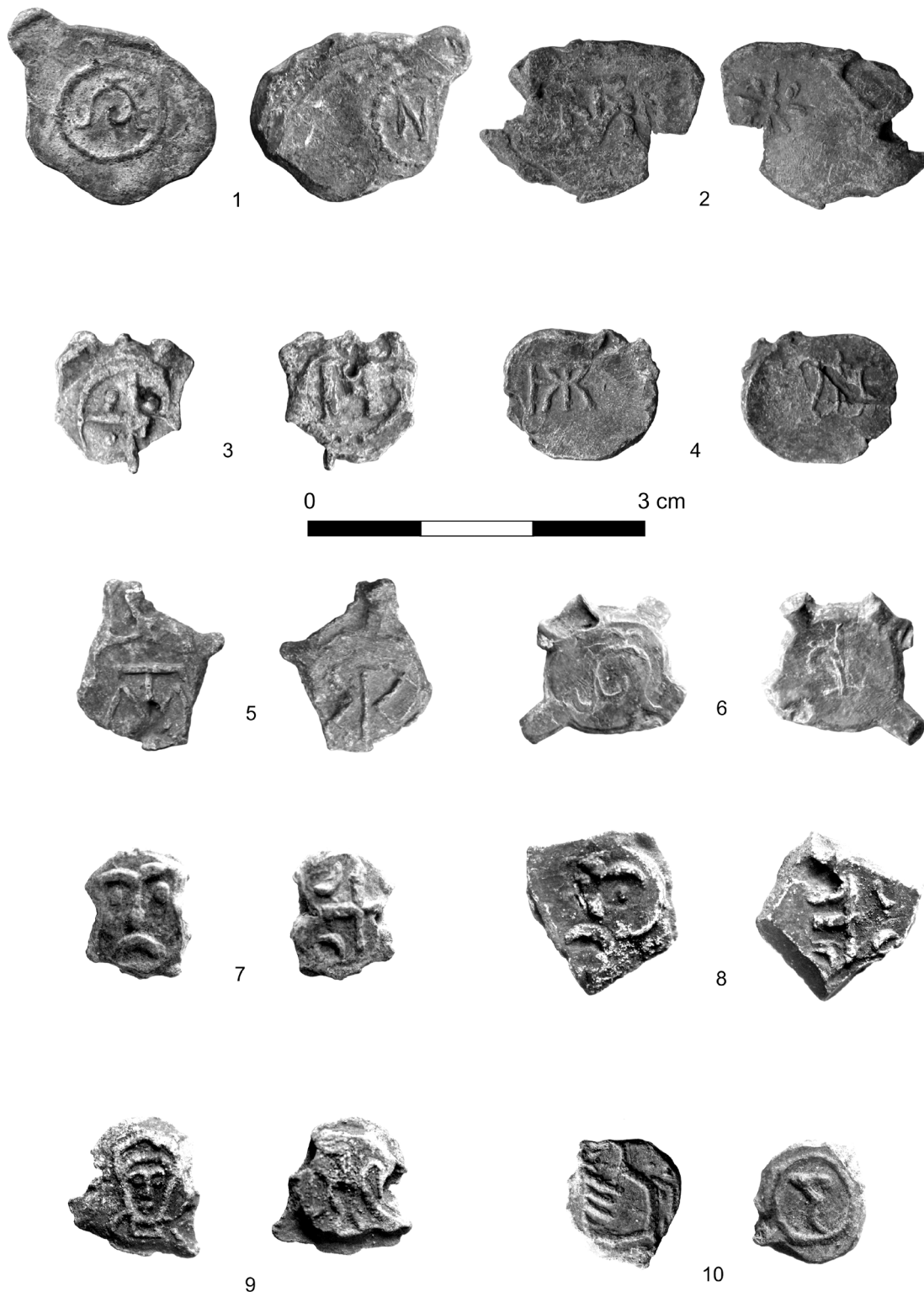
¹⁴ Makarov 2012.

¹⁵ Yanin 2006, p. 203.

¹⁶ Musin 2012, p. 259.

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PLATE



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 Czeremno, 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).