




Nikolay Kanev (Veliko Tŕrnovo)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0570-8078>

## TWO BYZANTINE SEALS FROM THE EXCAVATION OF THE MEDIEVAL FORTRESS “MALKOTO KALE” (YAMBOL REGION, BULGARIA)

**Abstract.** The present article aims to put into scholarly circulation two new unpublished Byzantine lead seals from the medieval fortress in the area of the village of Voden (municipality of Bolyarovo, Yambol region, Bulgaria). They were handed to the Regional Historical Museum in the town of Yambol as a result of the regular archaeological excavations of the site near the village of Voden, conducted in the period 2012–2019. The first seal dates from the last quarter of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and has a bust of the Holy Virgin with a halo and a round medallion with the image of the Infant Jesus Christ who blesses with both hands. From the legend on the reverse, it is clear that the bulla belonged to a Byzantine dignitary named Michael Tzitas, who advertises himself with the title of (*proto*)*kouropalates* and the position of *doux*. The second seal dates from the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> – the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and has an interesting and relatively rare iconographic plot depicting three military saints on the obverse, and an invocation to them on the reverse. The seal belongs to a clergyman – a metropolitan bishop of Athens, named Nicetas (Νικήτας).

**Keywords:** sigillography, history of the Byzantine Empire, Voden, Yambol, Bulgaria, Byzantine lead seals, Michael Tzitas, *protokouropalates*, *doux*, metropolitan of Athens, Nicetas

The role of sphragistics as a source of valuable information is beyond dispute<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the accumulation of enough data concerning the seal finds in the Bulgarian lands is of primary importance for the scholarly research of their medieval past. Any publication of a newfound seal is of enormous importance for the study of history. The present article aims at putting into scientific circulation so far unpublished artefacts from the Regional Historical Museum of Yambol, namely, two Byzantine lead seals (bullae) and three blank lead seals or

<sup>1</sup> On the role and importance of sigillography for the Byzantine studies, cf. e.g. J.-C. CHEYNET, *L'apport de la sigillographie aux études byzantines*, BB 62 (87), 2003, p. 47–58. Cf. also IDEM, *L'usage des sceaux à Byzance*, RO 10, 1997, p. 23–40.

lead cores<sup>2</sup>. They all originate from the excavations of “Malkoto kale” site near the village of Voden<sup>3</sup>.

The medieval fortress of “Malkoto kale” near Voden is situated on a hill with an altitude of 342 meters, accessible only from the south through a tiny saddle, due to the terrain being extremely steep from the other directions. As it has been said by the director of the excavations, there used to be a rather small fortress with an irregular quadrangular form, close to a square, with size 32 x 33 x 29 x 30 meters, closing a space slightly more than 10 ares, or 1083 square meters. It is evident from the excavations undertaken so far that we have a semi-round bastion in the NW corner of the fortress and a square tower in the middle of the western wall, situated just in front of the curtain. The thickness of the examined parts of the fortress wall is 2.00 m, built of quarry stones welded with white mortar. The preservation of the fortress walls in height varies between 2.5 and 3.8 m. At the northwest corner of the inner side of the fortress wall, there has been revealed two structural niches. The only examined entrance to the fortress is 1.55–1.60 m wide and is located in the middle of the northern fortress wall. As stated by S. Bakardzhiev, the stratigraphic observations in the research show the presence of three construction periods, the second construction period being associated with the thickening of the bastion, the extension of the premises to

<sup>2</sup> The sphragistic specimens were provided to me for reading, dating and publication by my colleague Dr. Stefan Bakardzhiev, director of the Regional History Museum – Yambol. I use the opportunity to thank him for this, as well as for the information provided to me about the archaeological context of their location.

<sup>3</sup> The medieval fortress is located in the locality of “Malkoto kale” – 2.5 km southeast of the village of Voden, Bolyarovo municipality, Yambol region. The archaeological excavations of the site began in 2008 under the supervision of Dr. Stefan Bakardzhiev and have been carried out by a team of the Regional Historical Museum – Yambol, continuing with some interruptions until now. So far the western half of the inner space of the fortress and parts of the outer face of the western and northern fortress walls have been uncovered. For the archaeological excavations of the fortress in more detail, cf. С. БАКЪРДЖИЕВ, *Аварийни археологически проучвания на късноантичната крепост “Малкото кале” край с. Воден, община Болярово, ВЯМ 5, 2008*, р. 2; ИДЕМ, *Археологически проучвания на късноантична и средновековна крепост “Малкото кале”, с. Воден, община Болярово, област Ямбол, АОР през 2009 г. (София 2010)*, р. 425–427; ИДЕМ, *Археологически проучвания на късноантична и средновековна крепост “Малкото кале”, с. Воден, община Болярово, област Ямбол, АОР през 2012 г. (София 2013)*, р. 457–459; ИДЕМ, Т. ВЪЛЧЕВ, *Археологически проучвания на средновековна крепост “Малкото кале”, с. Воден, община Болярово, област Ямбол, АОР през 2014 г. (София 2015)*, р. 703–706; S. BAKARDZHIIEV, *The Archaeological Field School in Malkoto kale near the Village of Voden, Bulgaria*, [in:] *Proceeding of 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Meeting EAA, Vilnius 2016*, р. 387; С. БАКЪРДЖИЕВ, Я. РУСЕВ, *Археологически проучвания на средновековна крепост “Малкото кале”, с. Воден, община Болярово, област Ямбол, АОР през 2016 г. (София 2017)*, р. 574–578; С. БАКЪРДЖИЕВ, Я. РУСЕВ, *Археологически проучвания на средновековна крепост “Малкото кале”, с. Воден, община Болярово, област Ямбол, АОР през 2018 г. (София 2019)*, р. 524–526; С. БАКЪРДЖИЕВ, Я. РУСЕВ, *Редовни археологически проучвания на средновековна крепост “Малкото кале” при с. Воден, община Болярово, АОР през 2019 г. (София 2020)*, р. 1196–1197.

the northern fortress wall and the partitioning of the interior of the room at the southern wall as well as the mortar screed of part of the yard. In the third period, a one-armed staircase was built on the inner side of the northern fortress wall. All findings, including the discovered bronze coins<sup>4</sup>, currently show that the medieval fortress “Malkoto kale” was built not earlier than the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and was accordingly burned and abandoned somewhere in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century – probably during the passing of the troops of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa during the Third Crusade<sup>5</sup>.

Undoubtedly, the sphragistic specimens discovered during the excavations have a definite role in clarifying the chronology of the fortress, as both seals are related to the first construction period in the inhabitation of the site. The first of the two seals was found in 2013 in a narrow round niche with a diameter of 0.22–0.25 m, located almost in the middle of the southern fortress wall, which, however, was sealed during the internal reconstruction of the adjoining room. The second bulla published here was discovered during the archaeological season of 2019 at the entrance of the fortress, under the mortar, which marks the ground level in the northern part of the yard<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> The numismatic finds from the excavations of the site in the period from 2008 to 2019 so far are relatively modest – a total of five Byzantine coins, four of which are well preserved and date from the time of the emperors Manuel I Comnenus (1143–1180), a total of three bronze coins, and Andronicus I Comnenus (1183–1185) – a bronze scyphate. In the last two years, however, the amount of finds increased, including coins, seals, luxury ceramics, jewellery, glassware, gold buttons for clothes. The number of coins reached fifteen and the number of seals reached eight. However, the seals of the most recent finds, among which there are also those of representatives of the Batatzes family, have not yet been made available to me for reading and publication.

<sup>5</sup> The interior space within the excavated part shows that initially, along with the construction of the fortress wall, along the inner face of the western and southern fortress walls a series of transitional rooms with a width of 6.00 m were built. The only separate room is in the northwest corner. Later, a whole series of narrow rooms with a width of 2.50 m was attached to the inner side of the northern fortress wall. The investigated premises form a courtyard with a rectangular shape and the following dimensions: in the north-south direction – 17.50 m, and in the east-west direction – 12.50 m. The northern half of the running level of the yard is covered with pink mortar. The studied premises are preserved in height from 0.65 to 1.90 m, and on their preserved parts the façades are decorated with mortar screeds, brick cassettes and niches, as the entrances were formed with brick arches. Decorative bricks and ceramic-plastic decorations were widely used in the construction, which shows the representative character of the studied object. The representative character of the fortress, which was probably the residence of a wealthy Byzantine noble (perhaps a *proniaros*, the centre of whose possessions was the fortress near the village of Voden?) is also supported by the finds. A large percentage of the discovered ceramics belongs to the group of luxury vessels – monochrome sgraffito, red and gold engobe coating, white clay ceramics. Among the finds are fragments of glass trays, an iron processional cross, a gilded cruciform bronze application from a small box and lead blanks, as well as the two lead seals published here. Along with these finds, the tips of arrows, spurs, bracelets, spindle whorls, coins, etc. were found. For all this, see the bibliography mentioned in the previous note.

<sup>6</sup> С. БАКЪРДЖИЕВ, *Археологически проучвания на “Малкото кале” през 2012...*, p. 457–459; ИДЕМ, Я. РУСЕВ, *Археологически проучвания на “Малкото кале” през 2018...*, p. 524–526.



### Seal of Michael Tzitas, (*proto*)*kuropalates* and *doux*

**Obverse:** Bust of Theotokos Episkepsis with outstretched arms and palms up in a gesture of prayer, with a halo and a breastplate medallion with the image of the Infant Jesus Christ. On her left side next to the halo is the letter Θ, part of the characteristic abbreviated spelling Μ(ήτη)ρ Θ(εοῦ), in translation – “Mother of God”. The image is framed by a partially preserved circle in the shape of a single solid line.

**Reverse:** Five-line inscription within a border of dots:

[+ΘΚΕΡΘ] || ΜΙΧΑΗΛ. || ΚΥΡΟΠΑΛ. || ΤΗΣΔΥΚ || . ΩΤ .. Τ,

= “[+Θ(εοτό)κε β(οή)θ(ει)] Μιχαήλ (πρωτο)κουροπαλ[ά]τη (καὶ) δουκ(ι) [τ]ῷ Τ[ζ]ι[τ]α”  
i.e. “+Θεοτόκε βοήθει Μιχαήλ πρωτοκουροπαλάτη καὶ δουκὶ τῷ Τζίτα”

in translation: + *Mother of God, help Michael Tzitas, protokouropalates and doux.*

The dating of the seal refers to the last quarter of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. This dating of the seal, judging by the combination of Michael’s honorary title of *protokouropalates* and the high military office of *doux* which he held, can be assigned in particular to the first ten or fifteen years of the reign of Alexius I Komnenos, and in any case, it does not go beyond the end of his reign.

The seal is mentioned in Zh. Zhekova, *Pechati na edin personazh ot “Aleksiadata”*, p. 126–127<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> The seal is included in the overview of the sphragistic evidence for Michael Tzitas in Zhenya Zhekova’s recent publication, without its specific description and without mentioning its metrical data (cf. Ж. ЖЕКОВА, *Печати на един персонаж от “Алексиадата”*, НСЕ 17, 2021, p. 126–127). See also below footnote 12.

It is a relatively high-quality imprint with a diameter of 16 mm. Since the lead core on which the bulla was printed, was smaller than the die used to print it, the outermost parts of the image of the Blessed Virgin (mostly the upper part of the head) on the obverse, the line of the circle in which it is inscribed and the outermost peripheral parts of the legend on the reverse side of the seal, respectively, failed to fit on the available surface. For this reason, the first line at the beginning of the legend<sup>8</sup> remained outside the imprint on the reverse, also and the last letter of second line. The first letter of the name of the seal holder (M) was partially affected, as well as the first letter of the next two lines – *kappa* (K) and *tau* (T) respectively but without this making it impossible to read them. Additional mechanical deformation has caused partial erasure of the last two letters of the third line of the inscription – *alpha* (A) and *lambda* (Λ), but this partial erasure is also insufficient to impede the reading of the legend. The same applies to the *kappa* (K), partially affected by the deformation, at the end of the penultimate row. On the last line of the legend, the first letter is completely erased and almost completely – the penultimate letter sign.

The preservation of the seal, especially the size and arrangement of the letters, allows us to conclude categorically that there was no other deleted last line of letters on the reverse. The remaining space next to the preserved part of the circle of dots, despite having suffered mechanical deformation, is obviously extremely insufficient for the placement of letter characters. It could possibly fit a small decorative element or a cross, although this is very unlikely and there was nothing in this very narrow space. This is important so far as it demonstrates that the owner of the seal considered the space to be sufficient for the spelling of his surname or patronymic name only in an abbreviated form of only three (or possibly four) letters. Even in this way, it was considered to be fully identifiable by the potential addressees of the sealed correspondence, that is, it was a well-known family name or patronym. Only the first letter of the latter – *tau* (T), is clearly visible, as well as the same letter being the last written letter sign, which is the third or possibly the fourth one in the composition of the family name.

Is it possible in this situation to draw conclusions and, accordingly, reasonable assumptions about the surname (or patronym) of the *protokouropalates* and *doux* Michael in question? His position as a *doux*, attested on his seal, quite clearly shows that he belonged to the group of high-ranking Byzantine military officials. As already mentioned, the owner of the seal considered that the spelling of his surname or the patronymic name in an abbreviated form of only three or possibly four letters was quite sufficient for it to be fully recognizable in this form for the addressees of his correspondence, sealed with his bulla, i.e. it is obviously a surname well-known to his contemporaries. This suggests that in view of the way the

<sup>8</sup> Only the bottom part of the letters on the top line are visible. Even so they suggest that the invocation ΘΚΡ,Θ, (i.e. Θεοτόκε βοήθει) is written.

surname or patronymic name is written in the legend on the reverse, the possible reasonable and logical variants for the latter are actually not so many.

In the small space between the first letter of the surname (or the patronym) and the last written character from it, there is a place to contain only one letter, or possibly two at most. In this case at least one of them must be such a letter that, due to the way it is written, does not take up much space, *iota* (I), for example. As this space has suffered from a blow that almost completely erased what had been written there, we cannot say with absolute certainty as to whether the virtually erased letters after the first letter of the surname or patronym are one or two. If they are two, then given the above-mentioned arguments and in the context of the well-visible and safe first and last letters (T and again T) as well as the partially preserved traces of the almost deleted second letter of the surname (or patronym), which seems to be Z, the possible reconstruction of the latter is almost inevitably reduced to T [ZI] T, that is, Τζίτρας. The name in question, Tzitas (Τζίτρας) is well-known at the time of Alexius I Comnenus, according to both written and sphragistic data. In this situation, undoubtedly, the reconstruction seems logical and justified. In its favour speaks the bulla, mentioned in 1884 by Gustave Schlumberger, of a certain Michael Tzitas, *protokouropalates* and *doux*<sup>9</sup>. Nowadays, we have a whole series of different seals with the name of Michael Tzitas<sup>10</sup>. The seals of Michael Tzitas as a private person published so far are very

<sup>9</sup> G. SCHLUMBERGER, *Sigillographie de l'empire byzantin*, Paris 1884, p. 492. Seals of Michael Tzitas, *protokouropalates* and *doux* are also mentioned by Jean-Claude Cheynet, unfortunately – like G. Schlumberger – also without accompanying images, but with a description, and therefore it is not possible to draw conclusions whether these are identical with this one, which is mentioned in the passing by Schlumberger, or it is about seals from a different pair of dies (J.-C. CHEYNET, D. THÉODORIDIS, *Sceaux byzantins de la collection Théodoridis. Les sceaux patronymiques*, Paris 2010, p. 224 and note 556). G. SCHLUMBERGER in his *Sigillographie...*, p. 740 mentions that it was M. Sorlin-Dorigny who communicated to him the seal of Michael Tzittas, *protokouropalates* and *doux* (as described on p. 492, although on p. 740 Schlumberger notes only *kouropalates*). Since the collection of M. Sorlin-Dorigny ended up in the IFEB, the specimen IFEB 712 should be the one described by Schlumberger.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. J.-C. CHEYNET, D. THÉODORIDIS, *Sceaux byzantins de la collection Théodoridis...*, p. 223–224; Ж. ЖЕКОВА, *Печати на един персонаж от "Алексиадама"*..., p. 125–127. To the same Michael Tzitas, who is known from the *Alexias* of Anna Comnena, belong at least two of the four groups of seals with this name and honorary titles, described by Cheynet and Theodoridis: of Michael Tzitas, *protokouropalates* and *doux*, and Michael Tzitas, as *nobelissimos*. They have practically the same iconographic plot on their obverse, namely, with a bust of the Mother of God, while the other two (as a *magistros* and as a *proedros*) have a bust of a saint, who is difficult to determine, and an image of St. Demetrios respectively (cf. J.-C. CHEYNET, D. THÉODORIDIS, *Sceaux byzantins de la collection Théodoridis...*, p. 224; A.-K. WASSILIOU-SEIBT, *Corpus der byzantinischen Siegel mit metrischen Legenden*, vol. II, Wien 2016 [= WBS, 28.2], no. 2614). Despite their chronological proximity, their association with the same person is hypothetical, although it could not be excluded. In addition, seals are known of Michael Tzitas as a private person, again with very similar busts of the Mother of God, which their publishers date either to the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> or the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, or the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (cf. C. STAVRAKOS, *Die byzantinischen Bleisiegel mit Familiennamen aus der Sammlung des numismatischen Museums Athen*, Wiesbaden 2000, p. 380; J.-C. CHEYNET,



similar in their iconography and palaeography to the bulla published here. The mode of inscription of the family name Tzitas on its reverse side practically coincides with the inscription of the same on the seal of Michael Tzitas as *protokouropalates* and *doux* mentioned by Cheynet and Theodoridis<sup>11</sup>. In this situation, the reconstruction of the surname/patronym of the reverse as T [ZI] T = Τζιτ(ας), that is, Tzitas, can be considered completely certain and unquestionable.

The dating of the bulla of *Michael Tzitas, protokouropalates and doux*, mentioned by Cheynet and Theodoridis, refers to the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and is synchronous with the dating of the seal published here. Taking into consideration the similarities between the seals and their coinciding dates, their owner clearly is supposed to be the same person<sup>12</sup> and evidently the seal published here is another parallel specimen of the bulla of *Michael Tzitas, protokouropalates and doux*<sup>13</sup>. We know from the written sources of the

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D. THÉODORIDIS, *Sceaux byzantins de la collection Théodoridis...*, p. 223–224, no. 213; R. МИХАЙЛОВСКИ, *A Collection of Medieval Seals from the Fortress Kale in Skopje excavated between 2007 and 2012*, B 86, 2016, p. 292–293, no. 34; A.-K. WASSILIOU-SEIBT, *Corpus der byzantinischen Siegel...*, no. 2614). With all probability, they belong to the same Michael Tzitas to whom the seal published here is also attributed. According to Zhenya Zhekova (cf. Ж. ЖЕКОВА, *Печати на един персонаж от “Алексиадама”...*, p. 125–127), all groups of seals with the name of Michael Tzitas (with the exception of that of *Michael Tzitas, protospatharios, hypatos and judge of the velum and the Armeniakon* of the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, published by Christos Stavrakos – cf. C. STAVRAKOS, *Die byzantinischen Bleisiegel...*, 4.1.7), regardless of the differences in their iconography, belong to the same person – the Byzantine general mentioned in the *Alexias*.

<sup>11</sup> J.-C. CHEYNET, D. THÉODORIDIS, *Sceaux byzantins de la collection Théodoridis...*, p. 224.

<sup>12</sup> In the cited overview article on the seals of Michael Tzitas, Zhenya Zhekova points out that the entire group of his seals as *protokouropalates and doux* consists of four specimens printed with the same bullotyrrion, namely – the one mentioned by G. SCHLUMBERGER (*Sigillographie...*, p. 492), the one from the collection of the Institute of Byzantine Studies in Paris (Institut français d'études byzantines) – according to her – IFEB, no. 071, one specimen offered at the Pecunem auction in 2013 (*Pecunem Auction* 8/06.10.2013, lot 535), as well as the seal of Michael Tzitas from the fortress near the village of Voden published here. In fact, the specimen from the Institut français d'études byzantines is the one cited by Jean-Claude Cheyne – IFEB, no. 712 (cf. J.-C. CHEYNET, D. THÉODORIDIS, *Sceaux byzantins de la collection Théodoridis...*, p. 224, footnote 556). The images of the last three of the four seals mentioned by Zh. Zhekova, especially in view of the fact that she also provides a photo of the reverse of the seal from the Institut français d'études byzantines (which J.-C. Cheynet only mentions, but without publishing images of it), provide a basis to her claim that they are from the same bullotyrrion. At the same time, it is strange that Zhekova includes as a separate fourth (chronologically first) parallel specimen in this group the seal of the *protokouropalates* Michael Tzitas mentioned by G. Schlumberger without description and without image. As indicated here in footnote 9, this specimen should be precisely the IFEB 712 cited by Cheynet, i.e. the four seals from this group, which Zhekova indicates are from the same bullotyrrion, are actually three. On the other hand, she missed another seal of *Michael Tzitas, protokouropalates and doux*, which Cheynet cites together with IFEB 712, namely the one from the collection of the American Numismatic Society (ANS Bellingher 14.934), so the number of the seals from this group after all is indeed four.

<sup>13</sup> However, one other, albeit very unlikely, possibility should be mentioned. The lead blank on which the specimen published here was printed, as mentioned above, is smaller than the dies used

Byzantine military leader Michael Tzitas. Anna Comnena shows him as a person famous for his bravery in the battle of Nicaea in 1097, later commissioned by Alexius I Comnenus to accompany the crusaders from the last wave of the First Crusade in 1101<sup>14</sup>.

The personal name Τζίτας is known since the early Byzantine period<sup>15</sup>. It appeared as a surname (or patronym) in the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and in all probability “our” Michael Tzitas, the military leader known to us from the *Alexias*, was its first or possibly second bearer, who is well-represented in the Byzantine elite from 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>16</sup>.



### Seal of Nicetas, metropolitan of Athens

A quality imprint with a relatively high degree of preservation, despite some mechanically caused damage in the middle and at the extreme right part of its front side and, respectively, in the extreme left part of its reverse side. The diameter of the seal is 18 mm and its thickness is 2 mm. Its centring slightly deviates from the direction of the cord groove<sup>17</sup>.

for this purpose, and therefore (although highly improbable) the possibility that at the end of the second line of the legend on the reverse actually has no *alpha* (A) cannot be entirely ruled out. In this case, the reverse legend should read as follows: “[+Θ(εοτό)κε β(οή)θ(ει)] Μιχαήλ κουροπαλάτη (καί) δουκ(ι) [τ]ῷ Τ[ζ]ι[τ]α(α)”, i.e. +*Mother of God, help Michael Tzitas, kuropalates and doux*.

<sup>14</sup> ANNA COMNENA, *The Alexiad*, ed. et trans. E.A.S. DAWES, Cambridge 2000, p. 193, 205.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. P. SPECK, C. SODE, *Byzantinische Bleisiegel in Berlin II*, Bonn 1987, p. 208.

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of the bearers of the surname/patronym Τζίτας known to us from various sources, see e.g. in J.-C. CHEYNET, D. THÉODORIDIS, *Sceaux byzantins de la collection Théodoridis...*, p. 224.

<sup>17</sup> At about 12–15° relative to the openings of the channel, which are also relatively wide (2 x 4 mm in diameter) and this, too, may have influenced the appearance of the barely perceptible (more clearly visible on the obverse) line of deformation, which follows the direction of the channel.



**Obverse:** Full-length portraits of three uncertain military saints in military garments. Border of dots.

Each of the saints has the usual halo around his head, and with his left hand, he leans on a rounded shield resting on the ground next to his left leg. The central figure of a saint holds a spear in his right hand, and the one to his left – a sword resting on his right shoulder. The extreme right part of the figure, located to the right of the central one, has remained outside the field of the obverse, and it is generally partially deformed and somewhat half-erased from slipping, but, as far as it can be seen, he holds a sword in his right hand too. Although relatively weak, initial traces of corrosion could be seen in some limited areas. Above the left shoulder of the far-left figure, the two signs are visible  $\Theta \Theta$ , that is, the shortened form of the name of St. Theodore (Ἅγιος Θεόδωρος) –  $\Theta \Theta$ (εόδωρος). This suggests that the saints on either side of the central figure could possibly be St. Theodore Tyrone and St. Theodore Stratilates. At the top left above the head of the central figure is also seen a sigla, which seems to be the abbreviation for ἅγιος ( $\Theta$ ).

**Reverse:** Inscription in five lines, within a border of dots:

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 + ΑΓΙΟΙ || ΤΨΘΥΡ . || ΤΕΝΙΚΗ .. || ΤΟΝΑΘ. || ΝΟ ..  
 = + ἅγιοι τοῦ Θεοῦ β(οη)[θ](εἰ)τε Νική[τα] τον Αθ[η]νο[ν]  
 i.e. “+ Ἄγιοι τοῦ Θεοῦ βοηθεῖτε Νικήτα τῶν Αθηνῶν+”  
 in translation + *God’s saints, protect Nicetas (metropolitan) of Athens*<sup>18</sup>.

The seal dates back to the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> or the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. No parallels known.

It should be noted that the legend on the reverse of this bulla contains an interesting and relatively rare in sphragistic objects variant of invocation in the plural, addressed to the three saints depicted on the obverse at once. The second, third, fourth and fifth lines of the legend suffered at their ends of the above-mentioned mechanically caused damage to the surface of the field, making it difficult to read the last two letters of the second line and the penultimate letter of the third and the fourth lines. The last letter of the third and, respectively, of the fourth line and the last two characters of the last, fifth line are practically almost completely erased.

The seal belongs to a clerical person named Nicetas. At first glance, the image of the obverse, that is, the three military saints could very easily lead to the opposite conclusion. We could expect such images to be depicted on the bulla of a person, belonging to the military class, not a member of the clergy. On the other hand, the lack of any title and/or position mentioned in the text of the legend

<sup>18</sup> The verb may be βοηθεῖτε (present tense, imperative) or βοηθοῖτε (present tense, optative = may you help).

of the reverse in turn seems to lead to the conclusion that it is a seal of a private person. The relatively unusual and rare invocation on this kind of sphragistic specimen is not, however, a typical formula for a layperson. Moreover, it is crucial to read the end of the legend, where there is neither a patronymic name, nor a surname, but follows the name of a specific ecclesiastical see, which, given the preserved letters, can almost certainly be none other than that of Athens. Thus, in fact, the seal belonged to an Athenian metropolitan named Nicetas – Νικήτας τῶν Ἀθηνῶν.

Is it possible, however, to make an even more specific and precise attribution concerning the owner of this seal? Based on the reading of his name (Nicetas) and the dating of the seal, along with the possible reading of the end of the legend – τῶν Ἀθηνῶν, we could conclude that the person was the head of the metropolitan diocese of Athens. In that case, a very specific attribution can be offered with an extremely high degree of reliability: the metropolitan of Athens Nicetas III (ca. 1087–1103), who is also attested as one of the participants of the Synod of Blachernae, organized by Emperor Alexius I Comnenus in 1094<sup>19</sup>. According to an inscription from the Parthenon, the metropolitan of Athens, Nicetas III, died on April 3, 1103, which in this case is the possible *terminus ante quem* for the dating of this bulla and, accordingly, for the correspondence with the fortress near the village of Voden<sup>20</sup>.

It seems wrong that V. Laurent attributes to him a metric seal known from two specimens from the first quarter of the 12<sup>th</sup> century of a homonymous metropolitan of Athens<sup>21</sup>. This seal, however, seems to be of a slightly later date (at least one or two decades after the death of Nicetas III) and according to the very authoritative PBW<sup>22</sup>, dates to or shortly after 1115<sup>23</sup>. So far as for quite a long period of nearly half a century after the beginning of the second decade of the twelfth century, there is almost no data on the chronology and holders of the Athenian metropolitan cathedral (except possibly for a certain Gerasimus (?), without obvious chronological precision), it seems very probable that this metric seal belonged to another Athenian metropolitan named Nicetas (IV). This Nicetas has presumably presided over the see of Athens soon or even immediately after the successor

<sup>19</sup> Cf. P. GAUTIER, *Le synode des Blachernes (fin 1094). Etude prosopographique*, REB 29, 1971, p. 218, 266–267, no. III.13.

<sup>20</sup> According to Paul Gautier, the date of his death was 28 April (cf. P. GAUTIER, *Le synode des Blachernes...*, p. 266–267, footnote 5).

<sup>21</sup> Н.П. ЛИХАЧЕВ, *Историческое значение италогреческой иконописи, изображения Богоматери в произведениях италогреческих иконописцев и их влияние на композиции некоторых прославленных русских икон*, Санкт Петербург 1911, p. 100; V. LAURENT, *Le corpus des sceaux de l'Empire byzantin*, vol. V, *L'Église*, Paris 1963, part 1, no. 601.

<sup>22</sup> *Prosopography of the Byzantine World*, 2016, ed. M. JEFFREYS et al. King's College London, 2017 (cetera: PBW 2016), <http://pbw2016.kdl.kcl.ac.uk> [20 VII 2021].

<sup>23</sup> Cf. PBW 2016, Niketas 20301, <http://pbw2016.kdl.kcl.ac.uk/person/Niketas/20301/> [20 VII 2021].

of Nicetas III, the metropolitan Nicephorus, whose tenure lasted until ca. 1112 (or 1121<sup>24</sup>). This explains the great difference between those two types of bullae, as the one published here is that, which belonged to the Athenian metropolitan Nicetas III.

For the reader’s convenience, Table 1 below presents a list of the known names of metropolitans of Athens during the period between the 30s of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the 60s of the 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>25</sup>.

**Table 1**

**List of the known names of metropolitans of Athens between ca. 1030s and the 1160s.**

Leo I	ca. 1030–1060
Leo II Rektor	1060/1061–1069
John V Blachernites	1069–1086
Nicetas III	ca. 1087–1103
Nicephorus	ca. 1103 – ca. 1112 (or 1121)
Gerasimus?	?
Leo III Xeros	? – 1153
George II Bourtzes	ca. 1153/1156–1160
Nicolas I Hagiotheodorites	ca. 1160/1166–1175

The unusual iconography is striking – an image of three military saints, which is uncharacteristic not only for the seals of the Athenian metropolitans, but also for representatives of the clergy in general. In fact, similar iconography is rarely found on the seals of secular people. For the metropolitans of Athens during this period, a traditional iconographic image on their seals was that of the Virgin and only those of Metropolitan John (probably the direct predecessor of Nicetas III at the head of the Athenian Diocese) had an image of St. Nicholas<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *PBW* 2016, Nikephoros 188, <http://pbw2016.kdl.kcl.ac.uk/person/Nikephoros/188/> [20 VII 2021].

<sup>25</sup> In this regard, cf. V. LAURENT, *La liste épiscopale de la métropole d’Athènes d’après le Synodicon d’une de ses églises suffragantes*, Bucharest 1948 [= AOC, 1], p. 272–291; cf. also J. DARROUZÈS, *Obit de deux métropolitans d’Athènes, Léon Xéros et Georges Bourtzès, d’après les inscriptions du Parthenon*, REB 20, 1962, p. 190–196.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. e.g. V. LAURENT, *Le corpus des sceaux de l’Empire byzantin...*, vol. V, part 1, nos. 585–607 (in particular, the seal of Metropolitan John of Athens with the image of St. Nicholas is under no. 600).

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In addition to these two seals, during the excavations of the medieval fortress in the “Malkoto kale” site near the village of Voden were found three blank lead seals or lead cores dating from the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century – 12<sup>th</sup> century. There are no traces of images on them, but at the same time, at least two of these three lead artefacts have marks that indicate that they were used<sup>27</sup>. This suggests that these are not just lead cores, but that they may have been used as a kind of commercial or customs seals, possibly to seal shipments, such as luxury goods intended for the ruler of the castle or his family<sup>28</sup>. Exactly these two were found practically at the same place – in sq. C-4 of the fortress plan – near the eastern wall of the northernmost of the interconnected transitional rooms, located next to the western fortress wall, one on the inside, and the other – on the outside of the wall of the room.

The artefacts published in this article undoubtedly illustrate and enrich the picture of the life in the fortified area of “Malkoto kale” near the village of Voden (Bolyarovo municipality, Yambol region) in the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the 12<sup>th</sup> century, that is, at the time of Alexius I Comnenus. More generally, they present the situation in Byzantine Thrace during this period. They fully fit into the dating of the entire existence of this site, which was proposed by its researchers, S. Bakardzhiev and his team, and in turn, fully confirm it.

The sphragistic specimens from the fortress in the area of “Malkoto kale” near the village of Voden show that especially at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century a sufficiently influential and wealthy person resided there as an addressee of correspondence that associates him with important representatives of the higher clergy and the military-administrative elite of the empire. Such a person of the higher clergy was, by all means, the metropolitan of Athens Nicetas III, a participant in the Synod of Blachernae organized by Emperor Alexius I in 1094. Another person of similar rank, but from the Byzantine military-administrative elite, was the (*proto*)*kouropalates* and *doux* Michael Tzitas, especially having in mind that the latter was a sufficiently famous and well-placed military leader of Alexius I Comnenus and was not accidentally mentioned in Anna Comnena’s *Alexias*. In fact, the two correspondences in question could

<sup>27</sup> They are published in Н. КЪНЕВ, *Сфрагистични находки от средновековната крепост край с. Воден, Ямболска област*, [in:] *Юбилеен сборник в чест на 70-годишнината на проф. Борис Борисов* (in press), nos. 3.1–3.3. Also, a plan of the fortress in the area “Malkoto kale” near the village of Voden (fig. 6) is presented in the article, on which the exact locations of the discovered sigillo-graphic findings (including the blank lead seals) are indicated.

<sup>28</sup> The notion of an aristocratic and luxurious lifestyle of the owners of the fortified residence near the village of Voden is supported by the luxurious ceramics, ornaments, glassware, gold buttons for clothes and even oyster shells discovered during the excavations by Stefan Bakardzhiev and Yavor Rusev.

most likely be attributed to the late 80s or the first half of the 90s of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, which also leads to interesting thoughts and conclusions about the owner, the historical context and the role of the fortified site near the village of Voden.

In turn, the blank (customs or commercial) lead seals found there give a serious reason to assume that at the site of the area of “Malkoto kale” near the village of Voden certain shipments were received that seem to have been valuable enough to be sealed, that is, more expensive and luxurious goods. By the way, the fact that the exact location of one of these artefacts in question and the bulla of the (*proto*)*kouropalates* and *doux* Michael Tzitas coincides is interesting, albeit it could be just by chance. Undoubtedly, the receipt of correspondence from influential persons, one of which can hardly be reconciled with an assumption of its official character, indirectly supports the admission of the nature of the consignments as evidenced by the seals found there.

All this, and in particular – above all the seals found at the site near the village of Voden, combined with its overall appearance and character as a type of complex, discovered during archaeological excavations by Stefan Bakardzhiev and his team, quite reasonably allows the conclusion that this fortified complex seems to have in fact been a fortified residence. It was built probably in the last third (or even in the last two decades) of the 11<sup>th</sup> century as the seat of a sufficiently significant and wealthy representative of the Byzantine provincial elite, who acquired and ruled the surrounding area in the form of a *pronoia*<sup>29</sup>. The owner of this fortified residence seems to have belonged to an aristocratic family with a sufficiently influential clan and personal ties.

The existence of such a *pronoia* type estate in the area of the fortified residence of “Malkoto kale” near the village of Voden is in line with the overall trend during the reign of Emperor Alexius I Comnenus to form an aristocratic military class of *pronoiaroi*. Some of those men received quite extensive, in terms of income and territorial scope, *pronoiai*. This class is in fact largely a Byzantine replica of the Western European feudal knighthood, and accordingly, the existence of fortified residences of *pronoiaroi*, such as the one near the village of Voden, is also an answer to the question of the existence of castles of the Byzantine aristocracy (or at least specifically from the age of the Comneni onwards). The tendency towards a larger distribution of *pronoiai* and for an increase of the representatives of that stratum under Emperor Alexius I Comnenus is connected with the need for measures to strengthen the military class in Byzantium and thus to ensure the much-needed effectiveness in dealing with the many external

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<sup>29</sup> For the institution of *pronoia* and its development, cf. e.g. G. OSTROGORSKI, *Pronija: prilog istorii feudalizma u Vizantiji i u juznoslovenskim zeljama*, Beograd 1951; IDEM, *Die pronoia unter den Komnenen*, ЗРВИ 12, 1970, p. 41–54; M.C. BARTUSIS, *Land and Privilege in Byzantium. The Institution of Pronoia*, Cambridge 2013, as well as the ODB, vol. III, p. 1733–1734 and the bibliography cited there.

enemies. The trend was connected, moreover, with the aspiration of Alexius I by providing *pronoiai* in the Balkan territories of the empire to compensate, at least partly, the representatives of the Anatolian aristocracy, who lost their possessions in the last third of the 11<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the Seljuk invasion of Asia Minor, which took almost the entire Byzantine East. In that context, the “pronoia” policy of Alexius I was definitely an integral part of the very core of the system of government of the Comnenus dynasty and the formation and strengthening of the so-called *Comnenus clan*<sup>30</sup>.

Undoubtedly, the receipt of correspondence by senders who were sufficiently elevated representatives of the church and military elite in Byzantium at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, from their addressee in the fortified residence near the village of Voden speaks for itself, that he himself was an important person. The sphragistic data support the thesis, along with the appearance and character of the complex in the area of “Malkoto kale”, that the site in question is actually the fortified residence of the family of a Byzantine provincial noble – *pronoiarhos*.

Furthermore, it should be noted that thanks to the lead seal of the Athenian metropolitan Nicetas III (ca. 1087–1103) published here and hitherto unknown, and in view of the fact that there is a completely different type of metric seal of the metropolitan of Athens also with the name of Nicetas, which dates back to the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but is chronologically posterior to the bulla of Nicetas III introduced into scholarly circulation with this publication, it is possible to ascertain the existence of another hitherto unknown metropolitan of Athens, namely Nicetas IV. He was the head of the Athenian metropolitan diocese sometime after 1112 and definitely before the middle of the century, i.e. after metropolitan Nicephorus and before metropolitan Gerasimus, most probably in the second half of the first quarter of the twelfth century, which is a significant contribution to filling the gap in the names and chronology of the Athenian metropolitans during one of the longest “blank spots” in the history of the Athenian ecclesiastical cathedra and respectively in the list of its ecclesiastical leaders – the period between 1112/1121 and 1153/1157, when George II Bourtzes was certainly at the head of the Athenian metropolitan diocese<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> The influx of Byzantine, so to speak, Anatolian aristocrats, including those of Armenian and Georgian origin, into the Balkan possessions of Byzantium in the last quarter of the 11<sup>th</sup> century is indisputable. Some of them received *pronoiai*, as a form of compensation for the estates they had lost in Asia Minor. With regard to this, it is sufficient to cite the examples of representatives of such families as Bakuriani (or Pakuriani), Arshakids, Aspjeti etc., whose increased presence in the Balkans during this period, and particularly in Thrace is evidenced by sphragistic data (cf., for example, Н. КЪНЕВ, *Нови сфрагистични находки от Поморие*, Епо 23.1, 2015 (2017), p. 35–36; Н. КЪНЕВ, О. АЛЕКСАНДРОВ, *Моливдовул на протокурупалата Пакуриан Аршакид, открит в Поморие*, ИИМ.П 2, 2017, p. 158–162, as well as the titles cited there).

<sup>31</sup> In all likelihood, George II Bourtzes succeeded as Metropolitan of Athens Leo III Xeros, who is only known to have died on January 18, 1153 (cf. J. DARROUZÈS, *Obit de deux métropolités d’Athènes...*,



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p. 192; cf. also PBW 2016, Leon 225, <http://pbw2016.kdl.kcl.ac.uk/person/Leon/225/> [20 VII 2021]), but the first absolutely certain information about George Bourtzès as Metropolitan of Athens dates back to 1156/1157 (cf. J. DARROUZÈS, *Obit de deux métropolités d’Athènes...*, p. 193–195; cf. also PBW 2016, Georgios 20103, <http://pbw2016.kdl.kcl.ac.uk/person/Georgios/20103/> [20 VII 2021]).

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**Nikolay Kanév**

"St. Cyril and St. Methodius" University of Veliko Tărnovo

Department of Ancient and Medieval History

Faculty of History

2 Teodosiy Tarnovski Str.

5000 Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria

[kanev\\_nikolay@hotmail.com](mailto:kanev_nikolay@hotmail.com)