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UDK:902.2(497.74):929.651(495.02)

Original research paper

A RARE BYZANTINE LEAD SEAL FROM MEDIEVAL BUČIN**Abstract:**

For centuries the Byzantines, from humble monks and laymen to highly placed grandees and emperors, used lead seals to “lock” official and private correspondence and to validate or authenticate documents. The details contained on seals preserved shed light on many aspects of the Byzantine world, principally the structure of its civil, military, and ecclesiastical administrations, the careers and locations of its officials, and the responses to the ever-changing fortunes of the empire over its millennial existence. The inscriptions on the seals echo, as their images reflect, the beliefs and perspectives of people who but for the survival of their seals would be lost to history. The seals often provide the key evidence needed to outline a career, to chart the rise and decline of a family, or to confirm the presence of an individual at a given place or time. One such rare specimen, found during archaeological field surveys within the project “Old Towns and Fortifications 2019” in the vicinity of the site Kale, medieval Bučin, gives us information about its owner, a member of the highest Byzantine aristocracy, and ill-fated emperor from turbulent times of late 12th – early 13th century.

Key words: sigillography, byzantine, medieval, aristocracy, Laskaris

Introduction.

The project “Old Towns and Fortresses 2019” of the Faculty of Philosophy, Skopje aims to carry out archaeological surveys in several municipalities in Pelagonia, Povardarie, and Eastern Macedonia, with the goal of chronological and typological identification of the sites, preparation of planimetry, and documentation of all surface findings and phenomena as well as documenting their endangerment and damage. The works are performed under the guidance of the professional manager Prof. Viktor Lilčikj Adams, with a professional team of archaeologists and a numismatologist.¹

¹ In composition: Prof. Antonio Jakimovski, Deputy Head, Prof. Dragi Mitrevski, Prof. Marjan Jovanov, Prof. Irena Teodora Vesevska, Bosko Angelovski, PhD, Vanco Miloshevski, M.A., numismatologist, Aleksandar Ilievski, Goran Lilčič, and, if necessary, other expert associates, such as colleagues archaeologists Igor Širtovski and Naum Nalbantoski, who were part of the team in the surveys in Demir Hisar. On this occasion, I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the opportunity to publish this finding immediately.

One of such sites is “Kale”, near the village Bučin, located in the Prilep field, as the southernmost village in the municipality of Kruševo and a junction between the cities of Kruševo (19 km), Demir Hisar (15 km), Bitola (30 km) and Prilep (25 km), north of Mount Dervenik.

It is the name for the peak of a volcanic pile 1.5 km south of Bučin and 240 m above the surrounding area (845 m above sea level). The river Crna, exiting the Demir Hisar Strait, turns in a large bow around the Kale before it breaks into the Pelagonian field. Up from the top, there is a glimpse of many miles on all sides. Old iron mines lie on the slopes a few miles southwest from here and pieces of iron slag in the fortress point to the iron processing. Rare pieces of medieval pottery, iron arrows, and medieval small tools; one coin (follis) by John Cimiscus (late 10th century), but turned and used as a ring-ornament have been detected (Микулчиќ, 1996, 193/194).

With the restoration of mining in Demir Hisar in the late Middle Ages, the old fortress was also again used; maybe only from time to time. In the fighting between the Byzantine Emperor Andronicus III and the Serbs around these ore areas in 1329/30, besides the “towns” Dobrun, Gabalarion, and Debritsa, the **frurion Butsinin (Bučin)** is mentioned. Before and after this Bučin is not mentioned. On the contrary, in the Serbian documents in 1343/4 and 1344/5 the village Bučin is mentioned as a property donated to the Treskavec Monastery near Prilep.

Signed. Sealed. Delivered?

The lead seal in question was found during field surveys near Bučin, on the neighboring hill “Kale” Tronovci, which served as the military base of the medieval city. It is very well preserved, slightly damaged near the central axe, with a max diameter of 29 mm, weighing 11.54 g and 2.7/8 - 3 mm thick.



Obverse

St George standing, holding a spear and shield, inscribed in the column to the left: Ο | Α | Γ | ΟΣ | ΓΕ | ΩΡ | ΓΟ

To the side, the epithet Diasorites inscribed in the column: Ο | Δ | Α | Ρ | Τ | . Border of dots.

[ὁ ἄγιος Γεώργ[ι]ο[ς] ὁ Δ[ι]α[σο]ρ[ι]τ[ης].

Reverse

Inscription of seven lines, a cross above.



ΚΕΠΟΙΣ
ΚΟΜΝΗΝΟΝ ΛΑ
ΚΑΡΙΝ ΚΩΝ
ΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΝ ΟΥ
ΚΑΙ ΓΡΑΦΑΣ
ΣΤΡΑ ΓΙΖΕΙ
ΜΑΡΤΥΡΩΝ
ΚΛΕΟΣ

[σ]κέποις Κομνηνὸν Λά[σ]καριν Κων[σ]
ταντῖνον οὐ [κ]αὶ γραφὰς σ[φ]ρά[γι]ζε,
μα[ρ]τύρ[ω]ν κλέος]

*“Let the glory of the martyrs protect
Constantine Komnen Laskaris, and seal his
letters.”*

The owner of this seal is the brother of the emperor of Nicaea, Theodore I Laskaris (1205-1222); **Constantine Laskaris** who had been proclaimed emperor in Constantinople on April 12/13, 1204, but had to flee when he could not gather the support necessary to resist the Latins. The seals of Theodore I Laskaris and his brother Constantine are transcribed and published, to tie their iconographical choice of St. George Diasorites with their origins in Asia Minor (Wassiliou, 1997, 416–26).

These seals provide valuable information about the scarcely documented early Laskarides and, additionally, they are important sigillographic material, given the rarity of preserved seals of brothers. Only three other lead seals of Constantine Laskaris are found and published so far, all dated late 12th century – early 13th century.²

The seals were seemingly made contemporaneously, before the taking of imperial power by Theodore. This is evidenced by his titles of “protoves-tiarites” and “sebastos,” which he bore prior to his marriage to Alexios III’s second daughter Anna Angelina in 1199³, while Constantine mentions no title

² A.-K. Wassiliou, 416-424. Former Zacos collection. Parallel specimens: Koltsida-Makri, MoZuBgóBouda, no. 14 (partly read). Shaw 1176 (Dumbarton Oaks). A.-K. Wassiliou, Review of Sode, Bleisiegel, in Geldgeschichtliche Nachrichten 33. Jg., 186 (1998). In Sode, Claudia, and Jean-Claude Cheynet. *Studies in Byzantine Sigillography. Volume 8*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, (2003) 213

Wassiliou-Seibt, Alexandra-Kyriaki. *Corpus Der Byzantinischen Siegel Mit Metrischen Legendenden Teil 2: N - Sphragis*. (Vienna: österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2015).

³ After the marriage Theodore had a different seal. G. Zacos and A. Veglery, *Byzantine Lead Seals* (Basel, 1972), 1.3: no. 2753. In about 1203 he was made “despotes” and had yet another seal. DO 55.1.4355. Zacos and Veglery, *Byzantine Lead Seals*, 1.1: no. 116. DOSeals 6:192, no. 101.1. His ultimate, imperial, seal bore the image of Christ on the obverse. I. Jordanov, *Corpus of Byzantine Seals from Bulgaria* (Sofia, 2003), 3.1: nos. 205–6.

or office and so his seal can also be dated to before 1204. After the capture of Constantinople in April 1204, Constantine, although initially a pretender to the throne, aided his imperial brother Theodore in his military campaigns and diplomatic relations and as such had to have had a title. It is known that three other brothers of Theodore I (George, Alexios, and Isaac) were made “sebastokratores” (Ferjančić, 1968, 173/74), so it would seem inevitable for Constantine to have borne some title as well. Ruth Macrides ties a “Konstantinos despotes” in a Bodleian manuscript (Bodleian Barocc. ms. 235, fol. 478v) with this Constantine Laskaris (Macrides, 2007, 168).

However, these seals present a striking divergence: one is ascribed to Theodore *Kommenos Laskaris*, the other to Constantine *Laskaris Komnenos*. Both those seals are metrical, and in each case, both family names are of equal syllable length so that their order does not affect the meter. This poses a glaring dilemma: why two brothers, from the same family and the same geographical background, at the same time (and possibly in the same place—Constantinople) would elect to use different orders for presenting their same two surnames on two stylistically very similar seals? The reason might be that each brother emphasized a different name over the other. But if a choice, how do we read those seals to know which brother is deliberately emphasizing which name? To understand the difference, to appreciate what each seal-bearer wanted to say about himself and the message he intended for his audience, it is necessary to examine nomenclature standards. Although seal bearers undeniably had much liberty in their self-representations, there has to have been some kind of generally followed naming tradition in order for the bearer to be recognized, some parameters for identification within Byzantine aristocratic society, which one then proceeded to work within in a manner recognizable to the other members of this group (Volkoff, 2015, 197-208).

The point-in-question is to know what order of parents’ surnames was the established norm and which “slot” was considered the most emphatic. That is, among the possible orders, what was the generally normative combined order:

Parental surname order only:

N. Maternal Paternal or

N. Paternal Maternal

Emphasis order only:

N. Surname Surname or

N. Surname Surname

Combined orders:

N. Maternal Paternal or

N. Maternal Paternal or

N. Paternal Maternal or

N. Paternal Maternal

The recourse to secondary literature does not offer a definite answer. Notably, both H. Mortiz and E. Patlagean have written on some specifics of Byz-

antine names (Moritz, 1897–98, 1–2 bande, Patlagean, 23–42), and D. Polemis attempted generally to differentiate their establishment practices (Polemis, 1968, 189),¹ but there has been no direct explanation of Byzantine naming mechanisms. Nor does this question seem to have been taken into account in the headings of biographical entries on individuals with several family names, though prosopographical studies often list multiple surnames. But as Donald Nicol wrote: “the use and abuse of family names by the Byzantine aristocracy create many problems” and “the rules of the game in this late Byzantine name-dropping are hard to follow” (Nicol, 81). Hence, up to today scholars do not have a clear idea of how Byzantine surnames worked and what the name order was during any period, not even for simple double surnames. Attempting to resolve the aforementioned Laskaris example, we can convincingly set the premise that Theodore I was a Komnenos by his maternal line (Cheynet, 1990, 443–44) based on the fact that the primary surnames were generally patronyms and Theodore is named in Greek, Latin, and Oriental histories, as well as in official acts and in the letter of Pope Innocent III, solely as a Laskaris.² In inscriptions and patriarchal letters, he is addressed either as a Laskaris or by both surnames.³ On coins, Theodore used either both surnames or none at all (Hendy, 1969, 228–30. DOC 4.1:456–66).

Apart from one seal, where he is only “Komnenos” (Zacos and Veglery, 1. 3: no. 2753), possibly to underline his marriage to Anna, daughter of Alexios III Angelos, now renamed Komnenos (Zacos and Veglery, 1.1: no. 110; DO-Seals 6: 186–187, nos. 96.1–3. DOC 4.1:400–401), nowhere in written sources is his Komnenian lineage particularly stressed. Therefore, was Theodore merely stating his full double surname on his seals, without particular emphasis? And then, was Constantine accenting his maternal name by placing it second, it being the most emphatic slot, preferring “Komnenos” over “Laskaris” (an understandable choice, but also telling of Theodore’s conservatism)? This is assuming, of course, that it was not Theodore and the historical sources that deliberately chose to highlight his Laskaris name (not being his patronymic) for their own reasons, which would thus contradict our original premise. It also

¹ The third part of D. Polemis’s book contains “instances of those who had abandoned their patronymic proper and assumed the name . . . to which they had a right through the female line” — a somewhat vague differentiation, which the author himself states has not been fully pursued.

² Notable exceptions are the accounts of Nicholas Mesarites and the 1219 treaty between Nicaea and the Venetians, where Theodore is named as “Komnenos Laskaris.”

³ V. Laurent, *Les registres des Actes des Patriarches de Constantinople* (Paris, 1971), 1.4: nos. 1206, 1207, 1209. N. Oikonomidès “Cinq actes inédits du Patriarche Michel Autôreianos,” *REB* 25 (1967): 120, 122, 125; with both surnames cited on page 123, lines 31 and 43. A. Boeckius, *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum* (Berlin, 1882–87), 4: nos. 8746–47; with both surnames in nos. 8744–45, 8748. For nos. 8747 and 8748 see respectively pages 706 and 593 in A. Rhoby, *Byzantinische Epigramme auf Stein nebst Addenda zu den Bänden 1 und 2* (Vienna, 2014). Two further inscriptions with only the “Laskaris” surname: G. de Jerphanion, “Les inscriptions Cappadociens et l’histoire de l’Empire de Nicée,” *OCP* 1 (1935): 239–40.

remains unclear whether any of his direct heirs took up the "Laskaris" family name at any point.⁴

The Laskaris - *Nomen est omen*. History in the making.

The walled city of Nicaea, around 90 km away from Constantinople as the crow flies, became a center of anti-Latin resistance and attracted politically powerful refugees. Nicaea had excellent natural defences thanks to its location on the eastern shore of Askania, a large freshwater lake, and lay at the intersection of major routes leading into inner Asia Minor. The founder of the state of Nicaea, Theodore Komnenos Laskaris, was born between 1171 and 1176. Very little is known about his family. He had at least six brothers: *Constantine*, George, Alexios, Isaac, Manuel, and Michael. The names of their parents, grandparents, sisters or any twelfth-century members of their family are not recorded. The silence of the sources confirms the impression that their ancestors climbed the social hierarchy from the provincial second-tier aristocratic elite through intermarriage. Their mother belonged to an unknown side branch of the Komnenos family, for both Constantine and Theodore advertised their royal surname, as elaborated above. Their father may have been called Nicholas, a name that he gave his firstborn son following the common Byzantine practice of *papponymy*, the naming of a child after the grandparent. Their father may have remarried, for two of the brothers, Manuel and Michael, had the additional surname or nickname *Tzamantouros* and long outlived them. By the late twelfth century, the Laskaris were connected with western Asia Minor and Constantinople. An early seal of the elder Theodore, which identifies him as the *sebastos protovestiarites Theodore Komnenos Laskaris* and a similar seal of his brother **Constantine** (designated on it as *Constantine Komnenos Laskaris*) give clues as to the family's local ties.

Both seals represent on their obverse St. George described by the accompanying inscription as "Diasorites".⁵

⁴ His eldest daughter (and future empress) is at first cited as "Eirene Komnena." She later took up her husband's surname of Doukas, displacing "Komnena." It does not seem she had ever used "Laskaris" (Polemis, Doukai, 140). It is not known what were the surnames of his other children (he had two other daughters and three sons, two of which died young).

⁵ The *Diasoritis/Diasorites* epithet of the saint is believed to derive from his association with Zeus, who is known as *Dia* in Greek, or the association of the name "God" with *Dia*, thus meaning "Priest of Zeus". However, the epithet is probably of toponymical character and derives from the ancient name of Ortaköy (the traditional birth place of St. George in Cappadocia), or, according to another version, from the name of the monastery on Amorgos Island within the Cyclades. The expression *Diasorites* is usually linked to the composition modelled on the image from the monastery, where the Saint is presented frontally, from the waist up, with a lance in his right hand and a round shield in his left. See H. Grégoire, *Saint George le Diasorite*, *Revue de l'instruction publique en Belgique*, LII, (1909), pp. 1-3

The monastery of St. George Diasorites was located in the town of Pyrgion (Birge) in the Kaistros valley. The Laskaris family, thus, advertised its association with the region.

The origins of the Laskaris family in the eastern provinces are confirmed by the etymology of the name. The root is most probably Persian (from *lashkari*, "warrior"), but a derivation from Arabic (from *alashqar*, "the blond one") has also been suggested (Minorsky, 1953, 33-50).

The name is first attested in Byzantine sources during the eleventh century. In 1059 the magnate *Eustathios Boilas*, who was exiled to the theme (province) of Iberia, manumitted a slave named Laskaris and bequeathed him a small plot of land. The frontier theme of Iberia - a melting pot of Armenians, Georgians, and Greek-speakers - was formed after the death c. 1000 of the local Georgian client ruler, the *kouropalates* David, and grew after the annexation of the Armenian Bagratid kingdom in 1045 (Angelov, 2019, 13-36).

The other Laskaris known from the eleventh century was a naturalized foreign grandee and a descendant of the Kurdish noble family of the Shaddadids, who ruled Dvin and Gandzak in Armenia from the second half of the tenth century onward. The Persian name Lashkari was common among the Shaddadids and was rendered into Greek as Laskaris. The introduction of the name in Byzantium ate into the empire's elite. A certain Lashkari ibn Musa, the governor of Gandzak between 1034 and 1049, had a son by the name of Artasir who was sent as a hostage to Constantinople. Artasir's lead seal demonstrates his acculturation and co-option into the Byzantine military administration. Found at Kličevac on the Danube near Braničevo, the seal identifies him as Artasir, the son of Laskaris, "patrikios anthypatos ("patrician and proconsul"), and strategos ("general"). The son of Laskaris "held a high title and was transferred from the empire's eastern to its western frontier with Hungary." He must have been a Christian, a precondition for holding an office, and seems never to have returned to his homeland because the invading Seljuk Turks annexed the last independent Shaddadid territories in 1075 and put an end to the theme of Iberia. Artasir's identification as the son of Laskaris was the first step in the emergence of a family name because aristocratic surnames were formed from a foreign first name. Even though the evidence is inconclusive, it is quite possible that the Shaddadid governor of Gandzak whose son settled in Byzantium was the eponymous ancestor of the elder Theodore (Minorsky, 1953, 33-50).

The Laskaris family gained importance during the twelfth century through its marriage into the Komnenian dynasty established by the emperor Alexios I (r. 1081-1118). Documents, letters, inscriptions, and seals consistently render the surname of the elder Theodore as Komnenos Laskaris. His parents had sufficient connections with the imperial court in Constantinople to secure him a job in the palace guard of the emperor Alexios III Angelos, which was the platform for his meteoric rise to power. The inscription on the elder Theodore's early seal featuring St. George Diasorites mentions his holding the title of *sebastos* and the office of *protovestiarites*. *Sebastos* was introduced as a court rank

in the late eleventh century as a mark of special distinction for the emperor's relatives. The title was greatly devalued by the late twelfth century, but taken together with the family name Komnenos, the title offers supporting evidence that the elder Theodore Laskaris belonged at the time to the social and political elite.

During the first siege of Constantinople in 1203 Constantine was given command of the best body of troops available and led the Greek defenders on sorties against the entrenched Crusaders. None were successful in their goal of lifting the siege, and finally, Constantine was ordered to attack the Burgundians who were on guard at the time (Villehardouin, 2007, 31).

The Greeks issued forth from the city but were soon driven back to the gates, notwithstanding the stones that the defenders on the walls threw down onto the advancing Crusaders. Constantine himself was captured whilst mounted on his horse by William of Neuilly (Villehardouin, 2007, 31) and probably kept for ransom, which was the usual practice of the times. At some point, he was released, as he was soon swept up in the events of the second siege of Constantinople in 1204.

Shortly before the fall of Constantinople, the praetorian Theodore became involved in the politics of succession and usurpation. The imperial office in Byzantium was based on the Roman model, which meant there were no laws of succession. Emperors made arrangements for their sons or other coopted individuals to become their heirs (for example, by proclaiming them as co-emperors), but nonetheless gaining the throne often resulted from power struggles among leading generals, with the occasional involvement of civil officials, churchmen, and the populace of Constantinople. In 1195 Alexios III Angelos deposed his brother Isaac II Angelos, the ruling emperor for the past ten years, who was blinded and kept in comfortable confinement in a suburban palace. Alexios III had no male offspring. By 1200 his two eldest daughters, Irene and Anna, were widowed, and the third, Eudokia, resided at the Serbian court. The lack of a designated heir fired the ambitions of Alexios III's relatives. The elderly sebastokrator John Doukas, the brother of Isaac II and Alexios III, saw himself as a potential heir. Nephews of the two emperors borne by their sisters also had designs on the imperial crown.

The young widows Irene and Anna were tools for solving the problem of the succession, and in the late winter of 1200 were married in a double wedding to Alexios Palaiologos and the elder Theodore Laskaris. Alexios Palaiologos, who wed Irene, the firstborn daughter, received the title of despot (literally, "lord"), the highest court rank after the emperor. Since its introduction into the court hierarchy in 1163, this title was granted to the emperor's son-in-law and heir to the throne. Anna became the wife of the elder Theodore. The impressive genealogical credentials of Alexios Palaiologos and the former, deceased son-in-law of Alexios III suggest indirectly that the Komnenos Laskaris family was considered aristocratic and worthy of special honors.

In 1204 the political elite of the Byzantine Empire faced for the first time in its centuries-long history the prospect of a forced relocation from Constantinople, the city of New Rome, to the former provinces. The fall of Constantinople to the crusaders on the night of April 12, 1204, was traumatic and unexpected. After the Crusaders entered Constantinople and began to sack the city, a large body of citizens as well as what remained of the Varangian Guard gathered together in the church of Hagia Sophia to elect a new emperor, as Alexius V had fled the city (Magoulias, 1984, 314).

Two nominees presented themselves – **Constantine Laskaris** and Constantine Doukas (probably the son of John Angelos Doukas, and thus a first cousin to Isaac II and Alexius III) (Queller, Madden, Andrea, 1999, 189). Both presented their case to be nominated emperor, but the people could not decide between them, as both were young and had proven military skills. Eventually, lots were cast and Laskaris was selected by what remained of the army as the next emperor. **Constantine Laskaris** refused to accept the imperial purple; escorted by the Patriarch of Constantinople, John X, to the Milion, he urged the assembled populace to resist the Latin invaders with all their strength. However, the crowd was unwilling to risk their lives in such a one-sided conflict, and so he turned to the Varangians and asked for their support. Though his pleas to honour fell on deaf ears, they agreed to fight for increased wages, and he marched out to make a final stand against the Latin Crusaders. However, the Varangians betrayed Constantine and fled at the sight of the mail-clad Latin troops. Seeing all was lost, he quickly fled the capital in the early hours of 13 April 1204 (Magoulias, 1984, 314). The need for protection from the crusaders tipped the balance in western Asia Minor decisively in favour of the Laskaris. Theodore Laskaris is said to have crisscrossed western Asia Minor in an attempt to win the hearts and minds of the local population. His efforts paid off as Nicaea and other cities recognized him to be their overlord, even though he failed in his first battles with the invading Latin knights.

On March 19, 1205, Henry, the brother of the emperor Baldwin, dealt a crushing blow to the army commanded by Constantine Laskaris and Theodore Mangaphas before the walls of Atramyttion and the result was a massive defeat for **Constantine Laskaris**. Nothing more is heard of Constantine Laskaris after this battle, so it is presumed that he either perished in the defeat or was captured (Maryliaac, 1984, 314).

Instead of a conclusion.

“For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind: it hath no stalk: the bud shall yield no meal: if so be it yield, the strangers shall swallow it up.”

Hosea 8:7

The turbulent period of the 13. century witnesses Byzantium’s greatest medieval expansion in the Balkans, followed by the empire’s almost complete collapse in 1204 with the fall of the Byzantine capital to the Western knights of the Fourth Crusade.

Regional centers of power compete with the capital for authority, among them the Byzantine despotates of Epirus and Thessaly, Latin principalities in southern Greece, and the increasingly powerful states of Serbia and Bulgaria. The Lascarides, Theodore and his brother **Constantine**, perhaps tried to find allies against the Latins among the Balkan power holders before and after the fall of Constantinople,

The rare lead seal of *Constantine Comnenus Laskaris*, found near medieval Bučin, stands among the few artifacts found, as a rare specimen that raises more questions than it provides answers to the turbulent period of the 13th century and the dramatic development of events related to the Lascaris family and to the name Constantine Comnenus Lascaris, like a small beacon in the personal story of a mysterious and most likely tragic historical figure.

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