

Major Messages on Minor Surfaces

The Visual Language of the Early Medieval Royal Seal

Daniel Doumerc

Opening Remarks

Royal seals are by no means an invention of the Early Middle Ages. With the benefit of hindsight, however, one can easily argue that sealing practice was pretty much finalized at the time of the early post-Roman rulers of the West. From then on seals could not only be found in nearly every royal charter, they were also announced in the *corroboratio*. Accordingly, the seal became the central means of authenticating. In other words: a renowned royal symbol was aggrandized with regard to its political significance. In order to track the royal seal's semantic change one also has to consider its formal form of usage (seal images, seal legends). Thus it is possible to analyse the royal seal as a medium of political discourse of the Early Middle Ages.

The overall aim of the dissertation is to determine the royal seal's political and social significance within the early medieval world. Due to idiosyncrasies in terms of sealing practices, the territorial focus is on the post-Roman realms of the West. Although the above-mentioned rethinking of seal-usage was only established in the course of the 8th century, the origins of that development arose from the Merovingian period. Therefore the middle of the 5th century, when the first Merovingian kings began to reign, marks the outset of the evaluation period. The Carolingian era is key for the whole analysis as the main body of source material (70% of the extant seals) dates back to the 8th and 9th century. The year 1024, the year of death of the last Ottonian emperor Henry II, marks the end of the period investigated.

In relation to the sources the leading question is: in how far the early medieval royal seal was a medium of political and cultural concepts? As far as the period under investigation is concerned, it may become clearer how the rulers and their subjects construed style and form of the symbolic language of authority. With regard to the methodological approach, I expect promising results by comparing the royal seals with the development of early medieval kingship. The same applies to a comparison of the relationship between medium, image, and communication, while considering issues of mediality and its significance. Thereby, one can demonstrate correlations between the artefacts, their application, and their social interpretation. I will study the material mainly with regard to three analytical categories: *communication*, *representation* and *intermediality & "internationality"*.

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Communication

More often than not, we take for granted that iconographic sources carry a certain meaning, which beyond that was comprehended by the contemporary observers. Of course, one has to assume this in order to interpret the material with regard to its iconology. However, concrete evidence is rarely presented. Even if this is a difficult task to undertake, one of my goals is to present such evidence. In order to classify the royal seal as a medium of communication, we have to find out whether we can comment on its reception at all. Again, this is a difficult task since we talk about material that emerged in a period, in which it was unusual for the subjects to build a statue of the ruler, reflecting their image of the ruler in terms of the perception of the images presented to them. In search of other reactions, we have to turn our attention to the social circles that were privileged enough to receive royal charters (clergy and nobility).

Here, one has to rethink the common approach inasmuch as the written sources are largely insufficient. As a result, I constructed the following hypothesis: recipients of royal charters did perceive typical components of the attached seals. They would adapt them in their own seal matrices (*active perception*) or go their own way (*passive perception*). Of course, neither the first nor the latter is automatically synonymous with a statement of political intent. However, this type of evidence would emphasize that the royal seals were perceived as specific and changing icons.

Regarding this approach, our body of source material is a double-edged sword. On the one hand we are able to work with excellent editions of royal charters that allow us to determine major parts of clerical recipients and at least some secular recipients. In many cases it is even possible to figure out which seal was impressed on the respective charters. On the other hand the transmission history of non-royal seals not even begins to compare with the one of the royal charters. To put it another way: it is more tedious to render sources accessible. Probably it will be necessary to gather further (iconographic) material for the purpose of an outcome that is more reliable. By this means, I hope to corroborate the afore-mentioned hypothesis in order to take the idea of the *receptive* recipient as starting point for the way forward.

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Representation

In terms of representation again I would like to consider both sides of the communication model. Thus, I am not only interested in what the authorities wanted to represent but also in what the audience made out of these messages. The royal seal's point of origin, i.e. the context of the act of privileging, will provide the basis for further questions. In other words: the space surrounding the emergence is of high significance for both – what was represented and what was discerned subsequently.

Within the text of each royal charter the ruler addressed the public. Formulations that are typical for the *publicatio* (*notum esse volumus omnibus, notum sit omnibus* or *noverit omnium industria*) indicate to what extent this public was imagined. But for all that, only a small part of this group would ever take part in a privileging ceremony. So we must always consider that the act of privileging for the most part was a very special event for the individual recipient of a charter. In the course of this event, the recipient would face his ruler, who – while appearing in his official capacity – bestowed him a favour. Displaying a stylized portrait of the ruler and mentioning his name and title in the legend, the seal functions as a memorial picture of this special encounter.

In search of messages beyond the scope of the act of privileging, we have to focus on the iconographic program of the royal seals (also including the seal legends). In connection with the area of the representation of power, one can analyse the iconographic material regarding a wide range of issues: which iconographic elements were used to generate this aspect of the symbolic language of authority? How do we have to interpret the inclusion or disappearance of religious symbols? Do changes in the iconographic program of the seals reflect political and cultural upheaval? And to what degree did certain iconographic patterns reflect the political self-conception of the respective early medieval rulers?

Since it is one of my aims not to dismiss the recipients, the following question basically suggests itself: did these messages reach them? In addition to that, one can ask if the iconographic program of a seal might have offered various versions, depending on the observer's educational level etc. I will argue that the visual language of the royal seals was easy to understand since rather complicated issues were put into comprehensible forms.

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Intermediality & “Internationality”

I use these final analytical categories as a conceptual pair because they are both helpful to put the object of study into perspective. Of course, the seal was only one of many objects of royal/imperial representation. Without a sideglance to coins, miniatures etc. the focus of the intended research project would be too narrow. Although I intend to work predominantly on seals, I will at least compare their messages and functions to that of other visual media of the same time. Moreover, this claim to completeness helps us to face a methodological problem that relates especially to the transmission history of west-Frankish seals. Here, many seals are retained only because of one impression. In order to make more reliable statements regarding their symbolic language of authority, we have to include other media for the purpose of filling the gaps.

Similar reasons lead to the inclusion of “internationality” as an analytical category. The royal seal was not exclusively known within the post-Roman realms of the West. Other significant territories, such as Byzantium or the Caliphate, can look back on many centuries of sealing history. Even though their royal seals fulfilled different functions, the seals’ iconographic programs cannot be ignored. At least in parts this applies also to the general manner of royal/imperial representation. This approach again broadens the perspective of the whole research project, while it may also emphasize the idiosyncrasies of the early medieval royal seal of the West.

The concept of “internationality” is used as an umbrella term combining early medieval sources of other “nations” with more current epistemological phenomena. Regarding the latter, one can observe a strong national bias between French and German historians, who part their ways when reaching the year 877, the year of Charles the Bald’s death. For the subsequent years, German research predominantly deals with east-Frankish royal seals, while the focus of French research is on west-Frankish ones. I am convinced that a comprehensive analysis of all seals (east- as well as west-Frankish) will produce a strongly modified narrative.