TOWNS AND SEALS: REPRESENTATION AND SIGNIFICATION IN MEDIEVAL FRANCE

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In the first general analysis ever offered of medieval civic descriptions, J.K. Hyde remarked that, in the virtual absence of a pertinent pre-existing literary tradition, such *descriptiones* must have presented their authors a considerable challenge.[1] His observation may also be applied to medieval city seals which, by displaying a broad diversity of text and iconography, underline the elusiveness of contemporary town definition and the paucity of the conceptual and verbal tools then available for the apprehension of the urban phenomenon.[2] This diversity stands in contrast to the sigillographic usages and semiotic conventions in place in France at the time of the appearance of the first city seals in the late twelfth century. Seals had specific processes of signifying which functioned within the larger socio-cultural semantic code. The modalities of the city image, operative in the praxis, text, and iconography of seals, must be considered among the more general strategies of sealing within a society in which some groups came to conceive of themselves as sign-producing entities on the assumption that much of what they were depended upon how they were represented. An examination of the French city, and city image, on seals of the late twelfth to fourteenth centuries immediately raises the issue of definition with respect to seals, cities and city seals.[3] In the present paper, no attempt will be made to define the medieval town, but rather to identify and qualify a medieval urban space and community, through the modalities of their representation on and by seals.

Definition of the twelfth-century seal involves paradox. The intaglio-engraved matrix was an inward-oriented symbolic object of personal identity; the impression issued from the matrix was an image outwardly oriented and emblematic of its owner. Further, the seal expresses absolutely a fundamental aspect of the medieval mind, which

[1] J.K. Hyde, 'Medieval Descriptions of Cities', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 48 (1965–66), 308–40, at 310.

[2] Jacques Le Goff, 'Ordres mendiants et urbanisation dans la France médiévale', *Annales ESC*, 25 (1970), 924–46, at 937.

[3] French city seals from their appearance to 1500 are described with relevant bibliography in Brigitte Bedos, *Corpus des sceaux français du Moyen Age. Tome 1: Les sceaux de villes* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1980).

did not distinguish between the symbolic and the emblematic. As a synchronous structure, the sigillographic image is paired with the temporal process involved in reading the legend inscribed around it.[4] This sigillographic dialectic also involves the linkage of an individual identity in a seal's legend to a more general group orientation inherent in its iconography. On their seals of this period, kings invariably appear enthroned with regalia (fig. 1), lay magnates are equestrians in arms (fig. 2), noblewomen are endowed with attributes of virginity and fertility (fig. 3), and bishops and abbots are garbed in ecclesiastical vestments (fig. 4).[5] For these categories, and for their members, who were the only sealers until the end of the twelfth century, the underlying convention dictated that they be represented as concepts and not as individuals. The seal's iconography thus fostered a symbology of power, and articulated organizing principles of society, while the personal identification of its individual owner was totally dependent upon an inscription. This relationship between text and image[6] involved neither complete complementarity, nor redundancy, nor a tension of opposites; rather it created a space in which the particular (written legend) and the universal (image) combined to generate an identity that was operative in both legal and literate contexts. For the seal was to be appended to a document as testimony of the personal participation of its author, thus rendering the documented act valid and executory. The spread of seal usage from the French royal chancery to non-royal individuals in the mid-eleventh century was associated with an increased recourse to written documents by the lay nobility, and with a growing concern for trust in written acts. Seals offered a mode of literate participation in an otherwise largely non-literate society, even anticipating the printing process by enabling writing in an automated form: impressions reproducibly issued from matrices.[7] But twelfth-century seals, though literate forms operating in

[4] On image as a synchronous structure and reading as a temporal process: William Ray, *Literary Meaning* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 20; *The Language of Images*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.

[5] Auguste Coulon, 'Elements de sigillographie ecclésiastique française', in V. Carrière, *Introduction aux études d'histoire ecclésiastique locale* (Paris: Letouzey et Amé, 1934), ii. 109–215; B. Bedos, 'Signes et insignes du pouvoir au Moyen Age: le témoignage des sceaux', *Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques. Section de philologie et d'histoire jusqu'en 1610. Actes du cent cinquième congrès national des sociétés savantes* ([Caen, 1980] Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1984), 47–62; B. Bedos-Rezak, 'Suger and the Symbolism of Royal Power: The Seal of Louis VII', *Abbot Suger and Saint Denis*, ed. Paula L. Gerson (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986), 95–103; Bedos-Rezak. 'The Social Implications of the Art of Chivalry: The Sigillographic Evidence (France, 1050–1250)', *The Medieval Court in Europe*, ed. H. Haymes (*Houston German Studies*, 6: 1986), 142–75; Bedos-Rezak, 'Women, Seals and Power in Medieval France, 1150–1350', *Women and Power in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. M. Erler and M. Kowaleski (Athens/London: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 61–82.

[6] On the relationship between text and image: Michael Camille, 'The Book of Signs: Writing and Visual Differences in Gothic Manuscript Illumination', *Word and Image*, 1 (1985), 133–48; Camille, 'Seeing and Reading: Some Visual Implications of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy', *Art History*, 8 (1985), 26–49; Margaret R. Miles, *Image as Insight* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 1–39.

[7] M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record* (London: Arnold, 1979), 244–8.

a scribal context, nevertheless systematically also included an image, as though the image were needed to authenticate writing in a society still predominantly oral. According to Gilbert Crispin, Abbot of Westminster (1085–1117), 'just as letters are the shapes and signs of spoken words, pictures exist as the representations and signs of writing.'[8] The power of authentication inherent in seals was therefore manifold: as an inscribed object the seal authenticated an individual; as an iconographic device, social structure and written language; as an impression, a specific document.

The legal and diplomatic function of the twelfth-century seal depended principally upon the individual whom it symbolically represented. The royal seal, for instance, though possessing absolute state authority, nevertheless belonged to a specific king, and was changed at each succession.[9] In the debate concerning the ability of medieval people to distinguish between the public and the private,[10] early seals display a private form of diplomatic commitment. From the seventh century on, seals were associated with individual kings, and even after spreading outside the royal chancery, they remained specific to individuals, merging private and functional identity. A problem of private versus public – or rather communal – interest, arose for abbots or abbesses who, in their own names, committed the religious communities placed in their care. Of the earliest (eleventh- to early-thirteenth-century) seals used by religious communities, including cathedral and collegiate chapters,[11] the personal seals of bishops, abbots and abbesses appeared first.[12] In many monastic documents the personal seal of the abbot and the seal of the community then came to be

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[8] Quoted in Camille, 'The Book of Signs', 135.

[9] On the issue of royal or princely seals as state seals in the Middle Ages: Michel Pastoureau, 'L'Etat et son image emblématique', *Figures et couleurs* (Paris: Le Léopard d'Or, 1986), 61–9, at 62; Robert-Henri Bautier, 'Origine et diffusion du sceau de juridiction', *Comptes-rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 1971, 304–21, at 305; B. Bedos-Rezak, 'Les sceaux au temps de Philippe Auguste', *Colloques internationaux du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (no. 602): La France de Philippe Auguste. Le temps des mutations. Actes*, ed. R.H. Bautier (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1982), 721–36, at 724–5.

[10] See the convincing argument by Susan Reynolds on the medieval capacity to distinguish conceptually between private and public: *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900–1300* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 24, 60, 324–6, and *passim*.

[11] This sampling was conducted in the following inventories: L. Douët d'Arcq, *Collection de sceaux* (3 vols., Paris: Henri Plon, 1863–68; reprinted Munich: Kraus Reprint, 1980); Hubert Collin, *Sceaux de l'histoire de Lorraine, Lotharingia*, i (1988); Martin de Framont, *Sceaux rouergats du Moyen Age* (Rodez: Française d'arts graphiques, 1982); Germain Demay, *Inventaire des sceaux de l'Artois* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1877); Auguste Coulon, *Inventaire des sceaux de la Bourgogne* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1912); G. Demay, *Inventaire des sceaux de la Normandie* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1881).

[12] In the majority of cases, although there is some evidence to the contrary, e.g. Douët d'Arcq, *Sceaux*, no. 8129 (1172: seal of the abbey d'Anchin, dioc. Arras) and Demay, *Sceaux de l'Artois*, no. 2627 (1308: seal of the abbot); Douët d'Arcq, *Sceaux*, no. 8139 (1133: seal of the abbey of Saint Germain d'Auxerre) and Coulon, *Sceaux de la Bourgogne*, no. 1314 (1256: seal of the abbot). Accidents of seal preservation have to be taken into account when evaluating the evolution of seal usage and graphism; yet the surviving evidence indicates an evolution from individual toward common seal.

jointly appended,[13] but one might be used as the counterseal of the other,[14] or the abbot's seal might not even carry his name but simply bear reference to his function.[15] All of these usages occurred before the autonomous use of common seals by religious communities. Another indication of the primacy of individual seals, and of the uneasiness of the transition to the earliest communal seals, are the latter's epigraphic references to specific patron saints, the usual iconographic theme of such institutions (fig. 5). Identification with an individual referent was thereby sought, a practice that persisted until the early thirteenth century, when institutional designations such as chapter, convent, or monastery were finally adopted epigraphically.[16]

Parallel to the advent of institutional titles on communal ecclesiastical seals, there appeared in episcopal chanceries seals of officiality, which were seals of jurisdiction used to validate documents written in the episcopal courts. Here again the pattern of evolution is illuminating. Since bishops commanded literacy, and possessed judicial powers over churchmen and laymen alike, a wide variety of individuals in the twelfth century turned to the episcopal courts for judicial and scribal purposes. About 1200, several bishops delegated their jurisdictional competences to officials, who at first sealed with their bishops' seals, or with their own private seals, before using a new type of seal c. 1210, that of the episcopal court, the *sigillum curie*. Here again emphasis shifted from person to institution, and the concept of administrative seals soon after extended to the secular world (1234), though in this venue the authority of the private individual's personal seal was never entirely displaced.[17]

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[13] For instance the seals of the abbot and of the abbey of the Bec-Hélouin in 1221: Douët d'Arcq, *Sceaux*, nos. 8148, 8525; of the abbot and of the abbey of Cluny in 1209: ibid., nos. 8203, 8651; of the abbot and of the abbey of Jumièges in 1217: ibid., nos. 8253, 8779. Earlier seals are known for the abbots of Cluny (1188: Coulon, *Sceaux de la Bourgogne*, no. 1354), and of Jumièges (c. 1191: Demay, *Sceaux de la Normandie*, nos. 2804–5).

[14] Douët d'Arcq, *Sceaux*, no. 8338 in 1177: one side displays the seal of the abbey of Saint Martin of Pontoise, the other that of the abbot Geoffrey.

[15] e.g. the abbey of Longpont: between 1213 and 1261 the abbots' seals do not bear the names of specific abbots (Douët d'Arcq, *Sceaux*, nos. 8802–4), as if to appear unbound by specific time and tenure; however, the seal matrix was different for each abbot, and was identified within the sealed document. For anonymous abbots' seals, see also those of the abbots of Pontigny in 1187 (ibid., no. 8952) and of Val-Notre-Dame in the twelfth century (ibid., no. 9150).

[16] From all viewpoints, the legend of the seal of the chapter of Saint Etienne of Auxerre in 1120 is extraordinary (Douët d'Arcq, *Sceaux*, no. 7111 and Coulon, *Sceaux de la Bourgogne*, no. 1056). At this very early date, it reads: *sigillu(m). canonicor(um). s(an)c(t)i. stephani*, and includes a mention of the canons which remained rare for religious common seals on which *capitulum* was generally preferred. The second seal of the chapter of Saint Etienne of Auxerre in 1194 reads: *sigillum capituli s(an)c(t)i stephani* (Douët d'Arcq, *Sceaux*, no. 7112). For the first seal of a chapter or abbey being inscribed with the name of the patron saint, and only later replaced by a seal with institutional title, e.g. the seals of the chapter of Saint Etienne of Dreux, *s(igillum) s(ancti). steph(an)i p[ro] thom(arti-)ris. de drocis* (1230), and *[sigillum ca]pit(u)li b(eat)i steph(an)i de [drocis a]d ca[usas]* (1282): Douët d'Arcq, *Sceaux*, nos. 7171–2; of the abbey of Saint Germain d'Auxerre, *sigillum s(an)c(t)i. germani ep(iscop)i* (1133), and *sigillum capituli beati germani altissiodori* (second half of the twelfth century): Coulon, *Sceaux de la Bourgogne*, nos. 1256–7; of the abbey of Saint Pierre-des-Chaumes en Brie, *sigillum s(an)c(t)i. petri de calmis* (1203), and *s(igillum) conventus s(an)c(t)i. petri de calmis [ad caus]as* (1312): Douët d'Arcq, *Sceaux*, nos. 8190–1.

[17] For the detail of this evolution see Bautier, 'Origine et diffusion', 307–9.

So by the time of the first appearance of French city seals in the late twelfth century, seals were functioning primarily as personal devices, and the conceptualization of communality, and of abstract administrative entities, was still experimental. Such seals carried a dual graphism, verbal and iconographic, that was representational, simultaneously particular and conventional, functionally determined and status-oriented, and were thus able to reify and to validate social structure. The question arises whether city seals may be seen as generating anti-structure, focusing as they do in such an unprecedented way on *communitas*, and introducing a wider range of text and iconography. Elements of the fresh vocabulary interacted in a slightly disruptive way that created new meanings and definitions of urban process.

In the absence of a recognized definition of medieval towns,[18] the very category, city seals, may appear illogical. Yet such a category can be defined as belonging to collectives which constituted social and geographical units that were engaged in tertiary activities, and recognized by both members and others as distinct.[19] The earliest city seals appeared in the Empire, at Cologne (1114–19), Mainz (1118–19), Trier (1171), Metz (1180), and Cambrai (1185, fig. 6), spreading from there to Northern France – Arras (1175), Pontoise (1190), Bourbourg (1194), Meulan (1195), Valenciennes (1197, fig. 16), Bergues (fig. 11) and Saint-Omer (1199), and Aire (1200); and to Italy (Pisa, 1160), from where they extended to Provence (Arles, 1180, and Avignon, 1189), and to Rouergue (Millau, 1187).[20] Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the use of city seals was further extended. The largest number may be found, in descending order: in Languedoc especially within the territories of the counts of Toulouse, in the Flemish counties of Artois and Flanders, and in Alsace, then an imperial territory. In lesser though still important numbers, city seals were present in the Ile-de-France and Picardie; slightly fewer in Champagne, Provence and Lorraine, Normandy, Auvergne, Limousin, Guyenne, and Burgundy. They were hardly used, if at all, in Brittany and in the centre of France along a line extending from Anjou, Poitou, Berry, Nivernais, Orléannais down to Bourbonnais, Franche-Comté, Lyonnais, and Dauphiné.

This geographic distribution raises the issue of the relationship between sealing and urban status. Such a direct equation, however

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[18] On the failure of standing criteria to define medieval towns adequately, see Le Goff, 'Ordres mendiant', 924–5, 937–40 and *La ville médiévale* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), 230–1.

[19] In the excellent definition of Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, 156.

[20] Bedos, *Les sceaux des villes*, 14, 16–17, 19 with further bibliography and description of the cited seals arranged in alphabetical order; B. Bedos-Rezak, 'Les types des plus anciens sceaux des communautés urbaines du Nord', *Les chartes et le mouvement communal* (Saint-Quentin: Société académique, 1982), 39–50, at 39; Toni Diedrich, *Die alten Siegel der Stadt Köln* (Cologne: Greven, 1980), 16–26; on the seal of Millau see especially Framont, *Sceaux du Rouergue*, 30 and 'Aux origines du sceau de ville et de juridiction: Les premiers sceaux de la ville de Millau,' *Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des chartes*, 147 (1989), 87–122.

convenient for a constitutional definition of the medieval town, cannot be sustained. The communal governments of urban *échevins* or consuls simply constituted an extension of the already extant practices of associations with legal capacity, operative with or without charters of privilege.[21] Some urban communities, such as Bergues (fig. 11), sealed before receiving their charter. Even when granted, early charters did not mention the use of a seal;[22] and while many chartered towns did seal, as many never did so. Among towns known as *communes* and those known as *villes de franchise*, some sealed while others did not, and the same inconstancy is found among southern towns of *consulat*. Even among those towns endowed with similar charters of privilege, like those which followed the Etablissements of Rouen or the charter of Beaumont-en-Argonne, sealing was not consistent.[23] Not having a communal seal, on the other hand, did not prevent towns from acting corporately, for legal capacity might be exercised by using somebody else's seal, for instance that of the ecclesiastical provost in Saint-Dié, that of the Duke of Lorraine in Bar-Le-Duc, Nancy, and Pont-à-Mousson,[24] or that of the Count of Provence in Embrun.[25] When in the early fourteenth century the king of France saw fit to consult his towns, in the absence of an inventory or any proper definition of what a town was,[26] local arbitrary choices were made, and some places faced the necessity of sending responses to royal decisions, or documents bearing the names of their deputies for royal assemblies. Some towns, mainly in Languedoc, took this opportunity to have seals engraved for the first time. Others, however, sent written agreements or deputations under

[21] Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, 33, 155, 161, 167, 211; Anne Lombard-Jourdan, 'Du problème de la continuité: Y a-t-il eu une protohistoire urbaine en France?', *Annales ESC*, 25 (1970), 1121–42, at 1135–6, 1141; Georges Duby, *La société aux XIe et XIIe siècles dans la région mâconnaise* (Paris: Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, 1971), 450, 452; Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, 1961), 263; Le Goff, *Ville médiévale*, 155, 171; Yves Metman, 'Le sceau de la république d'Agen', *Club Français de la Médaille*, 29 (1970), 62–67, at 63.

[22] One exception appears to be the concession by Sanche of Aragon of a *consulat* to the city of Millau, *c.* 1181–85; this concession was confirmed in 1187 by Alphonse, king of Aragon, a text known by a *vidimus* of the French king in 1286: *concedimus namque sigillum commune consulibus* (Framont, *Sceaux du Rouergue*, 30, n.79). Later traditions of the grant of a seal may derive from later grants or from insertions which were made in earlier grants at a time when a seal had come to be seen as the defining element of an urban community.

[23] For the details of this analysis: Bedos, *Les sceaux des villes*, 14–20; Bedos-Rezak, 'Les types des plus anciens sceaux', 41–2; Framont, *Sceaux rouergats*, 31. Of *c.* 300 places in Champagne, Burgundy and Luxembourg that received the charter of Beaumont-en-Argonne (granted by William of Champagne, Archbishop of Reims, in 1182), only the seal of Beaumont is documented: Collin, *Sceaux de la Lorraine*, no. 196. On the danger of using city seals to produce a strict definition of the medieval town: Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, 63.

[24] Collin, *Sceaux de la Lorraine*, 14, 201, after describing the towns of Bar-le-Duc, Nancy and Pont-à-Mousson as endowed with charters of privileges, elected municipal councils, belfries and city walls, denies them the status of cities because they do not have their own city seals.

[25] Bedos, *Sceaux des villes*, 223; in 1252 the consuls of Embrun finally used a city seal: ibid., no. 260.

[26] Le Goff, 'Ordres mendiants', 937–8: a list of French towns was established for the first time in the second half of the fifteenth century.

the seal of the local seigniorial *prévôté*, or under the private seal of an individual.[27]

This diversity in sigillographic practice resisted thirteenth-century attempts by royal jurists to make the seal a constitutive element of the medieval town. Interestingly, Beaumanoir, though willing to theorize about towns, and general seal usage, never mentions urban seals at all.[28] Associations between urban status and seals, however, became increasingly formulaic. The use of seals by Laon and Calais was abrogated with the quashing of their *commune* and *loi*; yet Calais continued to seal after the abolition.[29] The Parlement of Paris confirmed the seal among its privileges to the town of Saint-Afrique in May 1318.[30] In 1271, Lyon was denied the use of a seal on the declared legal basis that it had *nec communia, nec universitas, nec aliquod collegium*; the fact that it was fighting its archbishop is probably more pertinent. For in 1320, when the fight was over and the archbishop had conceded liberties and privileges to the town, the communal seal of Lyon reappeared, though it was never specifically authorized, nor ever after contested.[31] Reims's seal during a trial at the Parlement of Paris in 1322 was not considered to carry full authority because it was a seal of *échevinage*, not of *commune*; the same seal appended in 1368 to a deputies' nomination was, however, no longer questioned.[32] Fourteenth-century royal concessions of *consulats* in Rouergue included explicit mention of the right of seal usage, yet none of these towns seems ever to have used a seal in this period.[33]

Though the constitutional link between seal and urban community remained merely theoretical, attempts at controlling the use of seals by towns appear to have resulted from fiscal and political concerns on the part of the royal administration which, in the course of the thirteenth century, developed local jurisdictions, *baillages* and *prévôtés*, the seals of which, when appended for a fee, served to guarantee private contracts even as they extended the scope of royal control.[34] This new

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[27] Bedos, *Les sceaux des villes*, 19–20, and no. 196 (1303): the agreement made by the *consules* of Cessenon to the trial of Pope Boniface VIII is sealed with a private seal, and so is the similar agreement of Mirepoix (no. 425); René Gandilhon, *Inventaire des sceaux du Berry* (Bourges: Tardy, 1933), no. 383 (1308): the nomination by the inhabitants of Châteauroux of their deputies to the royal assembly of 1308 is sealed with the seal of the local *prévôté*.

[28] Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, 61, 127 on Beaumanoir's theories regarding towns; Jean-Bernard de Vaivre, 'Valeur et hiérarchie des sceaux selon Philippe de Beaumanoir (fin du XIIIe siècle)', *Mélanges offerts à Szabolcs de Vajay* (Braga: Cruz, 1971), 585–603.

[29] In 1295–96 (Laon), 1298 (Calais); in the Laon quashing, the seal is referred to as 'chose afférente au corps ou communauté': Bedos, *Sceaux des villes*, 18. For the Calais quashing, see Charles Petit-Dutaillis, *Les communes françaises* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1970), 315, n. 355; for the city seal in use after the quashing, see Bedos, *Sceaux des villes*, no. 165 (1308).

[30] Framont, *Sceaux rouergats*, 31, n. 87 *consules   qui ea qua dicto officio consulatus pertinent exercerunt, archam et campanam communes sigillumque commune*.

[31] Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, 63; Bedos, *Sceaux des villes*, 17–18.

[32] Arch. nat., XIᴬ fo. 148r (1322) and S 3962 no. 8 (1368); Bedos, *Sceaux des villes*, 18.

[33] Framont, *Sceaux rouergats*, 32.

[34] For the details of this administrative evolution, see Bautier, 'Origine et diffusion', 309–21. Lords also created *prévôtés* with lordly deputy seals on their lands.

royal network conflicted with the pre-existing ecclesiastical jurisdic-
tions which ultimately lost their roles as writing bureaux, and with
those of local lords, who resisted this displacement more effectively.
The new system also conflicted, in northern France, with the use of
royally approved urban seals of jurisdiction, which generated fees for
urban chanceries to the detriment of the king's finances and jurisdiction
as exercised by royal provosts and baillifs.[35] Southern towns had
previously depended upon a notarial system, and welcomed royal seals
of jurisdiction for the validation of contracts, since they had not set up a
competing civic sealing establishment.[36] This in turn may explain the
already noted willingness of the king to grant seals with consular
liberties in the south, while in the north the royal administration was
more diligent in keeping usage under strict control. Clearly, royal
jurists were interested in controlling the use of urban seals whenever
royal sealing now established within the towns and delegated to
deputies, provosts and bailiffs, had to compete with a local city seal.

On the basis of this analysis, seal usage by urban communities
seems characterized by a diffused, inconsistent, pattern. Though there
are political, constitutional, economic, geographic, administrative, and
literate criteria which may be advanced to explain the use of seals by
certain towns, such criteria fail to account for other towns which,
though appearing to have been in similar circumstances, did not seal. A
demographic standard has also not proven entirely satisfactory as a
correlate of urban sealing. Of the twenty-five modern French towns
listed as having between 10,000 and 50,000 inhabitants in the
thirteenth century, only Bourges, Orléans, and Perpignan did not use a
seal.[37] Jacques Le Goff has conceived an alternative hierarchy of
French towns, as of 1355, on the basis of the number of mendicant
convents known to have been founded within heavily urbanized
areas.[38] Of twenty-eight towns with four convents, again Orléans and
Perpignan are shown to have been the only non-sealers; of twenty-four
towns with three convents, Bourges, Caen, Bourg, Draguignan, and
Grasse did not seal. The failure to find seals for major cities by the
above criteria, coupled with the fact that many of approximately 385
extant French city seals are associated with very small places, seems to
demonstrate that town size was only one element in determining the use
of a communal seal.

By sealing, urban communities asserted their participation in the
larger medieval society. Even urban communities without civic seals, in
Brittany, Berry, Lorraine, and Dauphiné for instance, utilized the

[35] Bedos, *Sceaux des villes*, 18–19; Bedos 'L'emploi du contre-sceau au Moyen Age: l'exemple
de la sigillographie urbaine', *Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Chartes*, cxxxviii (1980),
161–78; Bautier, 'Origine et diffusion', 320–2.
[36] Bautier, 'Origine et diffusion', 311–15; Framont, *Sceaux rouergats*, 41, 50–1.
[37] Léopold Génicot's list, cited by Le Goff, *La ville médiévale*, 403.
[38] Le Goff, 'Ordres mendiants', 939–40 and *La ville médiévale*, 403–4.

framework of local lordship and government for the fulfillment of their chancery work. Perhaps this implied some form of political control by these lords, though, even if that were so, such control did not prevent a substantially autonomous civic life. But, with or without autonomous seals, urban communities appear to have been well integrated within the fabric of medieval society. And yet they harboured certain practices and conceptions that challenged prevailing values, and even declared them upon their seals. Indeed, perhaps significant among the incentives for seal usage, was the very opportunity offered to define, express, and represent.

The wording of urban seal texts is quite as various as the pattern of seal usage.[39] Collective nouns such as *universitas* and *communitas* (in general use), *consilium*, *capitulum* (southern usages), *communia*, *concio*, *communio* (northern usages) are commonly found. So too are terms referring to people in groups: the northern *major* alone is rare, and more often is accompanied or replaced by *pares*, *scabini*, *jurati*, *burgenses*; in the south the *consules* are always mentioned in the plural. *Cives* or *civitas* are consistently used for episcopal cities, though not every such city is labelled *civitas*, nor its inhabitants *cives*. In Alsace, *civitas* is used freely, while *oppidum* is virtually specific for this region. *Urbs* appears very rarely, and typically in versified legends.[40] Finally, the use of the vernacular spread slowly, beginning in the first quarter of the thirteenth century with the town name, and coming a century later to include the entire legend, which usage became normal by the fifteenth century. A parallel evolution was shared by seals of all social categories, and towns, though centres for the development and use of vernacular languages, seem to have remained as loyal to Latin as noble and ecclesiastical sealers. The most significant aspect of urban seal legends is their emphasis on the human group in its plurality, rather than on the territorial form of the town proper. Even when the terms *castrum*, *villa*, *civitas*, *burgus*, do appear in the legend, they are usually placed secondarily, after mention of the human collectivity, as for instance on the seal of Avignon (1303): *sigillum consulum castri de avinione*.[41] Whereas communal ecclesiastical seals focused on their saint or on the administrative entity (*capitulum*, *conventus*), city seals tended to assert the pre-eminence of a collegiality of individuals within an urban territory. Perhaps this indicates a tension between the urban corporation and its territory, in which several other jurisdictions coexisted.[42] And this tension in turn underscores the apparent defi-

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[39] See an analysis of legends on early northern French seals in Bedos-Rezak, 'Les plus anciens sceaux', 44-5.

[40] Versified legends appear on the seals of Arles, Marseille and Strasbourg: Bedos, *Sceaux des villes*, nos. 44, 46, 47, 390-2, 670. An exceptional appearance of *urbs* in a regular legend is found on the second great seal of Rouen (1204), but was not maintained on later seals: ibid., nos. 591-5. Conversely, on the fourth seal of Toulouse (1303), *urbs* replaces the *villa* of the 1243 seal: ibid., 687-8. Should this be read as semantic equivalence?

[41] Bedos, *Sceaux des villes*, no. 69.

[42] For the seals of the comital court in Avignon during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, see Douet d'Arcq, *Sceaux*, nos. 4518- 21; for the seal of the episcopal court, ibid., no. 6952.

nition of a French city seal as the mark of a community happening to reside in town, rather than the public instrument of a territorially constituted civic community.

Some legends, in nominative and descriptive form, raise questions about the relationship between legend and iconography on city seals, and of the nature of realism, and its significance, in this iconography. Bold descriptive legends are as rare on city seals as on others. But whereas on non-civic seals symbolic conventions tended to reduce the possibility of realistic depiction, city seal iconography never produced a unified code of representation. In fact, when the legend of the seal of Doullens reads *hi sunt scabini bisterni terque bini*[43] in parallel with the depiction of the twelve échevins (fig. 7), or when the reverse of the seal of Peyrusse reads *imago castelli de petrucia* (fig. 8*bis*)[44] while depicting a castle of which the ruins still survive, a threefold novelty is manifest. For these are the first representations of lay people in a group, the first attempts at realistic depiction, and the earliest examples of an integrated correspondence between writing and image to appear on medieval seals. Realistic monumental images have also been identified on the seals of Toulouse showing the tower of St Sernin (fig. 9), of Agen displaying the round apse of the church of Saint-Caprais, and of Moissac depicting the tower of its abbey church with three blocked arcades still visible today.[45] Such interest in the specific, in attempts at characterization, coexists with numerous cases of conventional depictions, whether human or monumental. In the variety of these iconic compositions, in their synthesis of idealized and documentary elements, several urban visages emerge.[46]

The theme of the town as a holy space is repeatedly emphasized by the seals of many cities which portray patron saints (fig. 11), or show religious monuments (fig. 12) or façades with a profusion of spires and gables conjuring up a sublimation of the earthbound prosperous city, and which inscribe texts joining the town to the *visio pacis* of Jerusalem by invocations of *pax* or *justicia*. The depiction of pillories evokes the town as a place of justice. Other characteristic secular monuments – bridges, city halls, gates, and walls – present the town as a built space, in contrast to the solitude of the forest, sometimes represented by a few trees outside the city wall (fig. 13). Built and inhabited, the town is a male, communal, collegial space, and this point is often made by the

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[43] Bedos, *Sceaux des villes*, no. 251*bis*.

[44] ibid., no. 540 et *bis*; a photograph of the present castle of Peyrusse may be seen in Framont, *Sceaux rouergats*, 56.

[45] Metman, 'Le sceau de la république d'Agen', 62; Coulon, 'Eléments de sigillographie', 163; Helen Rosenau, 'Notes on some Qualities of Architectural Seals During the Middle Ages,' *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 90 (1977), 78–84, at 77–8 and *The Ideal City* (2nd ed., London/New York: Methuen, 1974), 32, 36.

[46] City seals and iconographic devices quoted thereafter are to be found in Bedos, *Sceaux des villes*: for iconography, see *index iconographique*. Cf. W.C. Jordan, 'The Lamb Triumphant and the Municipal Seals of Western Languedoc in the Early Thirteenth Century', *Revue Belge de Numismatique et de Sigillographie*, 123 (1977), 213–19.

display of consular groups in deliberation (fig. 8); of burgesses surrounding their mayor (fig. 14); of townsmen massed on top of the walls (fig. 15), with banners (fig. 16) proclaiming their urban patriotism and with some of them blowing horns (fig. 12). The town may thus be seen as a ceremonial space in which there developed a liturgy of state. Ships, whaling (fig. 17), fishes refer to the activities of inhabitants and define an economic dimension of urban space. Belfries and bells (fig. 18*bis*), and horn-blowing watchmen perhaps allude to the town's changing sense of chronology, in which a new technological rhythm has come to replace the seasonal calendar of the countryside. Crenellated walls and castles, mayors in arms (fig. 19), sometimes followed by crowds with lances (fig. 20), present the town as a military space, defending and defended. An equestrian mayor with sword and coat of arms is the sigillographic equivalent of a chivalrous lord (fig. 2); indeed, as with its hagiographic and castral iconography, the town denies and disproves any alienation from the noble and ecclesiastical worlds by incorporating their iconic representations.

Finally, the town projects itself architecturally (fig. 6, 8*bis*, 10, 12, 15, 16, 18*bis*), using an image that appears at once conventional, natural and arbitrary. The motif of the city – in fact Rome – on seals prior to the appearance of city seals had been an imperial prerogative of Carolingian and Germanic rulers wishing to stress *renovatio*,[47] their revival of the Roman empire of which they saw themselves as heirs. The twelfth-century seal of Cambrai (fig. 6) shows a city image directly copied from an imperial seal. In the medieval sensibility, the city had a rich symbolic dimension, religious and eschatological, inherited from biblical and Augustinian literature.[48] Such symbolism seems pertinent to the physical image of the city displayed on seals, for its architectural construct embodies unfolding historical process and expresses forces working against nature and time. It thus evokes the ideal city that stood for the eternal future of mankind. The biblical celestial city comes equipped with walls, gates, and towers, with a river of life, and with a defensible location atop a mountain, and so do many cities depicted on seals, although these characteristics may also refer to the locations and aspects of the actual town (fig. 8*bis*, 16, 21). In such cases the image serves to establish an ideational relationship between the spiritual values of the community and the physical attributes of the town. Stressing this relationship is the verticality of the medieval city with its heavenward orientation, and its dialectic of *intra/foras*, of inside/ outside. As an enclosed and a circumscribed space, the town excludes

[47] Otto Posse, *Die Siegel der deutschen Kaiser und Könige von 751–1913* (repr. Leipzig: Zentralantiquariat, 1981); Rosenau, 'Notes', 82–3.

[48] Gail K. Paster, *The Idea of the City in the Age of Shakespeare* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 1–4; J. Le Goff, *L'imaginaire médiéval* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 230–40; Michael Richter, 'Urbanitas-Rusticitas: Linguistic Aspects of a Medieval Dichotomy', *The Church in Town and Countryside*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), 149–57; James Dougherty, *The Fivesquare City* (Notre Dame/London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), *passim*.

and includes; bridges (fig. 18, 21), gates closed (fig. 10, 12, 13, 16) or opened (fig. 15), individuals in the process of entering or leaving (fig. 21), all symbolizing the passage between differing realities. Another dialectic relates periphery, gates, and towers, to centre, castle, shrine, and hall (fig. 12, 18*bis*). Thus the visual symbols of power are distributed so as to project topological harmony: the city as perfect space, the form of which corresponded to the perfection of its political and social arrangements (fig. 16).

Whether resulting from an ideal or realistic form, the unity of vision inherent in the orthographic representations of architectural cities gave citizens a sense of being comprehended within a single body. The town as a body politic produced an image of the city as a metaphor for power. This image of the city, not surprisingly, was not restricted to city seals, but also appeared on those of ecclesiastical and lay lords with jurisdictions located within urban territories, such as officialities or *prévôtés*.[49] It may be significant that perhaps the most beautiful of all sigillographic city images, that of Vienne in Dauphinois, appears on the counterseal of the Dauphin Humbert II (fig. 22), [50] that on their seals the Counts of Toulouse[51] hold the Château Narbonnais of Toulouse's seal, and that the Duke of Berry is depicted within a crenellated city wall.[52] A sign of power, the city image articulates assertions of power, and its simultaneous display on competing seals testifies to the role of the city, and that of its image, as the stage for the realization, and confirmation, of power.

It is remarkable that the architectural motif, though frequent, is not in fact used on the majority of town seals. When shown in its realistic form, this motif projects a sense of architecture as man-made and inhabited, but in its more typical conventional form it links the historical to the symbolic city, and thus compels a focus upon an ideal beyond reality. On consideration of the wide diversity of city seal iconography, which emphasizes real communal, commercial, and governmental activity, the possibility exists that the architectural topos was at times avoided because it tended to transfer reality from the secular to the ideal city. This interpretation need not posit an opposition between secular and religious values, but simply implies the rejection of an image which denied reality and specific identity to the place in which both the secular and religious communities were settled.

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[49] For secular seals of jurisdiction displaying an architectural motif: François Eygun, *Sigillographie du Poitou jusqu'en 1515* (Poitiers: Société des Antiquaires de l'Ouest, 1938), nos. 868, 881, 913, 920, 922, 924, 802, 820; Douët d'Arcq, *Sceaux*, nos. 4634, 4657, 4668, 4694, 4714, 4739, 4742, 4761, 4866 (with inscription: *aurelianis*), 5052, etc. For seals of ecclesiastical jurisdiction: Douët d'Arcq, *Sceaux*, nos. 6978, 6939–40, 6941, 6971, 6997, 7011 (with inscription: *remis civitas metropolis*), 7026, 7033, 7135, 7344 (with inscription: *turonis civitas*).

[50] Douët d'Arcq, *Sceaux*, no. 603 (1343); Metman, 'Humbert II le dernier dauphin 1313–1355 et la vue de la ville de Vienne', *Bulletin du Club français de la Médaille*, 20–21 (1968), 22–5.

[51] Douët d'Arcq, *Sceaux*, nos. 743 (1207), 744 (1218), 745 (1242) etc.

[52] Gandilhon, *Sceaux du Berry*, no. 4 and Douët d'Arcq, *Sceaux*, no. 422 (1410).

City seals set a precedent of denotation by mimetic rather than symbolic resemblance. They introduced the notion that the semantic relationship of images to both humans and objects might involve a new type of arbitrariness, away from an emblematic and toward a figurative correspondence.

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