CHAPTER THREE

SIGN THEORY, MEDIEVAL AND MODERN

The Role of Theory in Sigillography

Presence, during the twelfth-century, appears to have been registered increasingly by artifacts, and no longer solely in human beings.¹ Such an impression stems from an overview of the cultural landscape of this epoch (1050–1225), which offers texts, images, and artifacts in unprecedented numbers.² Among the artifacts then newly and significantly visible were seals and sealed charters.

Seals have a long history. Originating alongside if not actually preceding the invention of writing, sealing remained in most civilizations a significant mechanism for marking and protecting ownership, signing commitment, designating identity, representing authority, and authenticating documents. In parallel to their role in the sphere of practice, seals have also served as a metaphoric focus. Mesopotamian and biblical texts, Platonic and Aristotelian treatises, patristic and early medieval commentaries, all incorporate sealing imagery as a conceptual tool.³ Such historical longevity does not necessarily imply congruence of the cultural and modal significance of the seals themselves. Yet historian-sigillographers of all hues have assumed continuity of seal usage between very different societies as a category of historical explanation, thereby promoting interpretation of the seal as a single historical, and thus a-historical, object.⁴

⁴ The seal’s world history, from its beginning in 3000 BCE Mesopotamia to the modern period, is given in Erich Kittel, Siegel (Braunschweig, 1970); in his wide-ranging
In addressing the new appearance of seals on charters issued in the name of French non-royal elites between 1000 and 1200, my earlier work grounds this diffusion laterally, within the very circumstances of its occurrence, rather than approaching it vertically, as an event somehow predicated or determined by historical continuity. As I analyzed the diffusion of seals along the axes of regionalism, politics, and gender, I have come to rethink four previous assumptions that have long, almost axiomatically, dominated the field of medieval sigillography, or sphragistics, that is, the study of seals, and have in my view obscured the actual historical significance of medieval seals, relegating them to the world of antiquarianism and connoisseurship.

The first assumption is that the seal’s function, between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, was to authenticate documents. This notion, which was first articulated at the end of the twelfth century and received its prescriptive formulation in the thirteenth, cannot account for the early pattern of non-royal seal usage. In fact, when late twelfth-century canon lawyers began to reflect on documentary validation, they assigned the power of authentication only to the *sigillum authenticum*, the authentic seal. The meaning of authentic here does not derive so much from a concern about counterfeits but from the desire to establish the capacity for authentic seals to confer full validity on documents devoid of witnesses. However, if from its very inception the concept of the authentic seal involved a precise understanding of the seal’s effect, this effect was specifically understood to emanate

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