CHAPTER NINE

THE SEMIOTICS OF PERSONALITY IN THE MIDDLE AGES

In Book Two of his *De Miraculis*, Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny (d. 1156), discusses the relationship between the abbey of Cluny and one of its priories, the Parisian monastery of Saint-Martin des Champs. Abbot Peter emphasized the resemblance between the Mother House, Cluny, and its daughter, Saint-Martin des Champs, by using a seal metaphor. He wrote: “the abbey of Saint-Martin was so similar (*consimile*) to Cluny, so alike in everything (*in totum conforme*) that, more than any other Cluniac priory, Saint-Martin was the image of Cluny, as an image (*simulacrum*) imprinted in wax duplicates the image (*imago*) of the originating seal, so that those things which are separated by distance, are in fact not different but are absolutely one.”¹

The seal metaphor deployed here by Peter the Venerable is just one example of the many rhetorical uses of seal imagery so characteristic of prescholastic writings. Peter’s specific use of the metaphor, however, is particularly indicative of the two-tiered problematic which forms the core of this chapter. The first tier involves the referential capacity of seals and the representational nature of seal images. Abbot Peter considers that a seal’s main signifying axis hinges on the imprinting process which extends a particular form of likeness between an originating model and its replicated image, the imprint. The second issue raised by Peter the Venerable is the dialectic of singularity and multiplicity. By utilizing the seal metaphor, Peter clearly articulated his notion that Cluny and its affiliated houses, though collective and communal, were above all a single entity. While acknowledging the distance which separates a model, be it the seal matrix or the abbey of Cluny, from its multiple products, that is, seal impressions or Cluniac

¹ PL CLXXXIX, col. 916B, and Petrus Cluniacensis Abbas, *De miraculis libri duo*, ed. Denise Bouthillier (Turnhout, 1988; CCCM 83), p. 107. Peter’s Latin text is particularly concise, a feature lost in the English translation, but his terminology is revealing: . . . Est enim idem Sancti Martini monasterium, suo Cluniacensi monasterio in ordinis, religionis, ac fervoris proposito, pro modo suo ita consimile, et in totum conforme, ut velut simulacrum cerae impressum, multis aliis ad Cluniacum pertinentibus monasteriis originatis sigilli imaginem familiares repraesentet, et exceptis locorum distantis que simul esse non possunt, non diversa, sed prorsus unum sint.
priorities, Peter denies that such separation between model and copy entails any difference between the two. By invoking the seal metaphor to illustrate the intimacy of the likeness which results from replication, Peter argues that such likeness establishes a continuum between model and copy which, ultimately, has the power to cancel, not the distance, but any distinction between the two. Thus, through replication, a distinctive mark is transformed into a type. In the more general terms of Peter’s seal metaphor, reality was less represented than rendered visible as reproduction.

The fusion of representation with reproduction, and the conflation of distinct communities into a single entity, would seem to challenge any practice of personal identification. Yet, it was by the evocation of the very sign of identity then most current, the seal, that Peter the Venerable and his Northern European scholarly contemporaries struggled to clarify notions of personhood and personality, thereby revealing how fundamental seals were in their contemplation and expression of personal identity. A first focus of this chapter, therefore, will be a consideration of the concepts of person and identity as they were dialectically articulated in twelfth-century discursive and sealing practices. Seals were personal, belonging to a specific individual, but seal impressions were products of mechanical reproductive techniques which assured the multiplication of identical images. Furthermore, seal owners were identified, indeed defined, by their placement within status-sensitive categories. The formulation of personal identity thus hinged upon a resemblance to others sharing a similar status or function, while signs of identity substantiated principles of sameness and categorization by their very mechanism of production and system of representation (Fig. 21). I contend that the performance of a personal seal that de-personalized its owner was not paradoxical, but rather was informed by semiotic concepts which organized the reference between seal and subject by means of an ontological participation. This system of representation, organized through a logic of immanence and stereotypy, was to be challenged as markers of individuation appeared on personal seals. Individuality, nevertheless, remained distinct from personal identity and its assertion continued to be infrequent on personal seals. It was in fact on the seals of urban communities that representational practices came to exhibit features of differentiation. A second purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to analyze the ways in which the formulation of urban identity on city seals challenged preceding traditions for representing both the person and the city. I propose to show