

Local families, local allegiances: sigillography and autonomy in the eleventh-twelfth century Black Sea

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Many studies of the medieval Black Sea address the importance of Byzantine imperial agency in facilitating economic and political exchange. However, few studies examine the limits of Byzantine statehood regarding trans-Black Sea local dynasts. This study, primarily utilizing sigillography, focuses on the eleventh-twelfth century notable families of Cherson and Trebizond in case studies, particularly the well-known Tzouloi and Gavrades: two cities and families famed for their respective local autonomies. How can seals uncover an otherwise hidden dimension of Byzantine sovereignty, or its contestation, which manifested itself across the Black Sea even before the emergence of the empire of Trebizond after 1204?

Keywords: Byzantium; pre-modern statehood; sigillography; Black Sea; kinship networks

Frequently the status of pre-modern ‘statehood’ is ascribed to Byzantium with regard to Constantinople’s surrounding lands and sea lanes. Absolute sovereignty, ever a consistent element of imperial aspiration, is similarly taken for granted by many modern specialists of the time and place. While there is relatively little debate about the power of the eleventh-twelfth century emperors in the capital, in the provinces of the *oikoumene* there is far less consensus. Within the imperial Black Sea periphery, where distance from the capital frequently coincides with local autonomy, it is worth considering the cases of Cherson and Trebizond, whose elite families frequently operated within their respective localities as imperial agents or, perhaps equally frequently, as holders of personal

fiefdoms.¹ In this paper, I will examine the eleventh-twelfth century cases of the families of the Gavrades of Trebizond and the Tzouloi of Cherson, primarily using textual mentions, sigillography and numismatics. The *de facto* peripheral autonomies of these kinship networks may imply that our conception of Byzantium, Rus', or any other heretofore assumed 'state' in between, was, amongst other realities, an amalgamation of contested loyalties, at the peripheries of which lay autonomous local lords and their kin, who did not conceive of 'statehood' per se, but primarily of allegiance.

The Gavrades in narrative sources, seals and coins

To study the Gavrades in eleventh-century Trebizond is essentially to chart the story of a family of 'incorrigible rebels,'² who eventually 'brought to the Crimea the innate tendency of all the family to struggle against Byzantium,'³ in a gradual course leading to the independence of Trebizond in 1204.⁴ For the present purposes, we will concern ourselves with the preponderance of Gavrades in Pontic, eastern and central Anatolia in the eleventh century specifically.

The family history begins with three references to Gavrades in John Skylitzes' *Synopsis* of histories.⁵ Notably, Skylitzes' first mention of a member of the Gavras clan of Chaldia (16:6) is in 979 CE with a certain Constantine Gavras who took part in Bardas Skleros' failed Anatolian rebellion against the emperor Basil II, which drew much support from Monophysites and other peripheral *dynatoi*.⁶

Skylitzes' second mention of a Gavras clan member (16:43) comes in 1019 CE, albeit without a first name. Nevertheless, Skylitzes specifically identifies this Gavras in

1 A. A. M. Bryer, 'A Byzantine family: the Gabrades: c. 979-c. 1653', *The University of Birmingham Historical Journal* 12 (1970) 164. As for the use of the phrase 'personal fiefdoms,' while it may strike some readers as somewhat anachronistic and/or misplaced in the Byzantine context (when transferred from its technical definition in the Latin context), I would argue that as a shorthand for a semi-autonomous region ruled by a local warlord, it is an acceptable term. Given a schematic understanding of local rulership as assigned to, or carved out by a local lord, the term 'fiefdom' need not be consigned solely to the Latin West, but rather, the term may refer to an endemic, diachronic and global phenomenon, applicable to many areas and at many times. It may also help to think about the way in which the emperors, for example Basil II (976-1025 CE) and others, dealt with local elites and borderlands by devolving local power to them in return for their allegiance. For an excellent overview of the case of Basil II, see C. Holmes, *Basil II and the Governance of Empire (976-1025)* (Oxford 2005) 300-391.

2 A. A. M. Bryer, S. Fassoulakis, and D. M. Nicol, 'A Byzantine family: the Gabrades (an additional note)', *Byzantinoslavica* 36 (1975) 39.

3 A. A. Vasiliev, *The Goths in the Crimea* (Cambridge, MA 1936) 157.

4 Bryer, 'A Byzantine family: the Gabrades: c. 979-c. 1653', 167.

5 Ioannes Skylitzes, *Ioannis Skylitzae Synopsis Historiarum*, ed. H. Thurn (Berlin 1973) 321, 364, 412; trans. J. Wortley, *John Skylitzes, A synopsis of Byzantine history: 811-1057* (Cambridge 2010) 305 (16:6), 344 (16:43), 387 (19:26).

6 See, for example, A. M. Feldman, *The historiographical and archaeological evidence of autonomy and rebellion in Cherson: a defense of the revisionist analysis of Vladimir's baptism (987-989)*, (Birmingham 2013, unpublished Masters' thesis) 40 note 108.

Thessalonike as an *archon*, *patrikios*, and a co-conspirator in a plot with another man named Elinagos, who ‘sought to restore the Bulgar ascendancy [...] Gabras had already fled his homeland [Trebizond]; he was arrested and blinded...’.⁷ It is worth noting that this mention in Skylitzes is attributed to Theodore Gavras, the late-eleventh-century *doux* of Trebizond, by Cheynet, et al.,⁸ although this is not stated specifically in Skylitzes’ text and there is no indication in any other source that Theodore Gavras was present in Thessalonike. It may be a valid question to ask, how he could have been blinded in 1019 and yet have lived until the 1090s. While some had previously postulated that this Gavras did not even belong to the same clan, instead, Bryer, et al.⁹ seem to suggest that this Gavras was part of the same clan as Theodore of Trebizond, but an earlier member.

Finally, Skylitzes’ third mention of a Gavras comes in the year 1040 CE, when a certain Michael Gavras is revealed as having participated in an insurrection:

At that time there was an attempted insurrection against the emperor led by Michael Keroularios, John Makrembolites and several other citizens, who were likewise deprived of their goods and exiled. There was another mutiny, this one against the grand domestic, Constantine, at Mesanacta. When this was reported to him [the domestic], Michael Gabras, Theodosios Mesanyktes and many other officers in charge of units lost their eyes. And as for the patrician Gregory Taronites, Constantine completely enclosed him in a fresh ox skin with only a sufficient opening to see and breathe through (this because he was said to have been instigator of the mutiny) and sent him to the Orphanotrophos.¹⁰

The family story continues in the person of the remarkable St. Theodore Gavras, the late-eleventh-century ruler of Trebizond mentioned in Anna Komnene’s *Alexiad*, in

7 Skylitzes, ed. Thurn, 364: ὡς δὴ τὸ Βουλγαρικὸν ἀναδεξαμένων καὶ αὐτὸς κράτος, ὁ μὲν Γαβρᾶς ἤδη ἀποδράς εἰς τὴν ἰδίαν χώραν καὶ ἄλους πηροῦται τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς.

8 J-C. Cheynet, V. Gökyıldırım and T. Bulgurlu, *Les sceaux byzantins du Musée Archéologique d’Istanbul* (Istanbul 2012) cat. no. 2.206 (p. 216-217).

9 Bryer, et al., ‘(an additional note)’, 39.

10 Skylitzes, ed. Thurn, 412: Ἐγένετο κατὰ τοῦτον τὸν καιρὸν μελέτη τυραννίδος κατὰ τοῦ βασιλέως, ἕξαρχον ἔχουσα Μιχαὴλ τὸν λεγόμενον Κηρουλάριον καὶ Ἰωάννην τὸν Μακρεμβολίτην καὶ ἄλλους οὐκ ὀλίγους τῶν πολιτῶν, οἱ καὶ δημευθέντες ἐξωρίσθησαν. καὶ ἑτέρα δέ τις ἐπισύστασις γέγονε κατὰ Κωνσταντίνου τοῦ μεγάλου δομestίκο ὑ ἐν Μεσανάκτοις. ἥς μηνυθείσης αὐτῷ Μιχαὴλ μὲν ὁ Γαβρᾶς καὶ Θεοδόσιος ὁ Μεσανύκτης καὶ ἄλλοι πολλοὶ τῶν ταγματικῶν ἀρχόντων ἐκπυροῦνται τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς, Γρηγόριον δὲ πατρικίον τὸν Ταρωνίτην ἕξαρχον, ὡς ἐλέγετο, καὶ πρωτοῦργον τῆς συστάσεως ὄντα ὠμῆ βύρση βοῶς διὰ παντὸς τοῦ σώματος καλύψας ὁ Κωνσταντῖνος, καὶ μόνῃς τῆς ἀναπνοῆς ἕξοδον ἀφείρις καὶ τῆς ὄψεως, πρὸς τὸν ὀρφανοτρόφον ἀπέστειλε.

what is perhaps the single most important textual reference to the man along with other members of his clan.¹¹ According to Anna Komnene, in the mid-late 1080s,

When Theodore Gabras was living in Constantinople, the Emperor who had remarked his violent and energetic nature, wished to remove him from the city and therefore appointed him Duke of Trapezus, [Trebizond] a town he had some time ago recaptured from the Turks. This man had come originally from Chaldaea and the upper parts, and gained glory as a soldier, for he surpassed others in wisdom and courage, and had practically never failed in any work he took in hand, but invariably got the better of his enemies; and finally after he had captured Trapezus and allotted it to himself, as if it were his special portion, he was irresistible.¹²

The family story continues after Theodore Gavras, branching off into many clan members of the twelfth century and later, known from narrative sources and sigillography, on whom there have already been many scholarly studies.¹³

11 Anna Komnene, *Annae Comnenae Alexias*, eds. D. R. Reinsch and A. Kambylis (Berlin 2001) VIII.9.1; trans. E. A. S. Dawes (London 1928) 210-213: *the rise of Theodore, the appointed duke of Trebizond and his son Gregory, imprisoned in Philippopolis*; p. 284: mention of Theodore's successful siege of Paipert [modern Bayburt], in the metropolitan *thema* of Chaldia [see the *Notitiae Episcopatum Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*, ed. J. Darrouzès (Paris 1981) 560]; p. 339: mention of Constantine Gavras' [acc. to *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter (Harmondsworth 1969) 413 note 27, Constantine was son of Theodore and brother of Gregory] refusal to obey emperor Alexios I Komnenos' order to monitor crusaders; p. 370: mention of Constantine Gavras' military command of Philadelphia and defeat of the Seljuks at Kelvianos; p. 377: mention of Constantine Gavras' serving under emperor Alexios I Komnenos at the battle of Akrokos; p. 401: mention of an unnamed Gavras serving under emperor Alexios I Komnenos at the battle of Amorion).

12 Anna Komnene, VIII.9.1.

οὐ μέχρι δὲ τούτου τὰ κατὰ τὸν αὐτοκράτορα ἔστη. ἀλλ' ἐπεὶ Θεόδωρος ὁ Γαβρᾶς ἐνδημήσας ἦν ἐν τῇ βασιλευσίᾳ, γινώσκων τὸ τούτου ὄμβριμον ἐργὸν καὶ περὶ τὰς πράξεις ὄξύ, βουλόμενος τοῦτον ἀπελάσαι τῆς πόλεως, δοῦκα Τραπεζοῦντος προῦβάλλετο πάλαι ταύτην ἀπὸ τῶν Τούρκων ἀφελόμενον. ὄρμητο μὲν γὰρ οὗτος ἐκ Χαλδίας καὶ τῶν (5) ἀνωτέρω μερῶν, στρατιώτης δὲ περιφανῆς γενόμενος ἐπὶ τε φρονήσει καὶ ἀνδρείᾳ ὑπερέχων ἀπάντων μικροῦ καὶ μηδέποτε ἔργου ἀψάμενος καὶ ἀτυχήσας, ἀλλὰ πάντων ἀεὶ τῶν πολεμίων κρατῶν. καὶ αὐτὴν δὴ τὴν Τραπεζοῦντα ἐλὼν καὶ ὡς ἴδιον λάχος ἑαυτῷ ἀποκληρωσάμενος ἄμαχος ἦν.

Theodore Gavras is also mentioned in Zonaras' *Epitome Historiarum* as a *sebastos*, a title generally 'reserved for those connected by blood or marriage to the dynasty of the Komnenoi' (see A. A. M. Bryer, A. W. Dunn and J. Nesbitt, 'Theodore Gabras, Duke of Chaldia [†1098] and the Gabrades: portraits, sites and seals', in A. Avramea, A. Laiou and E. Chrysos [eds.], *Βυζάντιο Κράτος καὶ Κοινωνία: Μνημὴ Νίκου Οικονομίδη* [Athens 2003] 64). See Ioannes Zonaras, *Epitome Historiarum*, ed. T. Büttner-Wobst (Bonn 1897) III, 726, 739. See also V. Skoulatos, *Les personnages byzantins de l'Alexiade* (Louvain 1980) 295-298; and note 24 below.

13 For example, see B. Krsmanović, 'Γαβράδες', *Encyclopaedia of the Hellenic World, Asia Minor* (2003): <http://asiaminor.ehw.gr/forms/fLemma.aspx?lemmaId=3973>; Bryer et al., 'Theodore Gabras', 51-70; A. A. M. Bryer and D. Winfield, *The Byzantine Monuments and Topography of the Pontos* (Washington D. C. 1985) 237; Bryer, 'A Byzantine family: the Gabrades: c. 979-c. 1653', 174-187; Bryer et al., '(an additional note)', 38-45; H. Bartikian, 'Les Gaurades à travers les sources arméniennes', in H. Ahrweiler (ed.), *L'Arménie et Byzance: histoire et culture* (Paris 1996) 19-30; I. Jordanov, *Corpus of Byzantine seals with family names* (Sofia 2006) cat. no. 129 (Zacharias Gavras); Cheynet et al., *Les Sceaux Byzantins*, cat. no. 2.206 (p. 216 - Constantine Gavras, Gregory Gavras), 7.44 (p. 659 - Zacharias Gavras); and G. L. Schlumberger (ed.), *Sigillographie de l'Empire Byzantin* (Paris 1884) 665 (first publication of a seal of Theodore Gavras).

The case of the Gavrades is remarkable in that available narrative sources, such as those listed above, frequently match both seals and coins. We know that the Gavras family, perhaps not so dissimilar from other contemporary families, functioned as a corporate entity.¹⁴ Gavras kinsmen formed a network whose communications, attested in seals, have survived along with narrative evidence and coins, unlike other powerful families of the eleventh-twelfth century Black Sea region. Effectively, Theodore can be seen as a scion of this clan, whose rise was enabled by the service of his own kinsmen to the empire. We know of several Gavrades before the time of Theodore, whose seals have been dated by sigillographers to earlier in the eleventh century. For example, seals of a certain Marinos Gavras,¹⁵ as well as of a Leo Gavras,¹⁶ have been dated to the twelfth century. Other Gavrades' seals date to later in the eleventh century, such as that of a certain Nikephoros Gavras,¹⁷ and a certain Zacharias Gavras.¹⁸ However, the eleventh-century coins and seals of Theodore Gavras provide a deeper understanding of the Gavrades clan as a provincial institution, usually, although not always, in the Black Sea *thema* of Chaldia.

To the well-known Theodore, who is recognised to have ruled Trebizond (where there was a mint, imperial or otherwise) as his private domain, have been attributed specific coins during his rule (ca. 1092–1098 CE), marked by his namesake St. Theodore.¹⁹ This was despite Eugenios being the patron saint of the city,²⁰ which as Dunn argues,

14 N. Leidholm, *Political Families in Byzantium: the Social and Cultural Significance of the Genos as Kin Group, c. 900-1150*, (Chicago 2016 unpublished PhD dissertation) 21-70.

15 I. Koltsida-Makri, *Βυζαντινά Μολυβδόβουλλα: Συλλογής Ορφανίδη - Νικολαΐδη Νομισματικού Μουσείου Αθηνών* (Athens 1996) cat. no. 290.

16 V. Laurent, *Le corpus des sceaux de l'empire byzantin, vol. II: L'administration centrale* (Paris 1981) cat. no. 989. Laurent read this seal as belonging to a *spatharokandidatos* and a ship captain: "Λέων βασιλικός σπαθαροκανδιδάτος και πλοίαρχος ὁ Γαβράς," while Nesbitt, (in Bryer et al., 'Theodore Gabras' 63) instead replaces the [π]λοίαρχος with χ[ι]λοίαρχος. The seal may be found online via the Dumbarton Oaks online catalogue, accession number BZS.1958.106.2158: <http://www.doaks.org/resources/seals/byzantine-seals/BZS.1958.106.2158>. As for the dispute it as [π]λοίαρχος or χ[ι]λοίαρχος, I personally find it difficult to decipher a 'χ' in the third line of text.

It is also worth mentioning that Nesbitt (in Bryer et al., 'Theodore Gabras' 61), dates a seal which he reads as: Ἰω(άννης) ὁ [Γ]α[β]ράς to some time in the eleventh century, although its identification with the Gavrades may be uncertain on close inspection of the poorly preserved seal.

17 Bryer et al., 'Theodore Gabras' 63. Nesbitt reads this seal as: Νικηφόρου σφράγισμα Γαβρά τυγχάνω. See also the Dumbarton Oaks catalogue, accession number BZS.1947.2.1156: <http://www.doaks.org/resources/seals/byzantine-seals/BZS.1947.2.1156>.

18 Jordanov, *Corpus of Byzantine Seals*, cat. no. 129 (Zacharias Gavras, [dated late-eleventh century], asked for St. Theodore's protection specifically in honour of his father, Theodore Gavras – according to Cheynet et al., *Les Sceaux Byzantins*, cat. no. 7.44 [p. 659]).

19 S. Bendall, 'The mint of Trebizond under Alexius I and the Gabrades', *The Numismatic Chronicle* 17 (1977) 126–136 (esp. p. 135); and S. Bendall, 'Trebizond under the Gabrades again', *The Numismatic Chronicle* 149 (1989) 197–198. However, it should be noted that Bendall reads the coins' legend, 'ΑΑΒΡ' as: Ἀλέξιος Βασιλεὺς Ρωμαίων.

20 J. O. Rosenqvist, 'Local worshippers, imperial patrons: pilgrimage to St. Eugenios of Trebizond', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 56 (2002) 193–212. See also Feldman, *The historiographical and archaeological evidence*, 102, on the annual Trapezuntine trade fair, the *panegyris* of St. Eugenios; and Bryer, 'A Byzantine family: the Gabrades', 170.

‘was in fact a considerable sign and gesture of independence, which would have been easily grasped by Theodore’s contemporaries.’²¹

Like the seals and coinage of the Kievan prince Jaroslav the Wise (r. 1019–1054), which frequently matched in design and legend,²² the Trapezuntine coinage of St. Theodore in military attire, bears a remarkable resemblance to Theodore Gavras’ personal seals,²³ which also bear the bust of St. Theodore in military attire (see the accompanying fig. 1–2).²⁴ Therefore, while neither Anna Komnene’s text nor the Trapezuntine coins

21 Bryer, Dunn and Nesbitt, ‘Theodore Gabras’, 65; and Bryer, et al., ‘Theodore Gabras’, 65.

22 See for example M. P. Sotnikova, ‘A seal of Jaroslav the Wise (Kyiv, 1019–1054)’, in G. Ivakin, N. Khrapunov and W. Seibt (eds.), *Byzantine and Rus’ Seals: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Rus’-Byzantine Sigillography, Kyiv, Ukraine, 13–16 September 2013* (Kiev 2015) 221–230.

23 Schlumberger (ed.), *Sigillographie de l’Empire Byzantin*, 665; and Bendall, ‘The mint of Trebizond’, 135. In fact, according to M. Hendy, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection: 1081–1261* (Washington D. C. 1999) 427–434, type X of the Trapezuntine follis coinage of the period ca. 1080–1110 CE, of which there are five examples, and also type XI, of which there are two examples, both purport to show images of St. Theodore in military attire, very similar to the display of the same saint on Theodore Gavras’ seals, and without any mention whatsoever of the concurrent reigning emperor, Alexios I Komnenos. In the two images of St. Theodore’s attire, in both the seal and coin, he is documented as nimbate, wearing a tunic, breastplate and *sagion*, with a shield in his left hand and a lance in his right hand. See Hendy, *Catalogue*, 431 (type X); and also A. W. Dunn, *A Handlist of the Byzantine Lead Seals and Tokens (and of Western and Islamic Seals) in the Barber Institute of Fine Arts* (Birmingham 1983) 4 (cat. no. 6).

24 Bryer, Dunn and Nesbitt, ‘Theodore Gabras’, 63. Nesbitt, whose item of study resides in the Dumbarton Oaks collection in Washington D. C., reads this seal as: [K(ύρι)ε βοήθ]ει τῷ σῷ [δ]ούλο Θεο[δ]ώ(ρῳ) δουκί τῷ Γαβρᾶ. Another seal of Theodore Gavras’, held at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, at the University of Birmingham, is known to have been definitively found in Trebizond and dated to the late-eleventh century. It would be important to note here that this seal type of Theodore’s is the only one which records his possession of the title *sevastos*, along with *doux*, confirming Zonaras’ description of Theodore Gavras as not only a *doux*, but also a *sevastos*. It also includes Theodore’s militaristic namesake on the obverse, St. Theodore, (ὁ στρατηλάτης) ‘the stratelates,’ according to Dunn, 64–65. As for the title of *sevastos*, although it has been brought to my attention that ‘foreign’ rulers received the title *sevastos* along with ‘domestic’ rulers, I would question the concept of foreignness and domesticity, especially since in the Byzantine imperial context, all Christian rulers were theoretically subject to the Christian emperor and were therefore within the *oikoumene*, i.e., ‘domestic.’ This would equally apply to the comparison with the seals and coins of Jaroslav referred to in n.13 above. Finally, Dunn’s English translation should read as follows: (to St. Theodore, ‘the stratelates’), ‘Your namesake the *sevastos*, oh thrice-blessed one, the *doux* Gavras, oh holy one, protect.’

For the mention in Zonaras, see Zonaras, III, 726, 739. See also note 12 above. The poor preservation of the seal has not allowed me to make any alternative readings of this particular seal. Nevertheless, it would be worthwhile to make a final observation that the elaborate nature of the language used on the six-line metrical inscription on the reverse may suggest, if not attest to Theodore’s high position in an otherwise hypostatic court hierarchy, that he felt secure enough to represent himself as a *sevastos* as well as *doux* of Trebizond and to evoke his namesake, St. Theodore, as the *tris-makar* (thrice-blessed one) on his seal. Such an evocation of one’s namesake with the term *tris-makar* is little known elsewhere in provincial Byzantine sigillography. For other examples of the term ‘τρισμάκαρ’ appearing on Byzantine metrical seals, see the Dumbarton Oaks online catalogue accession numbers BZS.1958.106.2674 (<http://www.doaks.org/resources/seals/byzantine-seals/BZS.1958.106.2674>); and BZS.1955.1.3862 (<http://www.doaks.org/resources/seals/byzantine-seals/BZS.1955.1.3862>).



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Figures 1–2: (Colour online) *Left (fig. 1), reproduced with permission from J-C. Cheynet, V. Gökyıldırım and T. Bulgurlu, Les Sceaux Byzantins du Musée Archéologique d’Istanbul (Istanbul 2012) cat. no. 2.206: the seal of Theodore Gavras, which is read as: [Κ(ύρι)ε βοή-θ]ει τῷ σῶ [δ]ούλο Θεο[δ]ώ(ρω) δουκὶ τῷ [Γ]αβρᾶ.*

Right (fig. 2), reproduced from the University of Birmingham, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, cat. no. SL0006 (via webpage: <http://mimsy.bham.ac.uk/detail.php?t=objects&type=all&f=&s=Gabras&record=0>): the seal of Theodore Gavras. Archie Dunn reads the seal as: + Σὸν [ὄ]μόνυμον σεβαστ(ὸν) τρ(ισ)μάκαρ τ(?) δ(οῦ)κ(α) Γαβρᾶν [Α(γιε)] [φ] ἰ[λ]ατ(τ)ε/ [φ]ἰ[λ]άτ(τοις) (?). A. W. Dunn, personal communication, 5 August, 2016.

directly reveals Theodore’s sense of autonomy, a careful study of the sigillography completes our picture of the subtleties of allegiance and autonomy in the eleventh-century Black Sea littoral.

The Tzouloi of Crimea

The only textual reference to a member of the Tzoulas clan belongs to Skylitzes (dated to 1016 CE):

The emperor returned to Constantinople in January, AM 6524 [CE 1016], and sent a fleet against Chazaria under the command of Mongos... with the cooperation of Sphengos, the brother of Vladimir and brother-in-law of the emperor, he subdued the region and actually captured its governor, George Tzoulas, in the first engagement.²⁵

Nevertheless, as in the case of the eleventh-century Gavrades, there are other sources attesting to the importance of the family in local Crimean politics, or as it was known in Constantinople after 849 CE, the *thema ton Klimaton*.²⁶ Even changes in coinage have been linked to the aforementioned Georgios Tzoulas, the so-called ‘governor’ of Khazaria, and the events of 1016 as described by Skylitzes.²⁷ These changes in local Chersonite coinage have been explained by the numismatist Anokhin as otherwise ‘unknown’ between 989–1016 CE. For Anokhin, only after the death of Tzoulas was Cherson ‘outright incorporat[ed] into the composition of the empire.’²⁸

However, the sigillography of the Tzoulas family permits us to view Byzantine Crimea, not as a simple extension of the empire, but as a locally autonomous region/entity. This clan’s seals have already been included in a large number of publications on the

25 Skylitzes, ed. Thurn, 354 [16:39]; trans. Wortley, 336.

Ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς ἀπελθὼν ἐν Κωνσταντινουπόλει, κατὰ τὸν Ἰαννουάριον μῆνα τοῦ ἑξακισχιλιοστοῦ πεντακοσιοστοῦ εἰκοστοῦ τετάρτου ἔτους, στόλον εἰς Χαζαρίαν ἐκπέμπει, ἕξαρχον ἔχοντα τὸν Μογγόν, υἱὸν Ἀνδρονίκου δουκὸς τοῦ Λυδοῦ· καὶ τῇ συνεργίᾳ Σφέγγου τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ Βλαδιμηροῦ, τοῦ γαμβροῦ τοῦ βασιλέως, ὑπέταξε τὴν χώραν, τοῦ ἄρχοντος αὐτῆς Γεωργίου τοῦ Τζούλη ἐν τῇ πρώτῃ προσβολῇ συλληφθέντος.

We may also note that Wortley translates the word ἄρχων as ‘governor’ and the word χώραν as ‘region,’ even though alternatively it could typically be ‘land,’ ‘country,’ or in the context of contemporary reference to Crimea, as ‘climata,’ per the common usage in Latin. For example, the sixth-century *Synekdemos of Ierokles*, ed. G. F. C. Parthey (Berlin 1866) 140-141, lists all concurrent areas subject to the Constantinopolitan patriarch, the Latin translation of such areas, including Crimea and even Khazaria, in fact, references ‘climata,’ as opposed to the usage of words such as ἄρχοντεία or ἐπαρχία. In this regard, it would be important to note that Skylitzes’ use of the word χώραν is not technical, which, according to Archie Dunn (personal communication, 24 January, 2017), indicates the perception that this ‘region’ was not a formal province of the empire, as distinct from contemporary Cherson, even though the two are associated by other sources discussed below.

26 R. Sharp, *The outside image: a comparative study of external architectural display on middle Byzantine structures on the Black Sea Littoral*, (University of Birmingham 2011, unpublished PhD thesis) 114.

27 V. A. Anokhin, *The Coinage of Chersonesus: IV Century B.C. - XII Century A.D.*, trans. H. B. Wells (London 1980) 120.

28 Anokhin, *The Coinage of Chersonesus*, 114-115. Anokhin asserts that this was due to the appearance of coins issued with the letters κβω, which he assigns to the final years of the reigns of Basil II and Constantine VIII (1016-1025 CE). In the latest publication regarding these coins, Sidorenko does not address the appearance of the ω either, although he attributes their mintage to the local church in Cherson. See, for example V. A. Sidorenko, ‘Церковное и муниципальное производства литых херсоно-византийских монет IX- начала XIII вв.’, in A. Ajbabin, V. P. Stepanenko and N. Alekseenko (eds.), *ΧΕΡΣΟΝΟΣ ΘΕΜΑΤΑ №01. Империя и Полис: Сборник научных трудов* (Sevastopol’ 2013) 267–92.

sigillography of Cherson, the most prominent of which have been the works of Nikolaj Alekseienko.²⁹ That Crimea was a notoriously autonomous, if not downright rebellious periphery of the Byzantine *oikoumene* should by now come as little surprise.³⁰ In fact, it is worth noting that even before 1204, in the 1190s, a branch of the Gavras family had ‘established themselves in Crimea.’³¹ Therefore, in this subsection, I will posit that the Tzoulas family of Crimea [*ta Klimata*], similarly to the Gavrades of Chaldia, occupied a central role in eleventh century local affairs, as de facto rulers both on the imperial behalf, and also on their own behalf. This is reflected by their name often appearing alone on seals, its ubiquity throughout the Crimea, and its frequent identification not only with *protospatharioi*, but most notably with the title *proteuon*, which more often than not connoted local potentates and nobility in Cherson who ruled the *thema ton Klimaton* autonomously.³²

Firstly, it is striking to note that on a few seals, the name Tzoulas appears alone, and on other seals which bear both forenames and the Tzoulas surname, no title or

29 See for example, I. V. Sokolova, ‘Печати Георгия Цулы и события 1016 г. в Херсонесе’, *Палестинский Сборник* 23/86 (1971) 68–74; I. V. Sokolova, *Монеты и Печати Византийского Херсона* (St. Petersburg 1983); I. V. Sokolova, ‘Les sceaux byzantins de Cherson’, in N. Oikonomides (ed.), *Studies in Byzantine Sigillography* 3 (Washington, D.C. 1993) 99–111; N. Khrapunov, ‘Continuity in the administration of Byzantine Cherson according to seals and other sources’, in G. Ivakin, N. Khrapunov and W. Seibt (eds.), *Byzantine and Rus’ Seals: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Rus’-Byzantine Sigillography, Kyiv, Ukraine, 13-16 September 2013*, (Kiev 2015) 179–192; N. Alekseienko, ‘The particulars of the Byzantine administration in Taurica: seals of the Stratores of Cherson’, in G. Ivakin, N. Khrapunov and W. Seibt (eds.), *Byzantine and Rus’ Seals: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Rus’-Byzantine Sigillography, Kyiv, Ukraine, 13-16 September 2013* (Kiev 2015) 55–60; N. Alekseienko, ‘Новые сфрагистические данные по истории византийского Херсона VII-IX вв.’, *Античная древность и средние века* 43 (2015) 192–207; N. Alekseienko, *L’administration byzantine de cherson: catalogue des sceaux* (Paris 2012) 231–238; N. Alekseienko, ‘Les relations entre Cherson et l’empire, d’après le témoignage des sceaux des archives de Cherson’, in J.-C. Cheynet and C. Sode (eds.), *Studies in Byzantine Sigillography* 8 (Munich 2003) 75–83; N. Alekseienko, ‘Les sceaux des prôteuontés de Kherson au Xe siècle’, in W. Seibt (ed.), *Studies in Byzantine Sigillography* 7 (Washington, D. C. 2002) 79–86; N. Alekseienko, ‘Херсонская родовая знат X-XI вв. в памятниках сфрагистики’, *Материалы по Археологии, Истории и Этнографии Таврики* 7 (2000) 256–266; and N. Alekseienko, ‘Новые находки моливдовулов рода Цулы из Херсонеса’, *Древности-1995* (1995) 81–87. The author would like to thank professor Alekseienko especially for his contributions to guiding this research.

30 Feldman, *The historiographical and archaeological evidence*, passim.

31 Bryer, ‘A Byzantine family: the Gabrades’, 172; and Vasiliev, *The Goths in the Crimea*, 153–158.

32 Feldman, *The historiographical and archaeological evidence*, 69–71. The unique formulae of these seals, which primarily refer to imperial *spatharioi*, *protospatharioi*, *spatharokandidatoi*, as well as *notarioi* and *strategoï*, of Cherson, frequently refer to the local *proteuontes* of Cherson as well, which alludes to irregular conditions indeed. Imperial ranks and functionaries were supposed to be appointed from Constantinople, but in reality, as demonstrated by these seals, were often the same men as the local Chersonite *proteuontes*, thereby allowing local families such as the Tzouloi, to claim authority in the name of the emperor, but were not necessarily controlled by the emperor himself. Unfortunately, to my knowledge, Cheynet does not comment on this specifically, although Sokolova and Alekseienko have discussed it. See note 29 above and for specific examples, see notes 33–34 and notes 41–45 below.

office appears. With respect to the first type, one seal out of a total of four examples identifies a certain Tzoulas, imperial *spatharios* of Cherson (and nothing else), dated to the late tenth century. The other three seals bear a similar legend, but evoke St. Nicholas on the obverse side (see figs. 4–6)³³ whereas the former example bears only an Orthodox cross on three steps (fig. 3).³⁴ Another seal, that of a certain Ioannes Tzoulas, like the previous example, connects the family name to another imperial office, the *notarios* (fig. 10).³⁵ On other seals, it seems that simply the name Tzoulas was a significant enough indicator of status to render the inclusion of titulature unnecessary.³⁶ For example, it is notable that the seals of Ignatios Tzoulas (fig. 17),³⁷ Theophylaktos Tzoulas (fig. 18),³⁸ and Mosekos Tzoulas (figs. 20–21),³⁹ do not reveal any particular title or office, or even a saint's evocation, but, instead, prefer zoological depictions of what appear to be partridges, or in the latter case, a lion. Whether or not they were imperial office or title holders, it seems as if their name was the most important element to record on their seals.

Secondly, we may notice that the name Tzoulas appears not only in Cherson, but also in Bosphoros, at the opposite end of Crimea, modern Kerch. Two seals are known which belong to two men named Georgios Tzoulas, both dated to the early eleventh century and both clearly sharing much overlap with the Georgios Tzoulas mentioned by

33 Alekseienko, *L'administration byzantine de Cherson*, cat. no. 152 (p. 231–232). He reads the seals as: + Ἄγε Νικόλαε βοήθ(ει) Τζούλα β(ασιλικῶ) σπαθ(α)ρίῳ Χερσονόσ.

34 Alekseienko, *Cherson*, cat. no. 151 (p. 231). He reads the seal as: + Κ(ύρι)ε βο[ή]θ(ει) τῶ σῶ δούλ(ῳ) Τζούλα β(ασιλικῳ) σπαθαρῆῳ Χρεσῶνο(ς); [*sic*]. Although regarding its invocation of St. Nicholas, it would perhaps be sensible to compare this seal to that of Michael Tzoulas (Alekseienko, *Cherson*, cat. no. 153, n38).

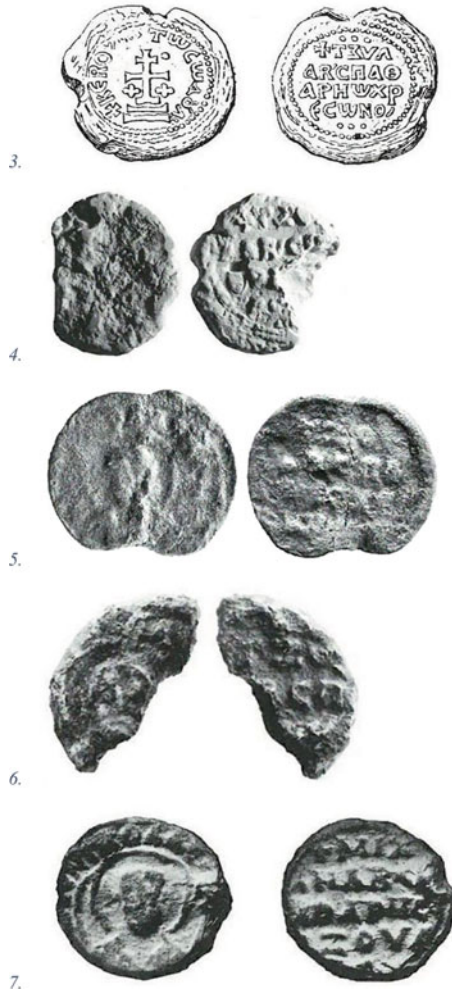
35 Alekseienko, *Cherson*, cat. no. 155 (p. 234). He reads the seal as: + Κ(ύρι)ε βο(ή)θ(ει) τῶ σῶ δού(λῳ) Ἰω(άννη) β(ασιλικῶ) νοταρίῳ τῶ Τζού[λ(α)]. The seal invokes on the obverse St. John the Prodromos, which is, incidentally the same namesake to whom the surviving eighth-century church in the modern Crimean city of Kerch is dedicated.

36 As for the significance of the family name appearing alone on seals as an indicator of special status, we may take into contextual consideration the example of Ioannes Kourkouas, whose eleventh-century metrical seal, found in Trebizond, refers solely to his first and family names, the context of which, according to Archie Dunn (personal communication, 6 September, 2017), indicates the special status his well-known family name held in the eastern Anatolian highlands. See for example the seal catalogued under the Dumbarton Oaks accession number BZS.1955.1.4039: <https://www.doaks.org/resources/seals/byzantine-seals/BZS.1955.1.4039>.

37 Alekseienko, *L'administration byzantine de Cherson*, cat. no. 157 (p. 236). He reads the seal as: + Ἰγνατίῳ τοῦ Τζούλα; [*sic*]. See also Alekseienko, 'Новые находки моливдовулов рода Цулы из Херсонеса', 81–87.

38 Alekseienko, *Cherson*, cat. no. 158 (p. 237). He reads the seal as: + [Θεο]φυλάκ[τ]ῳ [τ]οῦ Τζούλα.

39 Alekseienko, *Cherson*, cat. no. 160 (p. 238). He reads the seal as: + Κ(ύρι)ε βο(ή)θ(ει) τῶ σῶ δ(ούλῳ) Μοσηκῶ (τῶ) Τζούλ(α). This seal is known in two examples.



Figures 3–7: *Reproduced from Alekseienco, L'administration byzantine de Cherson: catalogue des sceaux (Paris 2012) cat. nos. 151–153, (231–233): the Tzoulas family, of Cherson and elsewhere in the 10–11th-c. Crimea. Above, seals of a Tzoulas family member described as an 'imperial spatharios of Cherson' another unnamed Tzoulas family member also described as an 'imperial spatharios of Cherson' and, in Alekseenko's reading, a certain Michael Tzoulas, described as an 'imperial protospatharios of Cherson.'*

Fig. 3 (cat. no. 151): + Κ(ύρι)ε βο[ή]θει τῷ σῶ δούλ(ω) Τζούλα β(ασιλικῶ) σπαθαρή(ω) Χρεσῶνο(ς).

Figs. 4–6 (cat. no. 152): + Ἄγιε Νικόλαε βοήθει Τζούλα β(ασιλικῶ) σπαθ(α)ρίω Χερσόνος.

Fig. 7 (cat. no. 153): + [Ἄγιε] Νικόλα[ε βοήθει τῷ σῶ δούλ(ω)] Μιχαήλ β(ασιλικῶ) (πρωτο)σ[π]αθαρηῶ [τῷ Τ]ζούλα[ρ Χ]ε[ρ]σ(ῶ)νος. It should be noted, however, that the reference to the city of Cherson on the final line of the reverse of this seal is hardly preserved, and is therefore a rather tentative reading, with respect to this seal's connection of the name Tzoulas and the city of Cherson.



8.



9.



10.

Figures 8–10: *Reproduced from Alekseienco, L'administration byzantine de Cherson, cat. nos. 154–155, (233–234): the 10–11th-c. seals of other members of the Tzoulas clan, Photios/Photinos, a 'protospatharios' and Ioannes, an 'imperial notarios.'*

Figs. 8–9 (cat. no. 154): Ὁ Ἄ(γιος) Εὐστράτ(ιος) + Κ(ύρι)ε βοήθ(ει) τῷ σῶ δουλ(ῶ) Φοτίῳ/Φοτ(ε)ί(ν)ῳ (πρωτο)σπαθαρίῳ τῷ Τζούλ(α).

Fig. 10 (cat. no. 155): + Κ(ύρι)ε β(οή)θ(ει) τῷ σῶ δού(λῶ) Ἰω(άννη) βασιλικῶ) νοταρίῳ τῷ Τζούλ(α).



Figures 11–17: *Reproduced from Alekseienco, L'administration byzantine de Cherson, cat. nos. 156–157, (234-236): the 10–11th-c. seals of other members of the Tzoulas clan, featuring a number of different seals of a certain Georgios Tzoulas described as an 'imperial proto-spatharios and strategos' and another member of the family, Ignatios Tzoulas.*

Figs. 11–16 (cat. no. 156): + Κύριε βοήθει τῷ σῷ δούλῳ Γεοργίῳ β(ασυλικῷ) (πρωτο)σπαθ(αρίῳ) (καί) στρατ(ηγῶ) τῷ Τζούλ(α). Fig. 17 (cat. no. 157): + Ηγνατήῳ τοῦ Τζουλα.



17.

Figures 11–17: (Continued)

Skylitzes and referenced above.⁴⁰ While momentarily resisting the reasonable temptation to imagine they may have belonged to the same individual, it is significant that one seal clearly relates that its owner resided in Bosphoros (fig. 19),⁴¹ while the other, of which we have no less than six examples, does not clarify where its owner was resident, although it does state that this Georgios Tzoulas was a *strategos*. Since five of the six examples were originally found in Cherson, we may reasonably suppose that he resided in Cherson (fig. 11–16).⁴² That members of the Tzoulas clan are clearly identified not only in Cherson, but also in Bosphoros, and two were imperial *protospatharioi*,⁴³ should serve as a significant marker that members of the Tzoulas family were both prominent and active throughout the *thema ton Klimaton*.

Examining the seals of other members of the family such as Michael Tzoulas (fig. 7),⁴⁴ and Photios/Photeinos Tzoulas (fig. 8–9),⁴⁵ presumably confined to Cherson, we can see that the imperial title of *protospatharios* was repeatedly evoked, although it

40 See for example Sokolova, ‘Печати Георгия Цулы и события 1016 г. в Херсонесе’, *Палестинский Сборник* 23/86, 68–74; Feldman, *The historiographical and archaeological evidence*, 70 note 236; and above note 26.

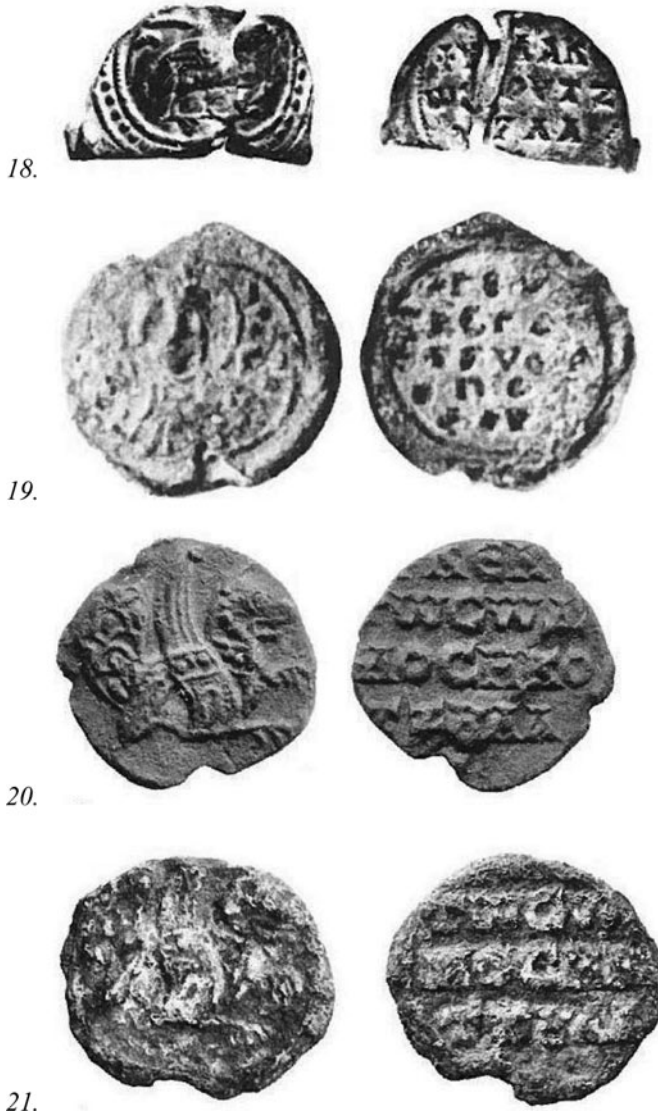
41 Alekseienko, *Cherson*, cat. no. 159 (p. 237). He reads the seal as: + Γεω[ρ]γ(ιος) (πρωτο)σπα[θ(αριος)] ὁ Τζ(ο)ύ[λ]α τοῦ Ποσφόρ(ου). The seal also evokes St. George on the reverse, presumably as a namesake. See also Kazhdan, ‘Rev. Печати Георгия Цулы и События 1016 г. в Херсоне’, *Byzantinoslavica* 33/1 (1972) 298.

42 Alekseienko, *Cherson*, cat. no. 156 (p. 234–235). He reads these seals as: + Κύριε βοήθει τῷ σῷ δούλῳ Γεοργίῳ β(ασιλικῷ) (πρωτο)σπαθ(αρίῳ) (καὶ) στρατ(ηγῷ) τῷ Τζούλ(ῳ). It would be significant to note here that no saint is evoked on any of these six examples of his seal, as both obverse and reverse fields are filled with epigraphy, with the inscription, + Κύριε βοήθει τῷ σῷ δούλῳ, appearing on the legend of one side, while the other half, + Γεοργίῳ β(ασιλικῷ) (πρωτο)σπαθ(αρίῳ) (καὶ) στρατ(ηγῷ) τῷ Τζούλ(ῳ), appears filling the legend of the opposite side.

43 See Alekseienko, ‘Новые сфрагистические данные по истории византийского Херсона VII–IX вв.’, *Античная древность и средние века* 43, 201.

44 Alekseienko, *Cherson*, cat. no. 153 (p. 232). He reads the seal as: + [Ἄγιε] Νικόλα[ε βοήθει τῷ σῷ δούλῳ] Μιχαήλ β(ασιλικῷ) (πρωτο)σ[π]αθαρῆ [τῷ Τζούλ[α] Χ]ε[ρσ(ῶνος) (?)]. For this particular seal, it ought to be noted that the reconstruction of the word Cherson is predicated on little evidence.

45 Alekseienko, *Cherson*, cat. no. 154 (p. 233). He reads these two seals as: + Κ(ύριε) βοήθ(ει) τῷ σῷ δούλ(ῳ) Φοτίῳ (ου Φοτ(ε)ίνῳ) (πρωτο)σπαθ(αρίῳ) τῷ Τζούλ(ῳ). It should also be noted for these two seals that they do not explicitly reference the city of Cherson, other than the fact that it is included in Alekseienko’s collection of seals from Cherson, and struck by a member with strong links to the city.



Figures 18–21: Reproduced from Alekseienco, *L'administration byzantine de Cherson*, cat. nos. 158–160, (237–238): the 10–11th-c. seals of other members of the Tzoulas clan, featuring a Theophylaktos Tzoulas, a Georgios Tzoulas, 'imperial protospatharios of Bosphoros' (modern Kerch), and Mosekos (Moses) Tzoulas, with what appears to be a griffin.

Fig. 18 (cat. no. 158): + [Θεο]φυλάκ[τ]φ [τ]οῦ Τζούλα.

Fig. 19 (cat. no. 159): + Γεω[ρ]γ(ιος) (πρωτο)σπα[θ(αρίος)] ὁ Τζ(ο)ύ[λ]α τοῦ Ποσφόρ(ου).

Figs. 20–21 (cat no. 160): + Κ(ύρι)ε β(οή)θ(ει) τῶ σῶ δ(ούλω) Μοσηκῶ (τῶ) Τζούλ(α).

remains unclear if it was inherited. That said, the seniority of the title and its significance for peripheral lords,⁴⁶ who were frequently granted the same honours as *strategoï*, should come as little surprise. Furthermore, since seals show that the *strategoï* and the notoriously autonomous *proteuontes* of Cherson were often the same individuals,⁴⁷ this suggests that the recommendation of the *De Administrando Imperio* to appoint *strategoï* for Cherson from Constantinople itself,⁴⁸ was not always followed.⁴⁹ Moreover, even when it was followed, the *strategoï* of Cherson did not always receive imperial salaries, but, rather, ‘gratuity’ from the *thema* itself,⁵⁰ similar to the case of Trebizond in Chaldia, where the income of the *strategoï* derived from the *kommerkion*, or the tax revenue collected by the *kommerkiarioi* of Chaldia.⁵¹ So it is that, as in the case of Chaldia, seals demonstrate the importance of the autonomy of local families to understanding contemporary events in Crimea.⁵²

Therefore, to return to Skylitzes’ mention of Georgios Tzoulas it should come as little surprise that a Tzoulas was imputed as a ‘Khazarian governor’ leading the uprising of 1016 in Crimea. It appears that whoever he was, whatever titles or offices he held, he was not so much ‘Khazarian’ as a member of a local prominent family, *proteuontes* of Cherson, with a tendency for autonomy and rebellion.⁵³ Much like Theodore Gavras, Georgios Tzoulas was the scion of a prominent local family to which Constantinople gave ‘recourse’ in the tenth-twelfth centuries and later.⁵⁴

46 A. P. Kazhdan et al. (eds.), ‘protospatharios’, *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 3 vols. (Oxford 1991) III, 1748.

47 Alekseienko, ‘Les sceaux des prôteuontés’, 79–86; and Feldman, *The historiographical and archaeological evidence*, 69 note 235.

48 Gy. Moravcsik and R. J. H. Jenkins (eds. and trans.), *De Administrando Imperio* (Washington, D. C. 1967) 42:25–54 (p. 184–185).

49 See for example Khrapunov, ‘Continuity in the administration’, 179–192; and Feldman, *The historiographical and archaeological evidence*, 70 note 236.

50 L. Neville, *Authority in Byzantine Provincial Society, 950–1100* (Cambridge 2004) 24. In the case of Cherson, Neville cites the emperor Constantine VII’s *de Ceremoniis*: J. J. Reiske (ed.), *Constantini Porphyrogeniti imperatoris de ceremoniis aulae Byzantinae* (Bonn 1829) 697. In this context, Cherson is regarded as a *thema* of the West.

51 A. Dunn, ‘The *kommerkiarios*, the *apotheke*, the *dromos*, and the *west*’, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 17.1 (1993) 3–8; B. Krsmanović, *The Byzantine Province in Change: on the Threshold between the 10th and 11th Centuries* (Athens 2008) 126 note 247; and Feldman, *The historiographical and archaeological evidence*, 103.

52 Alekseienko, ‘Les relations entre Cherson et l’empire’, 82.

53 Sokolova, ‘Les sceaux byzantins de Cherson’, 104. With regard to Sokolova’s words regarding the usage of ‘prôteuôn’ as a patronym on a seal, it is worth noting that Alekseienko, (*Cherson*, cat. nos. 52, 81, 82), mentions no fewer than three seals, otherwise belonging to imperial *strategoï*, whose surnames, or perhaps epithets, appear as *proteuon* on their seals.

54 J. Shepard, ‘Close encounters with the Byzantine world: the Rus at the straits of Kerch’, in K. L. Reyerson, Th. G. Stavrou and J. D. Tracy (eds.), *Pre-Modern Russia and Its World: Essays in Honor of Thomas S. Noonan* (Wiesbaden 2006) 28–30.

Having considered two case studies of local noble families of the Black Sea littoral in the eleventh century by means of narrative sources, coins, and, primarily, seals, it would seem reasonable to conclude that despite nominal homage paid to the emperor through the use of court titles on the seals of some peripheral notable families, imperial authority was not as absolute as we might suppose. The unity of the eleventh-twelfth century Byzantine ‘state,’ as it has often been imagined, was not as hypostatic as has often been conjectured, and scholars are becoming more aware of the conditionality of Byzantine ‘statehood’ at its peripheries.⁵⁵ This is particularly apparent in the Black Sea regions furthest from Constantinople, namely Crimea and Chaldia, where imperial sovereignty was hardly absolute, and allegiances were almost always negotiable at the local level.

55 G. Prinzing, personal communication, 13 December 2016. Other scholars have increasingly begun to question the paradigm of Byzantine ‘statehood’ as well, such as A. Eastmond, ‘Constantinople: global or local?’ and J. Haldon, ‘A “global” empire: the structures of East Roman longevity’ both presented at *Global Byzantium, the 50th Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies*, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, 25-27 March 2017.