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Seminar: The Archbishops of Cyprus 'Betwixt Greeks and Saracens'

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Abstract

This seminar presentation will discuss and reassess the textual evidence concerning the fate of the archbishops of Cyprus in the later 7th century, shortly after the beginning of Arab expansion into the eastern Mediterranean. According to later Byzantine sources, in 691 Archbishop Ioannes and his flock were transferred from their island to the region of Cyzicus on the Sea of Marmara, not far from Constantinople, to allegedly escape the Arab threat. The Cypriots remained there for seven years and were then repatriated together with other Cypriots who had been transferred to Arab-controlled Syria earlier on.

The 34 surviving lead seals attributed to Archbishop Ioannes offer valuable supplementary evidence for the interpretation of these events. What will be presented is a reassessment, at variance with those hitherto proposed by scholarship, about the vexed issue of the itinerant Cypriots and their spiritual leader. Based on a meticulous analysis of the style, inscriptions, iconography and findspots of the seals, it will be argued that the emigration of the prelate with his flock was rather the result of a different set of considerations. Placed within the wider context, it nuances our assessment of relations between Empire and Caliphate during a key period in the history of the Mediterranean.