

THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE PATH

Lucia Orlandi – In history and archaeology, we research and analyze the traces left by our predecessors. In some cases and for several epochs, we literally hold in our hands material printed by a stamp. We can think of bricks, tiles, amphorae, or else we have the instruments that were used to leave these imprints. And for the Roman period and the first centuries of the Byzantine Empire, it was signet rings and *signacula*, from the Latin verb "*signare*" that were most often used to leave a mark or a signature. A *signaculum* is a seal. They are used where it is necessary to have a mark that is reproducible and recognizable, to guarantee or identify an object or a document. So you can write your own name on it or you can choose to put greetings on it. Some stamps have more specific uses, for example to mark products that are prescribed for medical or possibly magical use, or even stamps to mark bread that were specially developed for use in the context of the Christian liturgy.

Let me now give you an example of this kind of object. My example first of all has the shape of a *solea*: the *solea* is an iconographic motif, in this case of the imprint of a foot, naked or shod, that has very ancient connotations. It is associated with three concepts: firstly fixing the memory of a passage or of a journey. It might be found, for example, in sanctuaries and places of pilgrimage. The second concept is the perpetuation of one's presence and the memory of oneself by recording one's own passage; often the imprints are found with the name of a person. The third concept is a kind of lucky charm: feet are a sound basis and in Greek, the term "bema" indicates a footstep but also a platform or a basis.

Now let's look at the inscription: the writing is normally inverted hence back-to-front in order to make the impression legible. The formula "*vivas*" can be translated as "that you may live", "that you may live well"... So a wish that is addressed to the reader. On the other hand, the final S is reversed, which suggests that this formula could also be a little play on words. By reading "*vivas*" backwards, we get *saviu*, which is in fact the vernacular form of *savium*, the kiss, so "that you may live" and "a little kiss". And this is a greeting that is commonly found in correspondence of the same period, and that is also evidently found in other *signacula*.

So this small imprint, both simple and rich in meaning, reminds us how much the most ordinary gestures of everyday life reveal complexity. By studying these objects, we find not only shared practices of society but also the emotions, the human intentions, that are engraved in the material. Through these imprints and these moulds, individuals are in fact telling us of their passage and setting down

their memories. Probably without even having imagined it to be possible, they are still letting us converse with them across the centuries.

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