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On a Rare Billon Trachy of Theodore II Ducas-Lascaris

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Abstract: *The paper discusses a very rare coin from the Numismatic Collection of the National Bank of the Republic of Macedonia with respect to its disputable attribution in the context of the other known specimens of this type. It aims to reattribute these coins due to the well-preserved inscription and iconographic elements of the coin discussed, and eventually to relate it to yet another late thirteenth century obscure group of coins, some found during the archaeological excavations at various sites in the city of Ohrid and its surrounding.*

Key words: *billon trachy, Theodore II Ducas-Lascaris, John IV Lascaris, Prilep, Ohrid.*

In 2003 the Numismatic Collection of the National Bank of the Republic of Macedonia came into a possession of a rare billon trachy said to have originated from the vicinity of the town of Prilep, in the south-west part of the country.

The coin (**Pl. 1, no. 1**) has a weight of 1.78 g and a diameter of 25 mm, with the following iconography:

Obverse: Ⓞ/Δ/Η, to I., ΜΙ/ΦΙ/С, in two columns; three-quarter-length figure of nimbate and beardless St. Demetrius, wearing tunic, breastplate, and sagion; holds in right hand sword, resting over the shoulder and in left a shield with star in the center.

Reverse: ΘCΘΔΨΡΟC ΔΕCΠΟΤΙC Ο ΔΧΚΑC; full-length figure of emperor, bearded, wearing stemma, divitision, collar-piece, jeweled loros of simplified type and sagion; holds in right hand labarum-headed scepter, and in left globus cruciger. In the upper right field *Manus Dei*, in the left, mark ∴.

The search for other known specimens of this type has resulted with a list of at least twelve additional coins, constituting an intriguing numismatic group with the following contents:

- one trachy from the Arta/1923 hoard with a date of deposition in the early 1260's,
- five specimens from the Arta/1983 hoard of a same date of deposition,
- one heavily damaged coin from the Samuel's Fortress in Ohrid,
- one is said to be from Dürres (Dyrrachium),

- one is kept in the Collection of the Faculty of Archaeology at the University of Sofia,

- one in the Collection of the Archaeological Museum in Athens.

In 2014, at the Forum Ancient Coins web coin-collectors community there appeared two more specimens of this kind¹.

In his important article on the two Arta hoards, Iannis Touratsoglou attributed this type to the Thessalonikan mint of the emperor Theodore Comnenus Ducas (1224/5, 1227-1230)². Vladimir Penchev published the Sofia specimen in 2008, expressing an identical opinion³. Ross Glanfield has suggested that the type was probably an issue of Theodore while he was an Epirote ruler based at Arta from about 1215 to 1224, discarding the possibility that the coin could be assigned to the Nicaean emperor Theodore II Laskaris (1254-1258) for the emperor is not depicted with the characteristic forked beard⁴.

The proposed attributions challenge Michael Hendy's view given in the Fourth Volume of the Dumbarton Oaks Catalogues that the type termed Q belongs to the Nicaean emperor John III Ducas Vatatzes as a Magnesian issue struck in the period between 1221 and 1254⁵. His conclusion rested only upon the Athens specimen, the same being previously published by Petros Protonotarios as John's Thessalonikan issue minted from 1246 to 1254, that is, after he had taken control over the city and set a second mint there⁶.

Obviously, the present knowledge on these rare coins has been a subject of conflicting numismatic interpretation, in a true accordance with the complicated *partito* reality of the thirteenth century after the Byzantine disaster of 1204.

Given the discrepancies, the Prilep coin appears to be a unique numismatic source since its fully preserved circular inscription with the personal name Theodore, an imperial title *despotes* and the family name Ducas, narrows the choice to two possible rulers that might have issued the type: either, the Thessalonikan emperor Theodore Comnenus Ducas or the Nicaean emperor Theodore II Ducas-Laskaris. To begin

¹ <http://www.forumancientcoins.com/board/index.php?topic=96897.msg599566#msg599566>

² Γ. ΤΟΥΡΑΤΣΟΓΛΟΥ, *Θεσσαυρός άσπρων τραχήων/1983 από την Αρτα*, in *Αρχεολογικόν Δελτίον* 36 1981 (1989), pp. 210, 212 and Pl.88, 1-4 with the quoted bibliography; (hereafter, *Θεσσαυρός άσπρων τραχήων/1983 από την Αρτα*).

³ V. PENCHEV, *Rjadka medna skifata na solunskija imperator Teodor Komnin*, in *Numizmatika, sfragistika i epigrafika* 4 (2008), pp. 103-6 and Pl.XI.1, (with a summary in English).

⁴ R. GLANFIELD, *The Arta 1283 Hoard*, in http://www.glebecoins.net/paleos/Notes/The_Arta_1983_Hoard/the_arta_1983_hoard.html

⁵ M. HENDY, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and Whittemore Collection* Vol. 4/2, Washington, D.C 1999, p. 506 and Pl.XXXIV, (51); (hereafter, *DOC 4/2*); He has suggested that the coin type bears two signs - the threefoil on the reverse, and the star on the obverse, where the last is hardly to be accepted in the view of the fact that many representations of Byzantine shields do have depicted star in its center. Moreover, a closer examination of the specimen given in the catalogue reveals that the reverse signum is ✧ and not ✧.

⁶ P. PROTONOTARIOS, *More Rare or Unpublished Coins of the Empires of Nicaea and Thessalonica*, in *Numismatic Circular* LXXXII/2 (Feb. 1974), p. 53, No. 8.

with the arguments against its Thessalonikan provenance, the remarkable coinage of Theodore Comnenus Ducas has been well studied and within the given indictional sequences for the billon types, it is virtually impossible to add new ones for the period between 1224/25 and 1230⁷. Certainly fascinated by his own success to rule independently from and with such a prominent city as Thessalonika was, Theodore frequently adorned his coins with the image of its patron-defender and the most venerated warrior-saint among the Greeks and the Slavs⁸. Impeccable representations of St. Demetrius, either dressed in a court costume or military attire, are reserved for the reverse iconography, an exception being the petty currency where he is shown on the obverse with a spear and round shield with an *umbo* in his right hand. On our type, St. Demetrius is depicted as a soldier armed with a sword and a distinctive almond-shaped shield with a star in the center and contrary to the fine artistry of the Thessalonikan mint, the image is rendered in a rather rudimented, post-1246, manner. The representations of almond-shaped shields are to be found in the other forms of Byzantine art already in the mid-eleventh century⁹, but as for the coin designs, the Magnesian late billon issues of Theodore I Laskaris (acclaimed 1205; crowned 1208-1221) would be the earliest such evidence¹⁰. The practice was widely exercised by his successor John III Vatatzes on his brief and plentiful types, series of billon trachea. For all intents and purposes, the almond-shaped shield feature was a purely Magnesian fashion. The obverse inscription ligature Φ was also unknown to the mint of Thessalonika, at least before it became a second mint of the Nicaean emperors. With regard to the reverse, the rendition of large jewels on the emperor's loros ends seems equally odd in relation to the Thessalonikan artistic tradition. Curious signum of two variants in the left field on the reverse, has no parallels in the coinages of the Thessalonikan despots, nor is it recorded on the Thessalonikan billon issues of the Nicaean emperors. Three-petted pendula hanging from the emperor's stemma are absent on these coins, too.

This being said, it seems very unlikely that the coins in question belong to Theodore Comnenus Ducas or that they are an early product of the Thessalonikan mint, if at all. The other possible place of their origin -- the mint at Epirote Arta, should be discarded in the view of the fact that Theodore, while ruling with the state of Epirus, struck

⁷ M. HENDY, *DOC* 4/2, pp. 545-65 and Pl. XXXVIII-XL; C. MORRISON, *The Emperor, the Saint and the City: Coinage and Money in Thessalonike from the Thirteenth to the Fifteenth Century*, in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 57 (2003), p. 177; (hereafter, *The Emperor, the Saint and the City*).

⁸ B. ΠΕΝΝΑ, *Η απεικόνιση του αγ. Δημητρίου σε νομισματικής εκδόσεις της Θεσσαλονίκης: μεσοβυζαντινή και ύστερη βυζαντινή περίοδο* (with a summary in English), in *Ὁβολός* 4 (2000), pp. 195-210; C. MORRISON, *The Emperor, the Saint and the City*, pp. 181-2.

⁹ On representations of almond-shape shields in other forms of the Byzantine art, see M. G. PARANI, *Reconstructing the Reality of Images – Byzantine Material Culture XI-XV Centuries*, Laiden and Boston 2003, pp. 27-8; P. L. GROTHOWSKI, *Arms and Armour of the Warrior Saints: Tradition and Innovation in the Byzantine Iconography*, Laiden and Boston 2010, pp. 231-4; G. A. ŠKRIVANIĆ, *Oružje u srednjovekovnoj Srbiji, Bosni i Dubrovniku* (with a summary in English), Beograd 1957, pp. 123-4.

¹⁰ Type G (c.1212-21?), Magnesia, see M. HENDY, *DOC* 4/2, p. 466 and Pl. XXVIII, 11.1-2.

only electrum trachea styled just with ΘCOΔΨΡΟC ΔΧΚΑC, pertinent to the historical actuality - he never held any title¹¹.

Theodore Ducas-Lascaris, the only son of the emperor John III Ducas Vatatzes, and a learned disciple of Nicephorus Blemmydes, was proclaimed emperor in November 1254 and ruled until September 1258. Much of the first two years of his reign, he was successfully campaigning in Thrace and Macedonia. His *praetor* for western Macedonia and Albanian lands, the historian George Akropolites was in charge of the cities of Thessalonika, Berroia, Servia, Ohrid, Dyrrachium, Dibra and Prilep¹². The control over the western Macedonian territories was soon lost given the Nicaean hostilities with the Serbs and with the Epirotes, but restored briefly after the decisive battle at the Pelagonian plain in July 1259. There, Michael Paleologus, already a colleague of the minor emperor John IV Lascaris, with the helping hands of his brother, won the famous victory over the powerful coalition of Sicily, Epirus and Achaia. Nicaean armies advanced as far as the Epirote capital of Arta; and the principality of Thessaly recognised Nicaean suzerenity. Albanian lands, too, returned to the Nicaean allegiance¹³. For the sake of the argument, the mentioned lands and towns have been the sites of provenance of the coins discussed here.

Theodore's II billon coinage, after much attributive confusion, currently consists of three types of trachea struck at Magnesia and a single one at Thessalonika, as it seems very probable that he closed the latter at 1255¹⁴. The Magnesian Type D, initially assigned to him by Hendy, was later transferred to John III, thus, as he notes, leaving a blanket in the billon coinage versus his four years in power. Should it be filled with the type discussed here, one has to take into consideration that Type A, unusually for billon issues, bears letter signa (ΘB or BB, on the obverse) and Type B - two lilies related to the image of St. Tryphon on the obverse. The Type C, with standing St. Theodore instead, bears a more simple form of reverse inscription, omitting the family name Lascaris, as it is the case with our coin type.

To put it in Hendy's words, "Theodore's coinage was tidiest, most rigidly symmetrical of the entire post-conquest period and in this respect, was rivaled only by those of the Thessalonikan Ducas", for the reason of which he has left opened the possibility that Thessalonikan mint personnel had been brought to Magnesia after

¹¹ Idem, p. 627; D. M. NICOL, *Despotate of Epirus*, Oxford 1957, pp. 47-75; A. STAVRIDU-ZAFRAKA, *The Political Ideology of the State of Epiros*, in A. LAIOU (ed.) *Urbs Capta: The Fourth Crusade and its Consequences / La IV Croisade et ses consequences*, Paris, 2005, pp. 315-6 and n. 35; B. FERJANIČIĆ, *Despoti u Vizantiji i južnoslovenskim zemljama* (with a summary in German), Belgrade 1960, pp. 53-58.

¹² K. ADZIEVSKI, *Pelagonia vo sredniot vek* (with a summary in German), Skopje 1994, pp. 143-60; B. PANOV, *Ohridskiot kraj vo periodot na megjusebnite borbi na Epirците, Nikejcite i Bugarite za prevlast vo Makedonija* (1230-1261), in *Ohrid i ohridsko niz istorijata* (with a summary in English and Russian) Vol.1, Skopje 1985, pp. 231-4; M. ANGOLD, *Byzantine Government in Exile: Government and Society under the Laskarids of Nicaea 1204-1261*, Oxford 2004, pp.279-96; (hereafter, *Byzantine Government in Exile*).

¹³ Idem, p.282.

¹⁴ M. HENDY, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c.300 - 1450*, Cambridge 1985, p. 446; (hereafter *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy*).

its closure¹⁵. That might explain the somewhat curious choice of St. Demetrius for an obverse effigy of the possible Type D. The Magnesian elements of the style - the exaggerated jewels, presence of signa -- all reasonably point towards Theodore Ducas-Lascaris. Yet, the corresponding attribution is not without problems. Circularity of the inscription, the lettering, the difficulties in defining the shape of the emperor's beard, all make this proposal a relative one. According to the hoard evidence, it is certainly late in date, rather eastern in provenance and closer even to the Magnesian issues of Michael Paleologus, than to the ones of the Thessalonikan rulers. To an extent, to the first type of the billon trachea of the Bulgarian emperor Constantine Asen (Tich) (1257-1277)¹⁶, as well.

Stylistically, the type resembles yet another obscure group of billon trachea that are not present in the reference catalogues, although several specimens have been already published in the numismatic literature. As Touratzoglou has reported, one has occurred in the early Paleologian Arta hoard of 1983¹⁷, then, one stray find from Karditza in western Thessaly¹⁸, and more recently, two at the Ohrid Fortress¹⁹ and one more at the nearby hilly site of St. Erasmus Basilica²⁰. The obverse bears an image of Virgin Orans, while the reverse, a representation of a standing emperor with stemma, dressed in divitision and chlamys with exaggerated jewels, holding scepter cruciger and globus cruciger.

Opinions have been expressed, including my own, that these were Magnesian issues of John III Ducas Vatatzes, mainly because of the ligature i and the two-columnar inscription *despotes* of a large lettering, on the reverse²¹.

One could have accepted this even regardless of the unusual absence of the family name Ducas, should five more coins clearly of the same type (on these coins emperor has visibly forked beard!), yet of completely different inscription, have not emerged: one is yet again from the Arta/1983 hoard and one from Servia, nearby the town of

¹⁵ M. HENDY, *DOC* 4/2, p.515.

¹⁶ J. YOURUKOVA, V. PENCHEV, *Bulgarski srednovekovni pechati i moneti*, Sofia 1990, p. 85 and Pl. IV, Nos. 37-40; K. DOCHEV, *Moneti i parichno obrshtenie v Turnovo (XII - XIV v.)*, Veliko Turnovo 1992, pp. 69-73, T.XXVI and Pl.8, Nos.14-18.

¹⁷ Γ. ΤΟΥΠΑΤΣΟΓΛΟΥ, *Θεσσαυρός άσπρων τραχήων/1983 από την Αρτα*, p. 212 and Pl. 88, No. 5.

¹⁸ Idem, p.212, n.8.

¹⁹ (Pl.1, no.2); K. HRISTOVSKA, *Middle and Late Byzantine and other Medieval Coin Finds in Coin Finds from the Ohrid Fortress* (forthcoming joint publication of the National Bank of the Republic of Macedonia and the Museum of Ohrid).

²⁰ (Pl.1, no.3); *Obv.* ΜΡ ΘΥ, in field; *Rev.* i, in l. field; ΔΕ, l.; ΠΟΤ, r.; weight: 2.01 g; diameter: 28 mm; unpublished. No. 89e; single find, but the precise archeological context unknown; found during the archeological excavations at the site of St. Erasmus Basilica in 1975, headed by the late archaeologist Vlado Malenko. I am indebted to Mr. Pasko Kuzman, an archaeologist at the Museum of Ohrid for the given opportunity to examine the numismatic material found at this site.

²¹ Γ. ΤΟΥΠΑΤΣΟΓΛΟΥ, *Θεσσαυρός άσπρων τραχήων/1983 από την Αρτα*, p. 212; K. HRISTOVSKA, *Middle and Late Byzantine Coins from the Ohrid Fortress* (Paper read at the XIIIth International Numismatic Congress, Madrid, 15-19 September, 2003).

Kozani²², added now by three single finds from the Plaoshnik site, at Ohrid²³, each product of a separate die. Circulation area of these coins is once more Epirus and western Macedonia. On this type, instead of the ligature for John and title *despotes*, there is the peculiar letter/signum B in the left upper field of the reverse - on the same place where the quatrefoil mark is present on the possible Theodore's II Type D, while in the right, there is large Λ and +. A closer inspection of the Arta specimen reveals that, here, the much smaller Λ is actually part of a columnar inscription, preceded by Π and succeeded by Γ or C ²⁴, designating, most probably the family name Paleologus.

Let us overview the circumstances at the imperial court of Nicaea following the death of Theodore for a possible explanation of this numismatic situation²⁵.

At the beginning of September 1258 a memorial service was held for the late emperor at the monastery of Sosandra, at which his son and heir, the 8-years old emperor John IV Lascaris showed on a balcony and greeted the troops. The same day, in a plot, his regent George Mouzalon was murdered, in favor of the unscrupulous ambitions of the *megas konstauros* Michael Paleologus, who soon after was appointed a regent for the minor emperor. In November 1258 at the assembly held in Magnesia the patriarch Arsenios was urged to raise him even to the rank of *despotes*. By this unprecedented act, Michael was put in charge of the Magnesian imperial treasury²⁶. Armed with such an opportunity he promptly advanced towards his ultimate goal - accession to the imperial throne. On New Year's Day 1259 he was raised on a shield and proclaimed co-emperor of John at Nymphaion. It should be noted that it took place after agreement had been reached that in the subsequent coronation John Lascaris should be crowned first. It had been also ordained that all the subjects of the empire should take the usual oath of servitude to both emperors and that when John comes to maturity, he would be the senior emperor. Yet, Michael saw this as a serious threat to his plans and in a matter of weeks, the patriarch, exposed to a large pressure by Michael's supporters among

²² Γ. ΤΟΥΠΑΤΣΟΓΛΟΥ, *Θεσσαυρός άσπρων τραχήων/1983 από την Αρτα*, p. 212 and n. 9, and Pl. 88, No. 8.

²³ 1. (Pl.1, no.4); *Obv.* $\overline{\Gamma\text{P}} \overline{\Theta\text{V}}$, in field; *Rev.* B, in l. field; W+, in r. field; weight: (?); diameter: 28 mm; unpublished. No. 366, Plaoshnik site, excavations of 2007, context: H/4-11.1, single find, south of a wall. I am indebted to Mrs. Danica Bacheva, a numismatist at the Museum of Ohrid for the given information and photo.

² (Pl.1, no.5); *Obv.* $\overline{\Gamma\text{P}} \overline{\Theta\text{V}}$, in field; *Rev.* B, in l. field; $\Lambda+$, in r. field; weight: 2.19 g; diameter: 24 mm; unpublished. No. 4676, Plaoshnik site, excavations of 2008, context: I/1-2, layer 20, single find.

³ (Pl.1, no.6); *Obv.* $\overline{\Gamma\text{P}} \overline{\Theta\text{V}}$, in field; *Rev.* B, in l. field; $\Lambda+$, in r. field; weight: 2.41 g; diameter: 21 mm; unpublished. No. 4918, Plaoshnik site, excavations of 2008, context: F/8-5, layer 5, single find. I am indebted to Mr. Anatolij Arnaudov, an archaeologist at the Museum of Ohrid for the information provided on both coins.

²⁴ Γ. ΤΟΥΠΑΤΣΟΓΛΟΥ, *Θεσσαυρός άσπρων τραχήων/1983 από την Αρτα*, Pl. 88, No. 6. He assigns this coin to Theodore II Ducas –Lascaris at Magnesia.

²⁵ M. ANGOLD, *Byzantine Government in Exile*, pp. 80-93; D. J. GEANAKOPOLOS, *Emperor Michael VIII and the West 1258-1282*, Cambridge, Mass. 1959, pp. 39-46; D. M. NICOL, *Last Centuries of Byzantium 1261-1453*, Cambridge 1993, pp.29-31; G. OSTROGORSKI, *Istorija na Vizantija*, Skopje 1992, pp. 536-44.

²⁶ M. HENDY, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy*, p. 443.

the army, clergy and nobility, crowned him in a ceremony where the young emperor, second in the row, received only a special semi-spherical headcloth ornamented with stones and pearls. On Christmas Day 1261, the boy was blinded and imprisoned in Asia Minor as a final act of Michael's usurpation of the monarchy.

It has been suggested that emperor John IV Lascaris (nominally, September 1258 - January 1259) never issued coins in his own name and that after the death of Theodore II, the mint at Magnesia produced gold, silver, copper and bronze coins only for the colleague-emperor Michael VIII for a period of three years - from his acclamation in January 1259 to August 1261, that is, before he was recrowned at Constantinople as a new Constantine in the capitol of the restored empire²⁷.

In view of the presented numismatic evidence, it is indeed tempting to leave open the possibility that there were billon/copper issues of John IV Lascaris and that they were minted at Magnesia probably between September 1258 and January 1259 and that Michael used the same design immediately afterwards, in the period between his acclamation and his coronation. That somehow could explain the scarcity of these coins, leaving of course, future finds to confirm or discard this hypothesis.

²⁷ M. HENDY, *DOC 4/2*, pp. 528-35 and Pl. XXXVII.

За една ретка билонска трахеја на Теодор II Дука Ласкарис

Резиме

Овој труд се обидува да ја преразгледа атрибуцијата на еден редок тип билонски пари кои се откриваат во регионот на Епир и западна Македонија, и за кој досега се искажани повеќе различни мислења во врска со името на царот за време на чиешто владеење биле ковани, како и за монетарницата во која се произведувале. Благодарение на еден одлично зачуван примерок од Нумизматичката збирка на Народната банка на Република Македонија со потекло од околината на Прилеп, и посебно во однос на неговата целосно зачувана инскрипција, во релација со компаративните истражувања врз останатите 12 познати примероци од овој тип, се предлага дека истите биле изданија на никејскиот цар Теодор II Дука Ласкарис (1254-58) во Магнезија. Нивното присуство во овие региони секако дека има врска со воено-политичката немирна шеста деценија од тринаесеттиот век, којашто кулминирала со познатата битка во Пелагониската рамнина во летото 1259 година, кога Никејските војски однеле победа над воениот сојуз на Епир, Сицилија и Ахаја предводен од епирскиот деспот Михаил II Комнен-Дука (ол.1236-. ол.1268)

Овој монетен тип може тесно да се поврзе со уште една специфична група на ретки билонски пари со сличен ареал на циркулација, коишто досега беа припишувани на никејскиот цар Јован III Дука Ватац (1221-1254), издавани исто така, во магнезиската монетарница. Заради фактот што тие се појавуваат со идентична аверсна и реверсна иконографија, но при тоа, поседуваат различни инскрипции и лигатури, се чини дека би можело да се претпостави дека истите се ковани во едни мошне специфични околности на никејскиот царски двор, непосредно по смртта на Теодор II Дука Ласкарис и тоа од страна на неговиот малолетниот син Јован IV Ласкарис (август 1258 - јануари 1259) и на Михаил VIII Палеолог (1259-1261, Магнезија; 1261-1282, Константинопол) по неговото прогласување за совладетел на Јован во јануари 1259 година, но пред церемонијата на неговото крунисување.



1



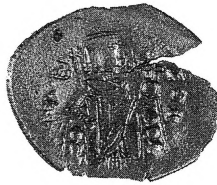
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3



4



5



6



1. Theodore II Ducas - Lascaris, Magnesia
 2-3. John IV Lascaris(?), Magnesia
 4-6. Michael VIII Paleologus, Magnesia