

**New Light on an Enigmatic Issue  
of Late Byzantine Coppers**

**By**

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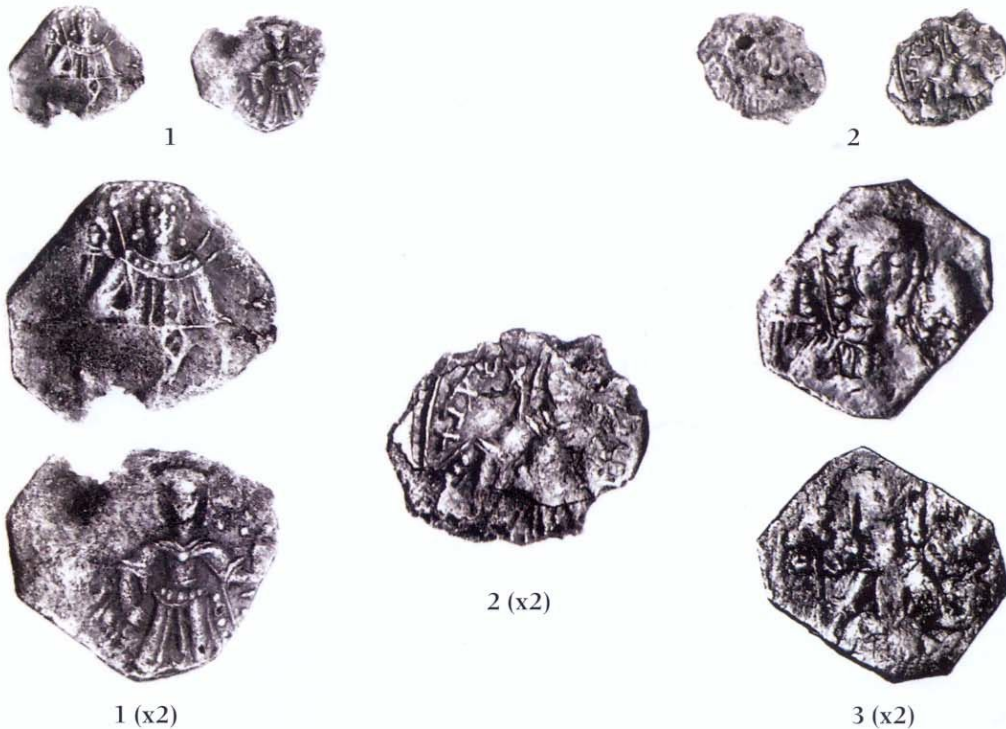
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## New Light on an Enigmatic Issue of Late Byzantine Coppers\*

Orestes H. Zervos



*To the Memory of  
Michael F. Hendy*

This article revisits a mysterious copper trachy, possibly of thirteenth-century date, published by the writer in a recent issue of the *Numismatic Circular*. Unrecorded at the time, this copper did not seem to have obvious connections with any known coinage of the period. I suggest here that it belongs to a loose family of irregular coins, often found in excavation, taking their inspiration from copper tetartera or Latin trachea of the interval of ca. 1185-1220.

In the October issue of the *Numismatic Circular* for 2004<sup>1</sup>, I published a puzzling little copper trachy depicting on the obverse a bust of Archangel Michael and on the reverse a figure of an emperor in military dress. The coin was found in the Corinth excavations of the American School of Classical Studies, and was until 2004 unpublished. I repeat here the description of the types:

Obv. Bust of Archangel Michael, beardless, wearing collar piece, jewelled loros of simplified type, etc.; in r. hand holds scepter and in l., globus cruciger. Star in upper r. field. No inscription visible.

Rev. Three-quarter-length figure of emperor, bearded, wearing short military tunic, etc.; holds in r. hand scepter with pellet at top and in l., globus cruciger. Columnar inscriptions (indecipherable) in r. and l. fields.

Weight 1.03 g.; axes 6 o'clock. Clipped

In that article I had called this copper a "tantalizing mystery" because it seemed to defy precise definition. For instance, it combined the fabric of a trachy - concave shape and a thin, insubstantial flan - with the style and overall design of a tetarteron - a pearl border instead of the linear border characteristic of the trachea of the period, etc. Another

peculiarity was the striking contrast between the fine style of the obverse and reverse coin types and the garbled inscription hastily cut into the reverse die. Thus the coin was not only ambivalent as to fabric and quality of engraving but also impossible to attribute to a specific emperor. What was one to make of such a coin?

In the months following the publication of my article, I was able to locate four additional examples of that type, also from the Corinth excavations, which shed light on this hitherto unknown coinage. One of these pieces<sup>2</sup> displays the familiar concave fabric seen on the piece published in 2004. The other three coins (illus. nos. 1-3)<sup>3</sup> caused surprise - all three were struck on perfectly flat flans! Thus the coins in our sample broke down as follows: two trachea specimens and three flat specimens. The inference would seem to be that the coins of this mintage were struck in two different fabrics - flat and concave. The flat pieces were probably meant to be recognized in the marketplace as tetartera and the latter as trachea.

The new coins also helped bring out two other curious aspects of the coinage. First, the coins tend to be struck on octagonally clipped flans — square blanks with the corners nipped off. I illustrate two examples (illus. nos. 1, 3), to which can be added the piece dealt with and illustrated in my previous article<sup>4</sup>. Second, the coppers are all light pieces having a weight range of 1.30-0.71 grams (median weight, 0.92 grams). Their weights are noticeably beneath those of both the copper and the billon coinages of the times<sup>5</sup>. Here then we have a coinage distinguished by several unusual features: “bilingual” fabric — flat or concave, flans of generally octagonal shape, and abnormally low weights. The coin published in 2004 is therefore shown to belong to a curious issue of coppers now surviving in exceedingly small numbers. Outside of the few pieces from the Corinth excavations here described, the only others I am aware of are three recently published specimens, found in rescue excavations conducted in Argos (Peloponnese)<sup>6</sup>.

What was the legal status of these coppers and when did they circulate? It is clear that our coins do not constitute a normal imperial mintage. Their deficient weights and “bilingual” fabric, considered separately or together, constitute oddities which make little sense within the confines of the regular coinage of Byzantium. The octagonal shape of the flans, too, sets the coins apart. In spite of all these peculiarities one would hesitate to call the coins counterfeits, mainly on account of the fine quality of their engraving. This is a coinage of an eclectic nature, which persists in defying precise definition.

But our coins do not seem stand alone. In a recent publication<sup>7</sup> I discussed a hitherto almost unknown group of irregular coppers - a larger group than the one discussed here - which share with our coins some of the familiar singularities, i.e., “bilingual” fabric, deficient weights, and frequent use of octagonally-shaped flans. These coppers form a compact group taking their inspiration from the Latin Imitative trachea of small module - Type A<sup>8</sup> - struck by the Latin conquerors of Byzantium beginning in 1204. But the “Latin” coppers differ from our coins in one significant respect: their obverse and reverse types - seated Virgin with head of Christ/Emperor figure holding long staff and akakia - are executed in a barbaric, uncouth style. But apart from this the two coinages are very similar in general aspect.

In my article about the “Latin” coppers I suggested that those slovenly coins, perforce struck after 1204, were “generic mintages of uncertain legal status made acceptable, as tetartera or trachea, by the numismatic confusion that prevailed in Latinized Byzantium<sup>9</sup>.” We might propose a similar explanation and a similar date for our coins, except that our pieces, by virtue of their better appearance, would also conceivably have been acceptable in trade in earlier decades. But their obvious kinship to the “Latin” mintages would make, I think, a post-1204 date preferable. Be that as it may, our coppers cannot be any earlier than the last dozen years or so of the twelfth century. This is made certain by the use on them of the bust of the Archangel Michael, which makes its first appearance, as a coin type, on the copper tetartera

of Isaac II (1185-95)<sup>10</sup>. Thus our coins could have been produced at any time after 1185. But fixing a more precise date for their emission remains a task for future research.

#### Acknowledgements:

\* I thank Dr. G. D. R. Sanders, Director of the Corinth Excavations, American School of Classical Studies at Athens, for permission to use the coins referred to in this article. Thanks are also due to Mr Paul Winroth-Broneer for the preliminary copy and style editing of the text.

#### Footnotes:

1. O. H. Zervos, “Rare and Unpublished Late Byzantine Coppers from Corinth (c.1000-1300 A.D.),” *Numismatic Circular*, August, 2004, p. 236, no. 6.
2. Corinth Coll.: Temple E. 12.x.1932 (1100-1120), (weight, 0.71g., chipped).
3. (i) Corinth Coll.: Agora NE, 2.iii.1937 (4-5), 0.74g., chipped (illus. no. 1); (ii) Corinth Coll.: Agora SW, 6.v.1961 (inv. 61-369), 1.30g., chipped (illus. no. 2); (iii) Corinth Coll.: Forum SW, 20.iv.1977 (inv. 77-44), 0.92g. (illus. no. 3).
4. See note 1, above.
5. The additional coppers offer nothing new to the meaning of the imperial inscription (if such it was). On one of these pieces (illus. no. 2), unfortunately much damaged, we see, in the left field of the reverse, elements of a columnar inscription similar to those noticed on the copper published in 2004. We recognize the same letters  $\omega$  and  $\chi$  (differently placed), but the letter beneath the  $\omega$  has now been turned from a  $\Delta$  into a careless  $\Lambda$ . The two characters appearing beneath the  $\Lambda$  are hard to read. Once again it is difficult to decipher the inscription of the new coin as a whole. Even if the  $\omega$  were taken to allude to  $(\text{I})\omega(\alpha\nu\nu\eta\varsigma)$ , or  $(\text{I})\omega\alpha(\nu\nu\eta\varsigma)$ , it is unclear how the remaining characters would fall into place.
6. J. Baker, “Two Thirteenth-Century Hoards and some Site Finds from Argos,” *Numismatic Chronicle*, 167, 2007, pp. 211-233, Pl. 33, no. 10 (octagonal); Pl. 34, no. 176 (oblong); Pl. 35, no. 313 (octagonal).
7. O. H. Zervos, “An Issue of Irregular Copper Coins of the Early Thirteenth Century from Corinth,” *Nomismatika Khronika*, 26, 2007 (hereafter, Zervos 2007), pp. 91-93. Also see “Corrections,” errata and emendations to the above article (new plate with illustrations in correct scale, etc.), in *Nomismatika Khronika*, 27, 2008 (forthcoming).
8. *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Coll. and the Whittemore Coll.*, vol. IV, Alexius I to Michael VIII, 1081-1261, ed. M. F. Hendy, Washington, D.C., 1999, p. 694, no. 30.
9. Zervos 2007, p. 92.
10. P. Grierson, *Byzantine Coins*, London, Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1982, p. 220; M. F. Hendy, *Coinage and Money in the Byzantine Empire, 1081-1261*, Washington, D.C., 1969, Index IV, p. 437 (see under St. Michael).