

Theodore Mankaphas or Theodore Branas?

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The field of Byzantine numismatics is a broad and complicated field, which often presents riddles that puzzle historians and numismatists for years. One of these problems, which some historians and researchers¹ have come to regard as a rather insignificant but appealing conundrum, is continuously attracting interest. Raised by a particular billon *trachy* of a peculiar shape and design, first noticed in 1967² the issue of its proper identification and attribution has since been at the center of many debates³. Collectors usually refer to this issue as the "Theodore Mankaphas trachy" and, being a rather rare coin, Byzantine numismatics aficionados and researchers are looking out for new specimens to add to the corpus of known examples.

Presented here is a specimen from a German private collection, which has not been published before neither in local numismatic publications nor international online numismatic forums, together with a foray into its two possible attributions (Fig. 1):



Fig. 1

Specs:

AE30x27mm 2.47g scyphate trachy, of deep concavity (ca. 3mm in depth)

OBV: [IC] – [XC]; Christ standing

REV: +/Θ/Δ/P in left field – B / M (or AN/ARN) monogram in right field, both legends running vertically; Emperor standing holding sceptre surmounted by patriarchal cross, wearing stemma (flat crown), divitision and loros.

REF: Grierson 1126-7.

NOTE: Most of the legend is very well preserved, a rather uncommon feature for this issue, which is often encountered in a bad to mediocre state of preservation.

The two attributions left standing for this interesting type – after the discarding of the Theodore-Peter tentative on account of inconsistencies between the historical data, the figure's importance as a ruler versus the small volume of coins available, especially considering the enormous amounts of typical Bulgarian *trachea* known from hoards and singular finds, the fact that at the time the regular Bulgarian coinage consisted of "Bulgarian imitatives", coins that followed the known Byzantine types rather than new specifically Bulgarian types, the unlikely representation of the name *Theodore* although the Tsar reigned under the name *Peter* and the representation of a singular imperial figure on the reverse although Peter shared the rule with his brother Asen in a traditionally Byzantine fashion – are **Theodore Mankaphas** or **Theodore Branass**. Both theories have their merits and their faults:

1. Theodore Mankaphas (usurper in Philadelphia, 1188-1189/90 and 1204-1205)

As a magnate of Philadelphia, Theodore Mankaphas seized power there in 1188, during a campaign of Isaac II Angelos in Bulgaria, and soon managed to gather local support all throughout Lydia in Asia Minor. His capital was set at Philadelphia and he managed to rule for almost a year before Isaac finally marched against him and convinced him to step down from his usurpation by granting him the title of *Doux of Philadelphia* and the governorship of the city. He was probably there to meet the armies of Frederick I Barbarossa in April 1190 on their march towards the Holy Land⁴. Soon after, he lost popular support and was deposed by Basil Vatatzes, who then cast him away to the territories controlled by the Turks. Theodore found refuge and gathered troops from the Turks to pillage Chonae, Laodicea,

Aphrodisias and provoke unrest, which prompted another imperial campaign against him, after which he was surrendered and imprisoned. In 1204, following the conquest of Constantinople by the Latins, he resurfaced to recapture power in Philadelphia where he ruled again for around a year until, presumably, joining ranks with Constantine Lascaris and being defeated at Adramyttium by the knights of Henry of Flanders, in March 1205⁵.

According to Nicetas Choniates, Mankaphas minted coins in his own name⁶ with a representation of himself in imperial attire, but just during his first usurpation in 1188-1190. Hendy identifies those coins with the issue presented in this paper⁷, rejecting the Bulgarian Tsar Peter attribution on account of the aforementioned historical, scriptural and iconographic inconsistencies. The scarcity of these coins next to the bulk of *trachea* that circulated in Bulgaria around the same time (ca. 1188-1195) to him is evidence that, although the type was present in Bulgaria, the minting place could not have been Bulgaria⁸, especially when we realize that from Veliko Tarnovo, the capital of Peter and Asen's Bulgarian Empire and main mint, come only 4 or maybe 5 specimens with secure provenance⁹. This line of reasoning is supported also by the fact that it wouldn't have been the first Byzantine usurpatorial coinage to make its way into Thrace and Bulgaria: we also have the examples minted in Cyprus under Isaac of Cyprus¹⁰, that might have arrived via trading routes, a situation possible in the case of these *trachea* as well.

Although very few finds come from Asia Minor, Bendall and Morrisson note an instance of 6 pieces found together in Izmir¹¹, which might lead some to incline that the type circulated as regular coinage in Asia Minor. Furthermore, Hendy notes that none of the specimens he had researched, seen or heard about, had the Slavic Б on the reverse legend, but instead the normal B and that the reading of the legend:

+	B̄
Θ	M
Δ	
P	

as + Θεόδωρος Βασιλενός ὁ Μαγκαφάς (+ *Theodore Basileus Mankaphas*) should be evident¹².

The usage of *basileus* instead of the usual *despotes* in this period is not really explained other than by the fact that an unusual title would not be that impossible considering that we deal with an unusual

issue. Grierson interpreted the legend along the same lines although he misread it as + /Θ/Δ/Ε¹³, perhaps because of the unavailability of better preserved specimens at the time¹⁴.

2. Theodore Branas (Caesar of the Latin Empire, 1204, Lord of Adrianople, Apros and Demotica after 1205)

Stemming from the Adrianople aristocracy (his father Alexios Branas had been *protosebastos* for Andronikos I Komnenos and a hereditary magnate in Thrace) and probably also under the influence of his lover, Agnes de France¹⁵, to whom he would eventually marry in the summer of 1204¹⁶, Theodore immediately acknowledged the establishment of the Latin Empire of Constantinople and did homage to Baldwin I. For this he was rewarded with the title of Caesar, served as representative and defender of the Greek interests in Thrace and, after the fall of Baldwin, became an ally to Henry of Flanders, as he ruled as regent and then as emperor.

For his services, Geoffroi de Villehardouin notes that he was allowed to rule Adrianople¹⁷, Apros¹⁸ and Demotica¹⁹ as lord, which he secured as a vassal of the Latin Empire in 1205/6 and defended against Bulgarian attacks.

In his argument for attributing this type to Branas either at Adrianople or Demotica/Didymoteichon, Docev brings into discussion the discovery of an inscription at Kricuva (northern Greece) which mentions a member of the Branas family with the BRANA form, written with A and N in ligature, in a way reminiscent of the monogram legend on the monetary type in question²⁰. Thus, considering the condition of most of the preserved specimens (the one pictured in this paper also lacks half of the legend in the right field on the reverse) the legend could actually look like or something similar to:

+ ᾠ
Θ Μ
Δ
Ρ

and read + Θεόδωρος Βράγα (+ *Theodore Branas*), without any titular rank.

The monetary finds, conspicuously and coherently numerous in Bulgaria, could also be an indicator of a local issue rather than one from Asia Minor. In addition, the coins of this type are of similar dimensions to the early Venetian-minted Latin *trachea* of the large module, and the Western feudal system which Henry tried to implement in the Latin Empire – allowing loyal Greek magnates the privilege of lordship and a higher degree of autonomy than under the earlier Byzantine system – could together account for the existence of a presumptive local *baronial* issue for Branas

Conclusions

There is no definitive proof to precisely attribute this type to one of the two probable candidates. Both theories still have their faults and are being debated, with the conventional wisdom inclining towards Mankaphas. This is mainly on the strength of the fabric of the coins, the account of Choniates, the six pieces found together in Izmir and the fact that it seems, at least in one case: the hoard at Stara Zagora²¹ containing one of the known specimens, that they could not date any later than 1196. On the other hand the vast majority of the ca. 100 discoveries with known provenance come from Thrace²² (although none from the important castles of Adrianople, Didymoteichon or Apros, which were ruled by Branas) and that casts some doubt on the Mankaphas attribution at least from a quantitative perspective.

Unfortunately, the specimen presented here cannot bring any more light on the issue of the reverse lettering, the M and the A(R)N in ligature are both poorly struck and worn out, as most of these coins usually are. Even if less likely and certainly unconventional, the Theodore Branas tentative attribution has its merits and would raise very interesting questions and prospects about the relationship between Greeks and Latins under Emperor Henry and the standing of loyal Greek magnates in Latin-ruled Constantinople. Although Geoffroi de Villehardouin holds Branas in high regard and implies that other crusaders, and most importantly Henry himself, relied on his service and his judgment, there is no mention about any of his possessions minting *trachea*. As stated earlier, it is not impossible considering the normality of local and feudal coinage in the West and the degree of autonomy that the feudal system allowed. If eventually the Branas theory is to be confirmed, then the cultural and institutional implications for the beginning phase of the Latin Empire of Constantinople cannot be overstated: it could open a new door into better understanding the relation between Greeks and Latins in the former Byzantine lands.

Notes

1. M. F. Hendy – *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection*, p. 395: "The amount of time and trouble expended on this historically quite insignificant and really rather quirky problem is now rapidly approaching the boundaries of absurdity."
2. D. M. Metcalf – *Classification of Byzantine Stamena in the light of a hoard found in Southern Serbia*, p. 117, no. 928 notes about the first exemple recorded: "This coin is apparently unpublished. It may prove of considerable interest."
3. Three hypotheses have been put forward: Theodore-Peter of the Vlach-Bulgarian Empire (1186-1197), Theodore Mankaphas, usurper in Philadelphia in Asia Minor (1188-89 and again 1204/5) and Theodore Branas, Lord of Adrianople and Apros in Thrace (after 1206). Since the Bulgarian hypothesis has been discarded in the 1980s, we are left with two competing views: Mankaphas (according to Hendy) or Branas (according to Docev).
4. Ansbertus Austriensis - *Historia de expeditione Friderici imperatoris*, in: *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores*, ed. A. Chroust, 1928, pp. 30, 72-73
5. Nicetas Choniates – *Historia*, ed. J. L. Van Dieten, I, 1975, pp. 399-401, 603
6. Choniates p. 399
7. Hendy p. 393
8. Idem 7 p. 394
9. S. Bendall, C. Morrisson - *Théodore-Pierre, Théodore Branas ou Théodore Mankaphas?* In: *Revue numismatique* p. 179 (2 or 3 mentioned in Jordanov 1984 p. 124 and another 2 found in later excavations at the site, identified from hundreds of other coins of the time, next to 226 from Isaac II Angelos and Alexis III and 519 "Bulgarian imitations").
10. Jordanov, apud Bendall, Morrisson, p. 174, note 19
11. Bendall, Morrisson p. 178
12. Hendy p. 394
13. P. Grierson – *Byzantine Coins*, 1982, p. 235
14. Grierson's work was published in 1982.
15. Agnes had been married at a very young age to Alexios II Komnenus in 1180 and given the

name Anna. In 1182, after murdering Alexios, Andronikos took her as his wife. She became again a widow in 1185 and in 1193 is tied up to Theodore Branas (cf. Roger de Hoveden 1180, William of Tyre 22.4 and Aubry de Trois-Fontaines 1193).

16. Villehardouin – De la Conquete de Constantinople, CCXI: "Le Vernas autem Princeps ad hoc inductus est, ut sororem Regis Francorum, quam hoc usque tenuerat, absque legalibus nuptiis, legitime sibi matrimonio. Et filiam ejus dederunt viro nobili Nargaldo de Toceio, Guidonis de Dampetru conaobrino."
17. Villehardouin CCXI
18. Villehardouin CCXV
19. Idem 14
20. Docev, apud. Bendall, Morrisson, p. 175, note 22
21. The Stara Zagora II, 1974, apud. Bendall, Morrisson p. 179: "699 staména (Jordanov, p. 209, n° 168). [Enfoui vers 1196]. Manuel I, 138 ex.; Andronic I, 48 ex.; Isaac II, 288 ex.; *Théodore*, 1 ex."
22. On an additional note to Bendall, Morrisson p. 180 it is stated that 70 pieces were found together in a hoard of uncertain provenance from Bulgaria comprised only of these Theodore trachea, a discovery arguably consistent enough to keep the debate going.

Bibliography:

1. S. Bendall, C. Morrisson - Théodore-Pierre, Théodore Branas ou Théodore Mankaphas? In: Revue numismatique, 6e série - Tome 36, 1994 pp. 170-181
2. P. Grierson – Byzantine Coins, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982
3. M. F. Hendy – Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection, Volume 4, Part 1, ed. A. R. Bellinger , Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1999.
4. K. Docev - Encore une fois à propos des monnaies de cuivre attribuées au tsar Théodore-Pierre (1186-1197) ou à l'usurpateur byzantin Théodore Mankaphas (1189-1190), in: Numizmatika, 1990, 1, pp. 29-38
5. D. M. Metcalf – Classification of Byzantine Stamena in the light of a hoard found in Southern Serbia, in: Situla 9, 1967.
6. E. Takov - The Bronze Coinage of Theodore Mangaphas in the Light of the Byzantine Monetary System at the End of the 12th Century, Spink Numismatic Circular, CVIII:153, 2000
7. I. Jordanov - Encore à propos des monnaies de Théodore-Pierre, in: Numizmatika, 1984, 4, pp. 17-25.
8. Ansbertus Austriensis - Historia de expeditione Friderici imperatoris, in: Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores, ed. A. Chroust, 1928
9. N. Choniates – Historia, ed. J. L. Van Dieten, I, 1975
10. Geoffroi de Villehardouin - De la Conquête de Constantinople
11. Aubry de Trois-Fontaines - Chronica Albrici Monachi Trium Fontium, in: Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores, vol. 23, pp.630-950, Hanover, 1874
12. Roger de Hoveden – Chronica
13. William of Tyre – Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum