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Σπάνιο εικοσανούμμιο του Ιουστινιανού από τον Πόντο

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A RARE JUSTINIAN HALF-FOLLIS OF PONTIC PROVENANCE

Among the anomalous issues of the emperor Justinian I there are some half-*folles* and *decanummia* dated to the 26th regnal year of the emperor (552/3) and bearing the letter P instead of the indicative letter of *officina*, beneath the mark of value. Moreover the date on these issues is written in Latin, replacing the appropriate Greek letter *stigma* for six, with the Latin version VI.¹ There is much debate concerning the identification of the mint responsible for these issues.

W. Wroth attributed the half-*folles* to Antioch,² regarding the P as a variant of some similar abbreviations which occur on Antiochian half-*folles*.³ On the other hand, he assigned the *decanummia* with the same mint mark to the mint of Constantinople,⁴ mainly on the basis of the iconography of the imperial bust on the obverse.

Bellinger has suggested that the specimens under discussion probably belong to a western mint and he proposes Perusia, which, according to Procopius was captured by the Byzantines, after the defeat of the Goths and the death of Totila in 552/3. In this historical context Bellinger considers Perusia to be a temporary military mint.⁵

Grierson regards the letter P as an abbreviation of *Polis*, namely of Constantinople (*Κωνσταντινίου Πόλις*), although he has maintained that the coins under discussion are Italian in style and lettering. He suggests that their Italian fabric

1. W. Hahn, *Moneta Imperii Byzantini* (=MIB), I, *Von Anastasius I bis Justinianus I* (491-565), Wien 1973, nos. 97, 101, 102.

2. W. Wroth, *Catalogue of the Imperial Byzantine Coins in the British Museum* (=BMC), I, London 1908, p. 59, no. 322.

3. MIB, I, nos. 155a - 155d.

4. BMC, I, pp. 38-39, nos. 133-134.

5. A Bellinger, «Byzantine notes, 6. Anomalous coins of Justinian's year 26 (552/3)», *American Numismatic Society, Museum Notes* 12 (1966), pp. 98-99; see also A. Bellinger, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection* (=DOC), I, *Anastasius I to Maurice, 491-602*, Washington D.C. 1966, p. 186, no. 356.

and appearance might be due to the transfer of Italian workmen to the metropolitan mint⁶ at the end of Gothic war.

Morrisson in her turn assigns these coins a western provenance and connects their issue with the mercenaries, barbarian or Byzantine, who fled to the Italian peninsula in the course of Narses' expedition against the Goths in 552/3.⁷

Hahn initially regarded the denominations under discussion as normal issues minted at Constantinople.⁸ In his view, the letter P was adopted as a mint mark during the 26th regnal year of Justinian I, in the context of innovations attempted by the metropolitan mint. In his view the P-group was issued on the occasion of the change of indiction in 1.9.552 when an old fashioned peculiar practice was revived.⁹ Hahn found confirmation of his suggestions in a somewhat obscure passage from John Malalas *Chronographia* where it is mentioned that an alteration in small currency (*διαστροφή τοῦ κέρματος*) took place in the month of March of the first Indiction.¹⁰

Hahn's proposed reconstruction of the procedure at the Constantinopolitan mint during the 26th regnal year of Justinian I was also based on an unicum half-*folles* acquired in 1967 by Dumbarton Oaks. It belongs to the P-group, but the date of the regnal year is given in Indiction (Indiction II).¹¹ Besides the link provided by the letter P underneath the value mark, the coin in question is linked to the P-group by its style and general fabric. The half-*folles* with the indiction-dating, is regarded by Hahn as a pattern coin on account of its extreme rarity. It was issued sometime in the course of the 27th regnal year of Justinian I and more precisely after the beginning of the second indiction (1.9.553).¹² However, by that

6. Ph. Grierson, «Solidi of Phocas and Heraclius: the chronological framework», *Numismatic Chronicle* 197 (1959), pp. 141-142 and esp. n. 1; *ibid.*, *Byzantine Coins*, Berkeley - Los Angeles 1982, pp. 75-76.

7. C. Morriison, *Catalogue des monnaies byzantines de la Bibliothèque Nationale (=BNP), I: d'Anastase Ier à Justinien II (491-711)*, Paris 1970, p. 59 and n. 5.

8. *MIB*, I, p. 60 and n. 57. Hahn also considers the letter P to be an abbreviation of *Polis*, that is of Constantinople.

9. W. Hahn, «Justinian's copper with the mint-mark P in the light of indictional type-changes», *Numismatic Circular* 80 (1972), p. 237: «... until 538, when dating by regnal year was introduced by Justinian I, each indiction was accompanied by a compulsory change in the varieties of the half-*folles* and *decanummia* pieces from the Constantinopolitan mint...».

10. W. Hahn, «Copper of Justinian I with the mint mark P, a reattribution», *Numismatic Circular* 79 (1971), pp. 449-450. According to Malalas the alteration in small currency provoked a riot among the lower classes and the poor, and when Justinian I heard of this disturbance he ordered that the coin to be restored to their former value. Hahn has suggested that the symbol P, which replaced the normal mint mark CON, was unknown to the populace, who then rioted in suspicious at the introduction of this unknown symbol.

11. *MIB*, I, no. 98; see also Grierson, *Byzantine Coins*, *op. cit.*, p. 75: the same coin; Grierson's description of indiction as I is wrong.

12. Hahn, «Copper of Justinian I with the mint mark P...», *op. cit.*, p. 450. *Id.*, «Justinian's

time the normal working of the metropolitan mint had been disrupted, probably as a result of the riot recorded by Malalas, since, as Hahn stresses, no other copper denominations of Constantinople are recorded from this year.¹³ From the 28th year of Justinian's reign onwards, Constantinople once again issued half-folles in the old tradition, with *officina* letters, without a mint-mark and with a dating by regnal years.

On the basis of some more information on the provenance of some of the P-group specimens Hahn evidently abandons his previous theories and now proposes an alternative. He is inclined to think that the P-group issues were minted in the East, at Constantinople or Nicomedia, but were intended to be dispatched to the West soon after the turn of events there favouring the Byzantine armies.¹⁴

A rare specimen in the Numismatic Museum of Athens provides further evidence. Donated to the Museum by a private collector in 1992, it is a half-follis with an indictional type of dating, similar to that of the coin in the *DOC*, but beneath the value mark, the letter P, Latin or Greek, has been replaced by a Greek Π. The condition of the coin is quite good and thus allows a more complete description of the obverse, where the lack of the cross from the right field of the obverse is the most striking feature.¹⁵ It does not occur on other specimens issued at eastern mints, a point to which we shall return later.

Undoubtedly the two half-folles with an indiction were issued by the same mint, since their obverses are die-duplicates.¹⁶ Consequently the other known coins of the P-group bearing the traditional dating, albeit in a Latin version, must also have been issued at the same mint. But where was this mint?

The mint mark of the issues of the P-Group, as well as of the two rare

copper with the mint-mark P in the light of indictional type-changes», *op. cit.*

13. *MIB*, I, p. 60. and *MIB*, III, *Von Heraclius bis Leo III. / Alleinregierung (610-720)*, Wien 1981, p. 47 and esp. n. 40; see also M. Oeconomidou, «Un follis de Justinien I de l'atelier de Constantinople», *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 117 (1983), pp. 619-621, where a normal Constantinopolitan follis from officina E, issued in the 27th Justinian's regnal year, is described. The number six is written in Greek stigma; underneath a pellet. The coin is part of a hoard, found in 1960 by the late professor Pallas during the excavation of an early christian basilica at Aghia Kyriaki, near Philiatra in the Peloponnese. It is true that the production of the metropolitan mint appears quite limited during the 27th regnal year of Justinian I (1.4.553 - 1.4.554). However, the existence of a Constantinopolitan follis of this year in a hoard found far away from the centre of its production suggests that the issue was not as limited as appears.

14. *MIB*, III, pp. 48-49 and n. 41, 42.

15. Hahn, «Copper of Justinian I with the mint mark P...», *op. cit.*, p. 450: mistakenly he describes the specimen from *DOC* as to have the parallel cross (although feint) in the right field.

16. Due to the bad condition of the *DOC* specimen the details of the emperor's face, on the illustrated photo, are quite obscure. Therefore its identification as die-duplicate to Athens specimen could be of some caution, but undoubtedly the two specimens in question are almost die-duplicates.

specimens with an indictional type of dating, is strongly reminiscent of the mint mark used by the mint of Antioch, from 554 onwards. However Antioch must be excluded since the 10*nummia* specimens of the P-Group do not fit the Antiochian mint because they bear no similar mint marks. Besides, after 538, these depict the imperial bust always frontal.¹⁷

The Nicomedia mint, on the other hand, had a tradition in dating copper coins by indiction from the previous reign of Justin I.¹⁸ Moreover, there are half-*folles* from the mint of Nicomedia with Latin numbering which depict the imperial garments in a clumsy, linear style, similar to that observed on half-*folles* of the P-Group.¹⁹

However the evidence provided by the 10*nummia* specimens of the P-Group leads to another possibility. The coexistence of 10*nummia* pieces, with and without *officina* letters bearing either the traditional mint mark CON or the P makes attribution of these specimens to a mint other than that of Constantinople difficult.²⁰ It is noteworthy that the 10*nummia* specimens of the P-Group fall into two stylistic groups. The first group includes specimens closely related in style to coins minted at Ravenna,²¹ while the second examples closely related to coins issued at Constantinople.²² Moreover, some of the 10*nummia* specimens with the traditional mint mark CON are in a clumsy style.²³ Thus despite their linear style, the 20*nummia* of the P-Group, could well belong to the mint of the Capital, in which case the simplified execution of the P-Group could be due either to hasty striking or to less skilled engravers employed in the *officinae* responsible for their issue.

The unexpected introduction of the dating in indiction should not be attributed to any change in the mint's current administrative structure or development. It must have been deliberate decision intended to differentiate the type from normal issues. The two varieties therefore, might have been destined for two separate circulation-districts, obviously different from the one in which they were minted.

All this provokes speculation. The predominance of the P-Group in the West, in connection with contemporary historical events in Italy, hints at a substantive dispatch of these denominations to Italy, and especially to Rome. The old capital of the Roman Empire was recaptured by Justinian's armies on 30 October 552, a

17. Hahn, «Copper of Justinian I with the mint mark P...», *op. cit.*, p. 449.

18. *i.e.* MIB, I, no. 41.

19. Compare MIB, I, no. 116a² to MIB, I, no. 97; see also Hahn, «Copper of Justinian I with the mint mark P...», *op. cit.*, p. 449 and BNP, I, p. 59, n. 6.

20. For a detailed analysis of this argument see Hahn, «Copper of Justinian I with the mint mark P...», *op. cit.*, p. 449.

21. Compare MIB, I, no. 102 to MIB, I, no. 236; see also Grierson, *Byzantine Coins*, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

22. Compare DOC no. 357, 1 to no. 85.1.

23. *i.e.* DOC, no. 86.2.

date which coincides with the 26th regnal year of Justinian I (1.4.552 - 1.4.553), and the date which appears on P-Group with the Latin numbering.

Consequently the indiction specimen from the *DOC*, with the mint-mark P may have been a special and limited issue sent to Rome a little later, in connection with the spirit in which the *Pragmatica Sanctio* granting Italy a considerable degree of autonomy in matters of local administration, was signed on 13 August, 554,²⁴ a date which is included in indiction II (=1.9.553 - 1.9.554).²⁵ In fact the obverse of 40*nummia* and 20*nummia* minted at Rome after 554 also lack the parallel cross on the right field.²⁶ The wide format of the emperor's face, the execution of the frontal part of the emperor's garments and the manner in which he holds the small globus crucifer are reminiscent of the two rare specimens of the indiction type.

The letter P beneath the mark of value is difficult to explain. It may be the initial letter of the word Πόλις, that is of Constantinople, written in Latin, given that the issues that bear this mint mark were sent to the West from the metropolitan mint. However, it may be the initial letter of the word Rome, when written in Greek (Ρώμη). The adoption of the Greek letter P to indicate the Latin word Rome is not as surprising as it might seem. These coins were issued by an eastern mint, most probably at Constantinople, where the responsible engravers may well have been Greek educated.

The Athenian specimen with a Greek Π is also difficult to explain. However we believe it too represents a pattern issue, parallel to that in the *DOC*, but destined for another city or area, more familiar with Greek than Latin. In this context the Greek letter Π could also be considered an abbreviation of Πόλις, meaning Constantinople. In fact the letter Π employed as a mint mark had appeared a few years earlier, during the reign of Justin I, in a series of some rare 5*nummia*.²⁷ The prevailing view is that these types were struck at the mint in Constantinople.²⁸

The provenance of the Athenian coin is more or less known. Its donor, Mr. Theodoros Chatzisavas, is not himself a coin-collector: The hundred or so coins in his possession belonged to his father, a Greek refugee from Samsus (Amisos) of Pontos, who came to Greece in 1922. Most of the coins in his collection come from the area between Trebizond and Amisos, and are of various periods. Ancient Greek coins from Sinope are included, which fact confirms the Pontic provenance of the coins.

24. A. Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, London 1985, p. 206 and n. 132.

25. V. Grumel, *Traité d'études byzantines*, I, *La chronologie*, Paris 1958.

26. *MIB*, I, nos. 221, 224, N224, 228, 229.

27. *MIB*, I, nos. 29-31.

28. There is disagreement among scholars as to the identification of the relevant mint; see P. Grierson, «Anomalous pentanummia of Justin I», *Numismatic Circular* 75 (1967), p. 234.

On the basis of the provenance of the Athenian coin and in contradistinction to the alternative mentioned above that the letter P could be the initial letter of the word Rome, when written in Greek, I venture to present a tentative point of view. Could the Π be the initial letter of an important city in the eastern part of the Southern Black Sea littoral?

The historical events of the period recall Petra, on the border of Lazian lands, although at present there is no other corroborative evidence. Nevertheless during the 6th century, Petra developed into an important Byzantine fortified port;²⁹ written sources mention that under Justinian I imperial monopoly trade was introduced in the area and that alongside payment in kind, money came to play a significant role in commerce.³⁰ Moreover the date of Petra's recapture from the Persians coincides with that of Rome (552/3), which fact seems to have created an impression at the time. Procopius states that «...Bessa, who had lost Rome recaptured Petra, while Dagisthaeus, who had lost Petra, was now instrumental in winning back Rome...».³¹ In this context it is not implausible that, as part of the reorganization of the newly acquired territories, coins differentiated from the normal issues were dispatched there from the metropolitan mint as samples. The motives for a dispatch of coins to Petra were probably different from those governing the dispatch to Italy, and these should best be sought in the sphere of diplomatic policy or imperial propaganda.

Clearly, the investigation of the role of the metropolitan mint in the circulation of anomalous or extremely rare issues, for reasons we can only hypothetically analyse, remains an open book, the pages of which will only be closed gradually with the detailed publication of numismatic material from border regions of the Empire.³²

29. D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth, Eastern Europe, 500-1453*, New York 1982, p. 53. A. Bryer-D. Winfield, *The Byzantine Monuments and Topography of the Pontos* (=Dumbarton Oaks Studies 20), Washington D.C. 1985, pp. 326 and 349, n. 26; see also W. Seibt, «Westgeorgien (Egrisi, Lazica) in Frühchristlicher Zeit» in *Die Schwarzmeerküste in der Spätantike und im frühen Mittelalter* (eds. R. Pillinger, A. Pülz, H. Vetters), Wien 1992, pp. 137-144.

30. I.A. Tsukhishvili, *On the Relationship Between Western Georgia and the Eastern Roman Empire in the 4th-6th Centuries (Numismatic Data)*, Tbilisi 1991, p. 6.

31. Cameron, *Procopius*, op. cit., p. 140.

32. A recent article deals with a fair number of numismatic material of the 6th century, both stray finds and hoards, from Pitsunda, Great Kutaisi, Archaeopolis, Petra and elsewhere in western Georgia. However the numismatic evidence from the area still remains fragmentary while the lack of a detailed description of the recorded coins does not allow us to have a complete figure of the circulated types; see Tsukhishvili, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-13.



A rare Justinian half-*follis* of indiction II
(Athens Numismatic Museum; donated by Mr. Theodoros Chatzisavas)