

The date of Theoderic's gold medallion

By Philip Grierson

1. The Medallion and Related Coins

Twenty years ago, in his book on the profile Victory type used for their pseudo-imperial tremisses by several Germanic peoples in the sixth century, Wallace Tomasini referred to a suggestion made by me to the effect that Theoderic the Great struck a limited number of 'VPW' tremisses (i.e. tremisses having as reverse type a Victory carrying a palm and wreath, in contrast to 'VGC' ones on which the Victory holds a *globus cruciger*) 'perhaps concurrently with the Theoderic medallion', and introduced the Victory with palm and wreath as a deliberately non-Byzantine type in Visigothic Spain after he had established himself there in or about 511 (1). Neither Tomasini nor I questioned the accepted association of the medallion, the denomination that seemed best capable of providing a firm date for any related coins, with Theoderic's six-month visit to Rome in 500. This was on the occasion of his *tricennialia*, the celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of his association as king by his father Theodemir, and was marked by a series of splendid public shows and ceremonies (2). What would be more likely than for these to have included a special issue of coins for public distribution, and for a few specimens of them to have come down to us?

The coins that seem to belong to the medallion issue may be listed as follows, with references to their

numbering in Hahn's *Moneta Imperii Byzantini* (abbreviated *MIB*), and are illustrated in Fig. 1:

(1) Three-solidus medallion, *MIB* 1 (Fig. 1a). Unicum in the Museo Nazionale Romano (ex Gnecchi).

(2) Solidi, *MIB* 7, 8 (Figs. 1b, 1c). Rare types with RM the reverse field and having reverse inscriptions ending with either a *theta* (Theoderic's initial) or his monogram. Also struck, with monogram and appropriate mint-mark in field, at Ravenna (*MIB* 12, 13) and Milan (*MIB* 17).

(3) Semissis, *MIB* 2 (Fig. 1d). Unicum in the Hermitage (ex Tolstoi, ex Montagu, ex Ponton d'Amécourt, ex Schellersheim: see Tanini 1791, p. 379).

(4) Tremisses with Victory holding wreath and palm advancing either right or left (*MIB* 3) (Fig. 1e, 1f). Hahn (*MIB* 1, p. 83) suggests that the varieties may have been intended to distinguish between two officinae, but, since officina distinctions are not normally made on tremisses, lack of sufficiently specific mint directions seems more probable. The one with Victory advancing right, which was to serve as a model in the Visigothic and Burgundian kingdoms, would in fact be the effective type and the other a variant such as often occurs when a new type is introduced.



1b



1c



1a



1d



1e



1f



1g

Fig. 1.

(5) Half siliquae with similar Victory but carrying a trophy (not a long cross as Hahn has drawn it) instead of a palm, *MIB* 40 (Fig. 1g). It has the *Invicta Roma* legend normal on Roman folles and half folles of the period and an SC in the field. Hahn attributes the coin to Milan on the ground that there is a corresponding quarter siliqua (*MIB* 42) with Victory holding a palm and with IMD beneath the bust, but the authenticity of this coin (in Vienna) is open to question.

That the medallion, semmissis and tremisses all make part of a single issue is agreed on by Kent (3) and Hahn, the only scholars who had made a systematic study of the chronology of Theoderic's coinage, but one need have no hesitation over adding to them the solidi and half siliquae listed above. The solidi are of the same type as others of the reign but are distinguished by having a formal Ostrogothic ruler-identification – others have none – and by the presence of RM in the field. Their rarity shows them to have made part of a special issue, and since the same features also occur on the medallion, though the RM there is concealed by the mount, it is reasonable to regard them as minted on the same occasion. The exceptional type of the half siliqua – other silver coins of the king have as type a Christogram or the royal monogram in a wreath – likewise links them with the tremisses. The SC in the field, quite unusual on a silver coin, is to be explained by the Senate's control of the Roman mint at this period.

The attribution of this ceremonial coinage to 500, however, implies a gap of some ten years between the initial minting of a rare issue of VPW tremisses at Rome and the introduction of this type in the Visigothic kingdom of which Theoderic had become regent. Is it not more likely that the Roman coinage in

reality belongs to 509, and celebrates his military successes of the years 508/9, not his tricennalia of 500? One has only to ask the question for the answer to seem obvious, but it is worth justifying such a chronological revision in detail.

2. *The Tricennalia*

The date 500 has virtually held the field since Gnecci first published the newly-discovered medallion, of which he was the fortunate owner, in 1895 (3). It is true that he contented himself with placing it soon after Theoderic's formal recognition by Anastasius in 497 or 498, but Stückelberg (4), who commented almost immediately on various aspects of the type and legend, argued for its having been struck in 500, and this date was found satisfactory by Ennslin in his standard monograph on Theoderic (6). In more recent times Hahn has dated the group of denominations as '500?' (7), and Maria Alföldi has defended the date and occasion at some length (8). Kent, without committing himself too precisely, allowed the medallion and related coins to be early in Theoderic's reign (9). Only the late Dr. Bernareggi proposed to put it much later, on the ground that imperial policy would not have allowed the issue of a gold medallion bearing any name but that of the emperor; it must therefore, he argued, postdate Theoderic's breach with Justin I and belong to 526 (10). Quite apart from the objections urged by Alföldi, however, such a date is too late for the VPW tremisses that made part of the original issue. These were already in circulation by 516, for the tremisses of the Burgundian king Gundobald with his monogram in the field are of this type, and he died in that year.

Against the date 500, however, there is what seems to me a fatal objection, the absence from the medal-

lion and related coins alike of any allusion in the legends to an accession anniversary.

The dating of special issues on such occasions was a routine matter for late Roman mints, just as the dating of consulships and other traditional offices had been in earlier times. Fashions had changed by the fifth century. Consulships were usually indicated by costume or type instead of being numbered, and regnal datings were rarely given directly. Use was made instead of the custom by which vows were *soluta* ('paid') and *suscepta* ('undertaken') at five- and ten-year intervals (11). Such anniversaries were made the occasion for splendid ceremonies and lavish distributions of money, and were recorded by such phrases on the coins as VOT V MVLX, VOT X MVLXX, etc. Tricennialian celebrations would thus have presented no problems; one would expect VOT XXX MVLXXX on solidi and multiples and on silver coins, a Victory inscribing VOT XXX on a shield on semisses. Even if *vota* ceremonies were unknown to Germanic sovereigns, as may have been the case, there would still be an ANNO XXX formula on which to fall back. But on Theoderic's supposed tricennialian coinage such legends are absent. The reverse of the medallion reads REX THEODERICVS VICTOR GENTIVM followed by a small palm, while the solidi and tremisses read VICTORIA AVGG and VICTORIA AVGVSTORVM respectively, like all coins of these denominations throughout the reign. The Victory on the semissis is not inscribing a date on her shield but the formula VOT PC. What this means is uncertain, for these letters occur nowhere else in such a context and none of the suggested interpretations – *Vota publica civium* or *Constantinopolitana* (Tolstoi), *Vota Patrum conscriptorum* (Kent, followed by Hahn, making the *vota* senatorial in

character) – seems likely; possibly it is just *vota principis*, since Theoderic is styled *princeps* on the obverse of the medallion. In any case, it is not a numeral.

The legend and types of the entire issue have on the other hand a marked 'victory' character. This is of course a normal feature of late imperial gold coinage, but the element is heightened in various ways; on the medallion by the emperor's Victory with wreath and palm standing on a globus – this implied specifically the statue of Victory in the Senate House at Rome (12) – and by the phrase *Victor gentium* followed by a palm in the inscription; on the semissis by its very existence; on the tremisses and half-siliqua by the Victory being shown holding wreath and palm or trophy instead of wreath and *globus cruciger*. The martial element in the obverse medallion type is somewhat toned down, however, for the king is not shown helmeted or carrying a spear: victory is something that has been achieved, and the so-called 'gesture of power' (13) is rather one of 'benevolent dominion' (14) than that of a victor acknowledging the acclamations of a crowd.

The celebrations of 500, however, were not 'victory' ones and at that date the phrase *victor gentium* would not have been appropriate. Theoderic had, it is true, defeated Odovacar's troops, who were sufficiently mixed in character for Jordanes (xlvi. 243) to describe Odovacar as *rex gentium* and them, in a contemptuous phrase that probably went back, by way of Cassiodorus, to Theoderic himself, as 'Torcilingi and Rugii' (lvii. 291), but his defeat of Odovacar and acquisition of Italy were by 500 nearly a decade in the past. Victories are customarily celebrated close to when they occur. Belisarius completed his conquest of Africa in March 534, and had his triumph in Constantinople before the end of the year.

There were in fact only three occasions in Theode-

ric's reign in which a 'victory' coinage is conceivable. The first would have been in 493, after the completion of his conquest of Italy. The second would have been 504 or 505, after his capture of Sirmium and the addition of much of Illyricum to his kingdom. The third would be one of the years 508-11, when his defeat of the Burgundians and Franks made possible his annexation of Provence and his taking over the function of regent in the Visigothic kingdom. The first date, however, though the most suitable in one respect – it was the only one in which a whole series of victories can be credited to Theoderic personally – must be ruled out as too early. The years 504 or 505 are possible, for his generals' rout of the Gepids and Bulgarians in 504, and their subsequent defeat of an imperial army which was apparently trying to prevent his annexation of Illyricum and which largely consisted of Bulgarian troops, would have fully justified the epithet *victor gentium* (15). But the link between the tremissis type of his 'victory' issue and that subsequently introduced into the Visigothic kingdom makes it virtually certain that it is to one of the three years between the outbreak of war in 508 and the formal establishment of Theoderic's rule in Spain in 511 that the issue must be dated.

3. *The Visigothic War*

The battle of Vouillé, in which Clovis defeated the Visigothic king Alaric II and reputedly killed him with his own hand, took place sometime in the summer or autumn of 507. The Franks followed up their victory by occupying most of Visigothic Gaul, the so-called 'kingdom of Toulouse' (*regnum Tolosanum*), while their Burgundian allies under King Gundobald occupied Provence. The defeated Visigoths installed Gesalic, an illegitimate son of Alaric II, as their king, since

his only legitimate son Amalaric was still an infant. These events can be dated to late 507 or early 508, Gesalic's election being in fact dated to 508 by the Saragossa chronicle (16).

It was not until 508 that Theoderic, who was related by marriage to almost all the interested parties and had made desperate efforts to preserve peace in 507 (17), was in a position to take action.

That he intended from the first to annex Provence is highly probable, for it had been formally in 'imperial' hands rather longer than other parts of Gaul, having been ceded to Euric by Odovacar (18), and Theoderic probably regarded it as a natural part of his *regnum Italicum*. His action against Gesalic was at least partly dictated by family considerations, for Alaric had married his daughter Theodegotha and Amalaric was consequently his grandson. Against Clovis he must have harboured a natural resentment at his having spurned his advice and attacked Alaric, and he was presumably anxious to prevent him acquiring a southern coastline and upsetting the precarious balance of power between the Germanic kingdoms in the western Mediterranean. The few details we have regarding the actual fighting are concerned with Provence and the Burgundian campaign, but for Cassiodorus, who as a high official was in a position to know Theoderic's views, the Franks were the chief enemy.

The chronology of the war (19) is not at all clear from the scrappy and often contradictory annalistic sources, but can be worked out from references in Cassiodorus' letters, despite these being neither dated nor arranged in any particular order, and from a few other literary sources. We know for certain that the campaign began in the summer of 508, the year being given in an entry in Cassiodorus' chronicle (20) and the season by one of his letters (*Var. I. 24*), a stirring

proclamation summoning the Goths to assemble on 24 June for a military expedition *ad Gallias*. An army under Ibbas and Tuluin, an officer who had distinguished himself in the Sirmian war (*Var.* VIII. 10), invaded Provence. A letter (*Var.* IV. 36) to the Praetorian Prefect Faustus allows a remission of taxes for the inhabitants of the Cottian Alps, through whose area the army had to pass before reaching the frontier, for the third indiction, i.e. Sept. 509-Aug. 510. This was evidently to cover damage done during the financial year 508/9. Cassiodorus' placing of the defeat of the Franks in 508 – his figure of 30,000 for their losses is an obvious exaggeration – implies that all Provence, as far north as the Durance which became its frontier (*Var.* III.41) must have already been occupied before the end of the year.

The war carried on into 509, however, with a Burgundian siege of Arles and raids into Provence. The areas of 'Gaul' directly affected by the fighting, and eventually even those fortunate enough to have escaped, were granted (*Var.* III.40, 42) a remission of taxes for the fourth indiction (510/11). Several letters refer to the siege of Arles, where Tuluin distinguished himself in the fighting for the covered bridge over the Rhône (*Var.* VIII.10) and the king both granted tax remissions for 510/11 (*Var.* III.32) and supplied funds for repairing the city walls (*Var.* III.44). The Burgundians were punished by an invasion from an unexpected quarter, for the chronicler-bishop Marius of Avenches (20) records in 509 the ravages of the Ostrogothic general Mammo in 'a part of Gaul', i.e. probably in his own neighbourhood south-east of Lake Neuchâtel. Scraps of information regarding raids close to the Durance and referring to the plunder and prisoners brought back to Italy can be gleaned from the biography of St Caesarius (21), though the elabo-

rate details of the campaign as reconstructed by Ensslin must be dismissed as fanciful. Ibbas for his part followed up his successes against the Burgundians and Franks by invading the Narbonensis and expelling Gesalic, who fled to Africa and was given asylum and a promise of help by the Vandal king Thrasamund. The date of this is given by the Saragossa chronicle as 510 (22). Gesalic subsequently returned to Aquitaine, but after invading the Visigothic kingdom he was captured by Ibbas and put to death, either in 513 or 514.

In the light of these facts the 'medallion' coinage can best be dated to late 509. The year 508 would be too early, for despite a major victory over the Franks the end of the war would not have been clearly in sight. There were further campaigns in 509, but it seems that peace have been concluded with both Franks and Burgundians by the end of the year. There would have been no need to wait until 510 and the subjugation of Spain, especially since the Visigoths were not formally enemies. In favour of dating the medaillion to 509, indeed, is the fact that an issue in 510 would have coincided with the fortieth anniversary of Theoderic's accession and one would have expected some allusion to this in the coin legends.

It is true that the credit for the military successes of 508/9 was due to Theoderic's generals, not to the king personally, but he no doubt planned the campaign and coins would in any case have to be struck in the name of the king, not in that of his commander-in-chief. Belisarius may have been accorded a triumph at Constantinople, but the great medallion that commemorated it bears Justinian's name. We have no idea whether or not the king visited Rome for the occasion. Probably not, for no visit between 500 and

519 is recorded in Cassiodorus' annals, and despite their scrappy character one would expect them to have mentioned such a visit if it had occurred. But the king's absence would not have prevented the minting of coins in his honour, and the Senate would not have been likely to miss the occasion of commending itself to his favour.

Notes

1. Tomasini, 1964, p. 62.
2. Anonymus Valesianus, 12. 65-70; date in Cassiodori Chronica, a. 500 (MGH, Chron. minora, II. 160).
3. Gnecci, 1895.
4. Stückelberg, 1898.
5. Allara, 1898.
6. Ensslin, 1959, p. 110.
7. MIB, 1. 82-3.
8. Alföldi, 1978.
9. Kent, 1974, p. 70.
10. Bernareggi, 1969.
11. Mattingly, 1950-1.
12. Alföldi, 1961.
13. L'Orange, 1953, pp. 139-70.
14. Brilliant, 1963, p. 211, where the phrase is applied to the identical gesture on a silver medallion of Honorius.
15. Ensslin, 1959, pp. 129-31.
16. MGH, Chron. min., II. 223.
17. Cassiodorus, *Variae*, iii. 1-4 (letters to Alaric II, Gundobald, the kings of the Heruli, Warni and Thuringians, and Clovis).
18. Procopius, *De bello Gothico*, i.12, the date being uncertain.
19. Ensslin, 1959, pp. 142-4; chronology discussed in detail by Mommsen in the preface to his edition of Cassiodorus, pp. xxxi-xxxii, and by Levison, 1898, pp. 53-5.
20. MGH, Chron. min., II. 234.

21. Vita S. Caesarii, i. 28, 38 (in MGH, *Script. rer. Merov.*, III. 467, 470).
22. Chron. Caesaraugust., a. 510 (in MGH, *Chron. min.* II. 223): quo anno idem Gesaleucus ab Hebane Theodèrici Italiae regis duce ab Hispania fugatus Africam petit.

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MGH *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*.

MIB *Moneta Imperii Byzantini*. By Wolfgang Hahn. Vol. 1. Vienna, 1973.

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Var. *Cassiodori Senatoris Variae*.

Abbreviations of Numismatic Periodicals

JNG Jahrbuch für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte.

NNM Numismatic Notes and Monographs.

RIN Rivista Italiana di Numismatica.