

The acropolis of Pergamon in the winter of 1302–1303: the evidence of coins

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Throughout its thousand-year history, the core territories of the Byzantine Empire were always clustered around the Aegean, yet the periods in which the empire fully controlled all four flanks of this sea were rather rare. From the seventh century onwards, a major threat came from the south, from the successive Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates. The Byzantines finally retook the island of Crete from the Arabs in AD 961. However, just a century later, following the Battle of Manzikert (1071), the imperial territories in Anatolia all but collapsed and the Seljuqs of Rum managed to penetrate all the way to the Aegean. From this period onwards the Anatolian coastline of the Aegean, that is to say the area from the Dardanelles in the north to the Dorian (Datça) peninsula in the south, was of great strategic importance. Depending on which side you were coming from, control over it provided a springboard either to the island world of the Aegean in the west or into the Anatolian territories towards the east.

The Byzantines made inroads into Anatolia in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and re-established effective imperial control. During the early reign of the emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282–1328) Byzantium held a large section of Anatolia, but this situation soon unravelled, thanks to a number of interconnected developments. In the area which is now Albania, northern Greece and North Macedonia, the empire faced challenges from the Angevin kingdom of Sicily and its allies in southern Greece, which required the Byzantine emperors to redirect their resources to the west. In the east, meanwhile, the Mongols had dealt the Abbasid caliphate a mortal blow, forcing major displacements of peoples from the Near East westwards. As a result, Anatolia gradually transitioned from Seljuq and Byzantine rule to control by a number of Turkish beyliks, which took their names from their leading dynasties.

In my area of interest – the western Anatolian coastline – the first decade of the fourteenth century was the most decisive in terms of political formation processes. Around 1300, Kalem bey, father of Karesi bey, and Osman bey directly threatened the Byzantine possessions to the south of the Sea of Marmara. Meanwhile, further south, the respective leaders of the Menteşeoğulları and the Aydınoğulları at the time, Mesud and Mehmed, and the latter's enigmatic ally, Sasa bey, established their influence all the way to the Aegean Sea. Following the Byzantine collapse, some of the islands came to be integrated into the Latin Christian military and commercial area of influence between 1300 and 1310, for instance Chios under the Genoese Zaccaria family and Rhodes under the Knights of St John.

My current research rests on a number of considerations. Intense periods of change have an inherent interest, and the cities of late Byzantine western Anatolia, according to textual and recent archaeological information, were places of great sophistication and dynamism, culturally and economically. This importance was retained, and even augmented, under later Turkish rule. As a numismatist I am particularly interested in the increase in monetary data for the period around 1300–1310. New mints became operational, such as those at Chios, Ayasuluk and Rhodes. Their coinages reveal political allegiances and economic orientations. Important mutations took place at the main Byzantine mint in Constantinople, in line with developments in Anatolia and especially the need to make substantial emergency payments. Foreign denominations, for example from southern Italy, flooded into the area, reflecting movements of populations and goods.

Two particularly significant military operations had large coinage components. In 1301 the emperor Andronikos II spent much of his budget on the employment of Alan mercenaries, whom he sent out with his son and co-emperor Michael IX Palaiologos. In the spring and summer of the following year Michael proceeded towards Magnesia ad Sipylum (Manisa), where he was encircled by the Turks and subsequently abandoned by most of his Byzantine troops and the Alan mercenaries. Michael scrambled northwards to Pergamon, where he spent the winter of 1302/1303, then made his way back to the imperial capital via Biga and Karabiga (Pegai). Around this time, another group of mercenaries, the Grand Catalan Company, arrived in Constantinople. Also employed by Andronikos, the Catalans launched an initially more successful Anatolian campaign, securing amongst other locations Magnesia, Ephesos and Anaia for the empire in 1303–1304. However, for political and strategic reasons, the Catalans had to move on to the Balkans, whereupon this entire area rapidly fell to the nascent beyliks. Recently, Lale Pancar (the numismatic curator at the museum in Selçuk) and I have concluded that part of a silver coin hoard from the Church of St John in Ayasuluk, Ephesos, originated precisely in relation to the Catalan presence in the area during 1304. Looking at the situation a year or so earlier, my assessments of the literature and museum collections have revealed that an even more significant and concentrated body of numismatic sources might pertain to Pergamon in the winter of 1302–1303.

I have been able to establish that two important hoards of late Byzantine gold coins were found on the acropolis of Pergamon in the first half of the twentieth century. These



The acropolis of Pergamon (Adam Jones; CC BY-SA 2.0).

will be presented in a forthcoming joint publication with Martin Hirsch of the Staatliche Münzsammlung in Munich. The two coin hoards were both composed of so-called gold hyperpyra of the Constantinople mint, depicting either Andronikos II alone (1282–1294) or with his son Michael IX (from 1294). On the front of the most recent issues the Virgin is depicted, enclosed in the city walls of Constantinople, and on the back Christ is represented blessing the two emperors.

Scholars have postulated that issues such as these, which depict the walls with six towers, date to 1303 or earlier, after which the Byzantine gold currency was once more debased ready for the employment of the Catalans in the first half of 1303. This interpretation is now vindicated by the new information from Pergamon: the concentrated nature of the finds and their location (the fortified acropolis rather than any other part of the city) suggest that the unusual presence just half a year earlier of a Byzantine military contingent provides the context for these numismatic discoveries.



Gold hyperpyron, Andronikos II with Michael IX Palaiologos, from the acropolis of Pergamon.

In fact, in this as in many similar contexts, the historical, archaeological, topographical and monetary data bounce off one another. In combination, they reveal in our case imperial policy making, the shape of the Byzantine currency and its deployment, and the course of military events.

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References and further reading

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