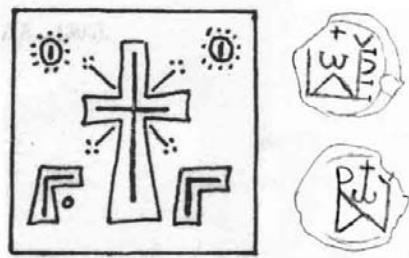


Exonumia from Ancient Abyssinia: Byzantine Weights and a Lead Seal
by Wolfgang HAHN¹

The trade route between the Roman Empire and Aksum via its harbour Adulis on the way to India have been mentioned in many books². Apart from literary sources there are material finds which have been excavated like pottery and, less frequently, Roman coins³ and some objects which we can define as *exonumia*: These are weights and seals. Despite their form and appearance they can only be regarded partly as related to coins, i.e. in specific cases of function: there are certain weights known for controlling the standard of coins, the so-called *exagia*, and sometimes coins themselves served as weights⁴; and in addition, seals were used when bags of coins had to be tied up in the mint⁵.



The weights show us the influence of the Byzantine system of weights (as also used when minting coins in Aksum). We know of bronze weights from excavations carried out in the years before the revolution, in Aksum as well as in Adulis, even if they could not always be clearly identified. Of course, these are not coin weights, which

are rather rare and can hardly be expected there, but weights for market use, particularly at an important trading post like Adulis. The report of the excavations in the area of Aksum's cathedral in 1958 mentions and illustrates two such objects⁶ (see the illustration below): a round half ounce weight with the Greek numbers "IB" (=12 *scripula*) incised, and a square three ounce weight with the Greek number "Γ" (=3 *ounkia*). The excavation in Adulis of 1906/07 reports a number of square



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² E.g. David W. PHILLIPSON: *Ancient Ethiopia*, London 1998, 63ff.

³ Cf. Wolfgang HAHN: „Auf den Spuren des späantiken Muenzverkehrs in Aksum, Numismatische Reisenotizen aus Nordaethiopien“, *Money Trend* 38/3, 2006, 192-5.

⁴ Well-known cases are the Roman solidus (*nomisma*) as a sixth of an ounce in late antiquity and the Maria Theresa-Dollar used as an one ounce weight (*weget*) in modern Ethiopia. See: Richard PANKHURST, „A preliminary history of Ethiopian measures, VIII: weights and measures“, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 8/1, 1970, 45-70 (cf. p. 60).

⁵ As depicted on several mosaics and ivory tablets of the Roman to late Byzantine times.

⁶ *Annales d'Ethiopie* 5, 1963, p. 12 ("poid ou jeton ou monnaie de bronze") and plates XIVc, XXg.

weights⁷. The samples which are clearly marked are: one weight of 4.8g with the letter “N” standing for *nomisma* equals one sixth of an ounce; another weight of 9.8g with “NB” (= *nomismata* 2) equals one third of an ounce, a weight of 14.4g with “HI” (= *hemiounkia*) half an ounce; and another weight of 81.6g with “Γ+Γ”, three ounces. We can tentatively date all those weights to the 6th century AD. However, what is unearthed during official excavations, is only a fragment of the total finds. They will certainly be increased in future by some surprising new examples. The same holds true for the category of lead seals.

Recently, the author of these lines was shown such a piece by a tourist who had returned from Ethiopia (s. photo above and the drawing). In October 2010 when buying some coins in Aksum he was given a supposedly worthless object as a little gift⁸. It was a lead seal as they were used on written communications as well as goods⁹. The special discipline engaged in dating and identifying the sender is called sigillography, which in particular has developed in the field of Byzantine studies¹⁰.

The piece described here is double-sided; there is a monogram of the block-type on both sides, a shape, which was still in use in the 6th century. This was the time when more intensive contacts between the Byzantine Empire and Aksum are documented¹¹. To explain the monograms is not straightforward, because the individual letters can frequently be read in more than one sense. What is even more detrimental, the imprint of the dies fixed in pliers (*bulloterion*) often was not completely successful. The same has to be said about the lead, which is liable to corrode affecting the conservation status. The material preferred for sealing was soft and could not be used for coinage, but it was cheap and seals by nature did not have to last for long.

We are in the lucky position of being able to decipher the monogram on the obverse as *Theodorou* in a rather rare variant¹². Only the “Θ” top left is no longer visible. Usually Greek monograms are given in the genitive (possessive)

⁷ Roberto PARIBENI, *Ricerche nel luogo dell'antica Adulis, Monumenti Antichi pubblicati per cura de la reale Accademia dei Lincei* 18, Milan 1907, pp.524 and 562f.

⁸ It was brought to my notice by Mr. Dietmar Fiedel, Bergisch Gladbach (Germany) who is to be thanked.

⁹ Sealing of merchandize is mentioned in contracts of traders, e.g. on the Indian route, cf. Hermann HARRAUER – Peter Johannes SIJPESTEIJN: “Ein neues Dokument zu Roms Indienhandel”, *Anzeiger der phil.-hist. Klasse der Oesterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 122, 1985, 124-55 (lines 6 and 9).

¹⁰ Recommended as introductory readings: Nicolas OIKONOMIDES: *Byzantine Lead Seals*, Washington 1985 and John NESBITT: *Security in Byzantium: Locking, Sealing and Weighing*, Washington 1980.

¹¹ PROCOPIUS of Caesarea, *Bella* I, 19-20; in the 2nd half of the 6th century some influence of Byzantine typology is apparent on Aksumite coins: cf. Wolfgang HAHN, “The sequence and chronology of the late Aksumite coin types reconsidered”, *Journal of the Oriental Numismatic Society* 205, Autumn 2010, 5-10.

¹² Georges ZACOS – Alexander VEGLERY – John Robert NESBITT, *Byzantine Lead Seals*, Basle 1972, pl. 233/168; Walter Otto FINK, *Das byzantinische Monogramm*, Diss. Wien 1971, no. 432.

case, understood as depending on a word like “signet”. The monogram on the reverse can most probably be read as the term for Theodor’s profession, viz *notariou*. Above is a cross, combined with an “*ω*”; This symbol can represent the so-called anchor cross, either a symbol of early Christianity or a St John monogram in the shape of a *nomen sacrum*. This term stands for the abbreviation of a holy name, characterized by the small cross serving as an abbreviation mark; here the name is made up of the first two letters of the name John, “*Iω*”, the “*P*” forming the vertical cross bar.

Theodore was, of course, a very common name for men and presumably there will have been many notaries of this name in the 6th century. Officials in the secular or ecclesiastical administration were called notaries. They also acted as legal counsellors when contracts had to be drafted, in particular for illiterate contractors¹³.

Because of the frequency of the name Theodore, we cannot expect to identify our notary with a certain person mentioned in a literary source. In the PLRE corpus¹⁴ there are two notaries of this name quoted from the 6th century AD. One of them delivered a message of emperor Justinian I to a synod in Constantinople in 536, the other drafted a contract for inhabitants of a district in Egypt. Apparently both were active in the capital. We could be led down another track by the *nomen sacrum*, which is known to stand for St John the Baptist. What follows is pure speculation, however tempting.

The holy places in Palestine seem to have attracted pilgrims from Ethiopia’s young Christianity in late antiquity¹⁵. This is only doubtfully documented by literary sources, which mention Ethiopian and Indian pilgrims – presenting us with problems of identification (as for example when Indian pilgrims are mentioned, Ethiopians might be meant)¹⁶. The stray finds of Aksumite coins in the Holy Land are more explicit. Bethany (Bethabara) on the river Jordan, the place where Jesus was baptized by his cousin John, was one of the places visited by pilgrims. From 1996 onwards, Jordanian excavations on the east bank of the Jordan, in Wadi al-Kharrar¹⁷, have unearthed the walls of extensive monastic compounds from the 5th and 6th century AD which were abandoned in the Middle Ages. In a pilgrim’s report written in the 570s, the so-called Pilgrim of Piacenza¹⁸, we read about this monastery of John the Baptist:

¹³ *Codex Justinianus* 4.21.17.

¹⁴ John R. MARTINDALE: *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire IIIB*, Cambridge 1992, pp.1248 (no.10), 1250 (no.19).

¹⁵ e.g., St Jerome’s letters, letter to Leta of 402/03 (*Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 54, pp. 339f.)

¹⁶ cf. Ulrike MAIBERG: „Und bis an die Grenzen der Erde”, *Jahrbuch fuer Antike und Christentum* 26, 1983, 38-55 (cf. p.52, n.88).

¹⁷ Preliminary reports were published in the *Annals of the Dept. of Antiquities of Jordan* 2002, 2003 and 2004 where only the pottery is dealt with in more detail, but not the other small finds. A first survey of the region was made by Felix Marie ABEL: “Exploration du Sud-est de la Vallee de Jordain”, *Revue Biblique* 43, 1932, 237-263.

¹⁸ *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 39, pp. 159ff.

“Above the river Jordan where the Lord was baptized there is situated the very large monastery of St John with two hospices”. Later the text mentions for the feast of the epiphany: “Vigils are held around an obelisk where the waters recede at dawn until the priest has accomplished baptism. Shipowners from Alexandria put balm into the water and then they collect it in order to sprinkle their ships”. As we learn from the remark about the Alexandrian ship-owners it seems that spiritual importance was already given to the water of the river Jordan in late antiquity and not just by modern pilgrims.

Our notary Theodore “of St John” could be thought of as an official in the monastery of Bethany to certify the genuine article. Whether this really was the case and whether our lead seal could be seen as an early evidence that the water of the river Jordan was already greatly desired in Ethiopia, is something which cannot be said with any certainty. However, some 13 centuries later, in 1880, it is documented that the pious emperor of Ethiopia, Yohannis IV, had water from the Jordan brought to him from Palestine by a special envoy¹⁹.

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¹⁹ BAIRU Tafla: *A Chronicle of Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-89)*, Wiesbaden 1977, p. 171; the envoy was his treasurer, *bejerond* Lawt'é; see Wolfgang HAHN – Wolbert SMIDT: “Läwte”, in: Siegbert UHLIG (ed.): *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag 2007, vol. 3 (He-N), 525f.