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A BILLON TRACHY OF JOHN DUCAS, EMPEROR,  
AND JOHN COMNENUS-DUCAS, DESPOT (?)

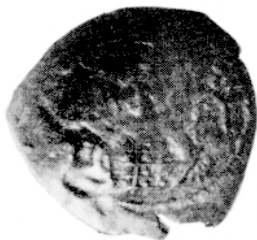
Two specimens of a most interesting and hitherto entirely unknown joint issue of billon trachy have recently come to light. The new type that they represent is described below:

*Obv.*    X   X  
          P   M

Half-length figure of Archangel Michael, nimbate, wearing divitision, collar-piece, and panelled loros of simplified type; holds in right hand jewelled sceptre, and in left, globus.

*Rev.* Inscription as below

Full-length figure of emperor John, on right, crowning figure of uncertain identity on left. Emperor wears stemma, divitision, collar-piece, panelled loros of simplified type, and sagion; holds sceptre cruciger in left hand. Figure of uncertain identity wears stemmatogyron, divitision, and chlamys; holds palm-frond in right hand.



n° 1



n° 2



The reverse inscription of the first piece (no. 1), from a private collection, measuring 26 mm. in diameter and weighing 2.87 gm., reads .....**CA(€?) IWENX**. That of the second piece (no. 2), from another private collection, measuring 25 mm. in diameter and weighing 2.22 gm., merely reads **IW** in the right-hand field, all traces of the left-hand inscription having been obscured. The coins are from different obverse and reverse dies.

The mint responsible for the emission of these pieces is undoubtedly Thessalonica, and the chronological limits for their striking must lie between the recovery of the city from the Latins by Theodore Comnenus-Ducas in late 1224, and a less exact point somewhere early in the period succeeding its definitive conquest from Demetrius Comnenus-Ducas by John Ducas (called Vatatzes) in late 1246. It is only within those limits that the details of dress and regalia, and the rather neat style (evident in the illustrations), were in use contemporaneously<sup>1</sup>. The type, among other things, provides a further of the rare instances in which the palm-frond (*βάλλον*) is depicted as part of the regalia<sup>2</sup>.

There is no doubt that the figure named John on the right-hand side of the reverse design was, or at least claimed to be, a full emperor. The inscription on the first piece, **IWENX**, clearly forms the opening part of the formula: *N, ἐν Χριστῷ τῷ Θεῷ πιστὸς βασιλεὺς (καὶ αὐτοκράτωρ) Ῥωμαίων*.<sup>3</sup> There were two Johns who bore such a title at Thessalonica during the period in question. The first was John Comnenus-Ducas who ruled the city between 1237 and 1244, and as emperor between 1237 and 1242. There is no record of any formal coronation ceremony, but that he did at least claim the title is indicated both by the evidence of the contemporary, if hostile, historian, Acropolites<sup>4</sup>, and by the survival of a lead seal published by Laurent in 1943 and reading: **+IWEN/ΧΡΙCΤΩΤΩ/ΘΕΩΠΙCΤΟCΒ / ACIΛEVCΚAIAV / TOKPATOPΠΩ / MEΩNKOMNH / NOCΘΔOVK / AC**.<sup>5</sup> The second is John Ducas himself, concerning whose coronation, entitu-

1. Cf. M. F. Hendy, *Coinage and Money in the Byzantine Empire 1081-1261* (= *Dumbarton Oaks Studies*, 12), Washington D. C., 1969, pls. 37-42.

2. T. Bertelè, «L'imperatore con una palma su una bulla e monete bizantine del sec. XIII», *Polychronion: Festschrift Franz Dölger zum 75. Geburtstag*, I, ed. P. Wirth (Heidelberg, 1966), pp. 82-89. In pseudo-Codinus, *De Officiis*, VII (ed. Verpeaux [see below, n. 3], pp. 260, 262, and 355), the palm-frond seems more an adjunct of the empress.

3. The section within parentheses depending on whether a senior emperor, or a junior co-emperor, was involved. The first occasion on which more than one emperor was acknowledged as *αὐτοκράτωρ* seems to have involved Andronicus II as son and co-emperor of Michael VIII. See J. Verpeaux, *Pseudo-Kodinos, Traité des Offices* (Paris, 1966), p. 27, n. 3. For Michael IX as son and co-emperor of Andronicus II there exist, of course, silver coins of a Venetian pattern with the inscription **AVTOKPATOPEC PΩMAIΩN**.

4. George Acropolites, 38 (Bonn edn., p. 66), 40 (Bonn edn., p. 70).

5. V. Laurent, "Bulle et monnaies inédites de Jean Ducas Comnène empereur de Thessalonique (1240-1244)", *Cronica Numismatică și Arheologică*, 125/126 (1943), pp. 3-14. *Contra* (for John, at least) G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (trans. J. Hussey, second edn., Oxford, 1968), p. 439, n. 1, citing p. 62 of the work of Ferjančić quoted below, p. 146, n. 6.

lature, and general recognition as full emperor there can be no doubt<sup>1</sup>. In fact, as Bertelè has pointed out, John Comnenus-Ducas was a youth at the time of his accession and in all known cases is represented as beardless on his coinage.<sup>2</sup> John Ducas, to the contrary, was a man of mature years in 1246 and in all known cases is represented as possessing a forked beard on his coinage other than the gold - not only on that from his original mint at Magnesia, which he had held since his accession in 1222, but also on that from Thessalonica after its acquisition in 1246. The two pieces of the type under discussion closely resemble, in this respect, the two types of his Thessalonican trachea that have been shown to belong early in the period following the conquest of 1246.<sup>3</sup> The emperor on the right-hand side of the reverse design can therefore only be John Ducas.

If this is then the case, who is the figure on the left-hand side? He could, on the face of it, be either a junior co-emperor signing simply as N, ... βασιλεὺς Ῥωμαίων, or, in certain exceptional circumstances, it might be supposed, a member of the higher but still subordinate ranks of the imperial hierarchy, such as a despot, a sebastocrator, or a caesar.<sup>4</sup>

There is, however, no case for supposing him to be Theodore Ducas-Lascaris, the son and successor of John Ducas, for it is clear from documentary sources that the latter had, unusually, resisted the temptation to anticipate the succession by crowning his son co-emperor before his own death in 1254.<sup>5</sup> It is equally unlikely that any of the contemporary regular imperial governors of Thessalonica and the European territories would have had himself portrayed, or would have allowed himself to be portrayed, in such compromising terms. The conclusion that it is unlikely that these pieces were issued after 1246 cannot therefore be avoided. But since it is also known that the independent rulers of Thessalonica (Theodore, Manuel, and John Comnenus-Ducas) were issuing coinage in their own names at least up until 1242, the intervening years 1242-46 alone remain. In fact, the political circumstances of those four years suit the issue admirably.

In early 1242 the emperor John Ducas, having decided to bring to an end what he considered the imperial pretensions of the rulers of Thessalonica, laid siege to the city. Before he could put his intentions into effect, news arrived of a Mongol attack on the sultanate of Iconium. The news was kept secret, but it must have been obvious that the emperor's presence in Asia Minor would be required and that he would therefore have to forgo a completely satisfactory settlement of the Thessalonican problem.

1. Acropolites, 19 (Bonn edn., p. 35); D. I. Polemis, *The Doukai, a Contribution to Byzantine Prosopography* (London, 1968), no. 72, pp. 107-09.

2. T. Bertelè, "Monete di Giovanni Comneno Duca imperatore di Salonicco (1237-44)", *Numismatica*, 16 (1950), p. 67.

3. Polemis, *op. cit.*, p. 108, n. 4; Hundy *op. cit.*, pp. 290, 294, pl. 42.

4. The rank of caesar was, of course, of ancient standing. That of sebastocrator was an innovation of Alexius I for his brother Isaac (Anna Comnena, III, 4, Bonn edn., I, pp. 147-48). That of despot seems to have been an innovation of Manuel I for his Hungarian son-in-law Bela (Alexius) (John Cinnamus, Bonn edn., p. 215). For the order of precedence see: *De Officiis*, I (ed. Verpeaux, pp. 133-31). See also the studies mentioned below, p. 146, n. 6.

5. Nicephorus Gregoras, III, 1 (Bonn edn., I, p. 53).

A compromise was duly arranged between John Ducas on the one side and John Comnenus-Ducas on the other, with the ex-emperor Theodore (the latter's father) acting as go-between. By that compromise John Comnenus-Ducas put aside the scarlet boots (ἐρυθρὰ πέδιλα) and the ruby-topped pyramid (πυραμίδες) which were the βασιλικὰ σύμβολα:<sup>1</sup> he was then dignified by John Ducas with the title of δεσπότης and was permitted to retain control of Thessalonica while declaring himself well-disposed towards the emperor. Whereupon having, as Acropolites neatly and sardonically puts it, made an emperor into a despot and a subject, John Ducas left for Asia Minor.<sup>2</sup>

On the death of the despot John, in 1244, his younger brother Demetrius Comnenus-Ducas requested that the emperor grant him his brother's title and possession of his territories.<sup>3</sup> The request was acceded to and Demetrius was duly acclaimed despot at Thessalonica.<sup>4</sup> The precarious independence of the city was terminated in late 1246 when a conspiracy against Demetrius finally rendered it into the hands of John Ducas.<sup>5</sup>

Between 1242 and 1246, therefore, Thessalonica was in the hands of despots who—whatever the degree of their de facto independence—were subject de iure to the supreme authority of the emperor John Ducas. The reverse type of the two trachea under discussion, depicting an emperor named John crowning a figure of inferior rank, would therefore be most appropriate to the period.

This suggestion is reinforced by a brief consideration of what is known of the *despotes*. It is, in the first place, necessary to emphasise that, although the emperor himself continued to be termed *despotes* in a non-technical sense—and particularly on seals and coinage—the technical title merely conveyed a rank in the imperial hierarchy, even if it were the highest after that of emperor and its distribution therefore largely confined to the immediate imperial family or to the rulers of semi-independent territorial interests like Thessalonica. The technical title in itself conveyed no functions, no territorial authority, and was not hereditary.<sup>6</sup>

Chapter eight of the *De Officiis* of pseudo-Codinus, entitled Περὶ προβλήσεως δεσπότητος ("Concerning the promotion of a despot"), reads: ...'Αναστάντος οὖν ὁ βασιλεὺς περιτίθησιν οἰκιοχειρῶς τῇ αὐτοῦ κεφαλῇ στέφανον διὰ λίθων καὶ μαργάρων, ἔχοντα καμάρας μικρὰς τέσσαρας ἔμπροσθεν τε καὶ ὀπισθεν καὶ ἐκ πλαγίων, εἰ ἄρα ὁ χειροτονηθεὶς βασιλέως υἱὸς ἐστίν, εἰ δὲ γαμβρὸς τύχοι ὢν, ἔμπροσθεν μόνον ὅς δὲ στέφανος καλεῖται καὶ στεμματογύριον: — "[The despot] having arisen, then, the emperor [wearing the stemma] with his own hands places round about his head a crown with precious stones and

1. Acropolites, 40 (Bonn edn., p. 72); the *pyramis* was evidently a description of the imperial crown or diadem—C. Du Cange, *Glossarium ad Scriptores Mediae et Infimae Graecitatis*, I (Lyon, 1688), col. 1275-76.

2. Acropolites, 40 (Bonn edn., pp. 70-73).

3. *Ibid.*, 42 (Bonn edn., p. 75).

4. *Ibid.*, 45 (Bonn edn., p. 85).

5. *Ibid.*, 45 (Bonn edn., pp. 85-90).

6. R. Guiland, "Études sur l'histoire administrative de l'Empire byzantin: le despote, δεσπότης", *Revue des Études byzantines*, XVII (1959), pp. 52-89; B. Ferjančić, *Despota u Vizantiji i južnoslovenskim zemljama* (Beograd, 1960). The latter devotes a chapter (V) to Solun (pp. 88-103).

pearls on it, having four small arches before, behind, and to the sides, if he who is appointed is the emperor's own son; but if he happens to be a relative by marriage it has only the one in front; and this crown is called a 'stemmatogyron' ".<sup>1</sup>



The implications of this passage for the reverse design of the two pieces under discussion are immediately obvious, even if the scene depicted there was never an actual one. There is no indication that John Comnenus-Ducas actually went through the ceremony of appointment, for Acropolites gives the impression, at least, that he remained safe within the city. Nor did his brother Demetrius, whose appointment certainly took place from a distance. The details of the design nevertheless tally so closely with the passage that there is little doubt but that these pieces were intended as a formal demonstration of the dependence of despot upon emperor.

1. Pseudo-Codinus, *De Officiis*, VIII (ed. Verpeaux, p. 275). Acropolites, 77 (Bonn edn., p. 169), mentions that Michael Comnenus (*sc.* Palaeologus) was crowned despot in 1258 with a *ταινία δεσποτική* but this need be no more than a loose description. That the crowns of sebastocrators, at least, were more substantial affairs than use of *tainia* (fillet, headband) might seem to suggest, is confirmed by an incident at the coronation of Alexius III in 1195. Owing to the restiveness of his mule the *σεβαστοκρατορικὸς στέφανος* of John Ducas, the emperor's uncle, fell off, exposing his baldness—much to the amusement of the crowd. Had the crown not been of covered (*καμελαύχιον*) type, the incident would have lacked point. See Nicetas Choniates, Bonn edn., pp. 604-05. The *διάδημα* of the emperor, and the *στέφανος* of the caesar and sebastocrator, are described by Anna Comnena in the passage quoted above, p. 145, n. 4. The question of the detailed evolution and nature of the imperial crown or diadem rests unsolved. The latest treatments are those of P. Grierson, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection*, 2(i), Washington D. C., 1968, pp. 80-84; J. Verpeaux, *Traité des Offices*, p. 199, n. 1. It is clear from the material quoted by Verpeaux that the *στέφανος*—even the imperial one—was quite distinct from the *στέμμα*. The only surviving crown or diadem of the period seems to be that of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen: conveniently illustrated in J. Deér, *The Dynastic Porphyry Tombs of the Norman Period in Sicily* (= Dumbarton Oaks Studies, 5), Washington D. C., 1959, fig. 210.

It is in particular clear that there has been a conscious attempt to differentiate the crown worn by the figure of inferior rank from the stemma worn by the emperor. But although it is perhaps somewhat adventurous to expect court dress to have been the same in the mid-thirteenth century as it was in the mid-fourteenth, when the *De Officiis* seems to have been written, the bulbous and visibly arched shape of the crown on the coins is so closely akin to what might be expected of a despot's *stephanos* on the basis of the passage from the *De Officiis* that identity may be assumed. If this identification of the stemmatogyron is accepted, it may be supposed that John and Demetrius – not being at all closely related to the emperor – would have worn the kind with a single arch only, although it is of course impossible to tell from the coins owing to the small scale and frontal nature of the figures.

There is, unfortunately, no definite indication as to which of the two despots is involved. The inscription to the left-hand side of the first piece reads: ..... **CA E?** which could form the remains of either **IΩANNICΔE** or **ΔΗΜΗΤΡΙΟCΔE**. The title **ΔE CΠOTHC** will, presumably, have been employed in its technical sense, and in contrast to the imperial implications of **ENX**. As noted above John is depicted beardless on all the coins known to have been struck by him as emperor, but this obviously precludes neither a change in his actual appearance nor in his portraiture.<sup>1</sup> It is in addition noticeable that, at least on the first piece, the despot has been given a light beard represented by shallow diagonal strokes – quite unlike the emperor's heavy and deeply cut forked one. Given that coins are already known for John – even if hitherto only as emperor – but not at all for Demetrius, it would seem wiser to make a provisional identification in favour of John. A curious distinction that does not seem to have been remarked upon is that the name *Ἰωάννης* is frequently rendered in its full form **IΩANNIC** in the case of the coinage of John Comnenus-Ducas<sup>2</sup>, but always in the abbreviated form **IΩ** or **IΩ** in those of John II Comnenus and John Ducas.<sup>3</sup> If the type under discussion were eventually to prove to be a joint issue of John Ducas, emperor, and John Comnenus-Ducas, despot, it would provide a case in point.

1. Demetrius was apparently the younger brother, and if Acropolites, 42 (Bonn edn., p. 76), is to be believed concerning his amorous escapades, he must have been well beyond the age of puberty at the time of his deposition in 1246. All the more so his elder (and more chaste) brother John. Either could well, therefore, have been represented as bearded during the period 1242-46, if not before.

2. Hendy *op. cit.*, pp. 279-83.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 102-07, 237-45, 290-93.