

# STUDIEN UND TEXTE ZUR BYZANTINISTIK

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## Serbia and Byzantium

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## Serbian and Byzantine Coinage

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The coinage in medieval Serbia drew on the achievements of the Byzantine monetary system. The first issues of the Serbian king Stephen Radoslav (1228-1234) were modelled after those of the Thessalonian Empire (Fig.1). These issues, albeit short-lived – they were minted for a few years only – demonstrate the importance Byzantine coins enjoyed in the central Balkans in the early 13th century, as they had been the principal legal tender in the region for many preceding centuries. The changes that occurred in the early 13th century when the economic axis moved from west to east resulted in the first place in the penetration of Central European silver coins, such as those minted for Hungarian kings, Friesacher pfennigs and Venetian grossi. The Venetian currency shortly took the place of the weakened Byzantine coins. Towards the end of the 13th century, under the new and changed circumstances, medieval Serbia started anew to mint its coins following the model of the Venetian silver grosso (Fig. 2.1-2). The system was due to the predominance of the Venetian currency on the Balkan market and Serbia's wealth in ores. This wealth came from the exploitation of the silver ore. The production of this precious metal gained momentum in the late 13th century. Although the Serbian and Byzantine coinage parted company, other ties subsisted: spiritual – because the Serbian mints took over the images from the Byzantine coins – and economic as reflected in the distribution of Byzantine coinage in the Serbian territory. This flow followed two different directions due to the diverse degrees of monetarisation of the Balkan market. The first was the area of the weak circulation of Byzantine coins within Serbian territories, and the second the area of intensive circulation of Byzantine issues in newly conquered territories, notably Macedonia.

The first issues of coins in medieval Serbia are associated with King Stephen Radoslav who had close spiritual and political ties with the Thessalonian Empire. From the typological and metrological point of view, his issues are based on the contemporary issues in Thessalonica. His monetary system was thus based on bimetallism – he minted electrum, or, more accurately, a silver aspron trachy for the market at large and billon, that is a copper aspron trachy, for the local use.<sup>1</sup> It was based on the Byzantine system, which played a

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1 V. Ivanišević, *Novčarstvo srednjovekovne Srbije* (Belgrade, 2001), pp. 87-89.

predominant role as demonstrated by numerous finds of Byzantine coins in the Ras<sup>2</sup> and Braničevo fortresses.<sup>3</sup>

Like the metrological basis, the iconographic images were also taken over from the coins of the Thessalonian Empire. Thus, the issue of King Stephen Radoslav with the representation of St. Constantine and the king is a direct copy of Manuel Ducas' (1230-1237) issue. We may also mention the reverse representation on the silver aspron trachy of King Stephen Radoslav, showing the king being blessed by Christ, modelled after Theodore Ducas (1227-1230) and Manuel Ducas's coins (Fig. 1). Some details on the Serbian coins, such as stemma, maniakion, loros, divitision as well as others, were directly taken over from the issues of the Thessalonian Empire. It is quite certain that the die cutters came from Thessalonica. It is possible that Thessalonian craftsmen and minters directly participated in the organisation of minting in Serbia.<sup>4</sup>

The production of coins during the reign of King Stephen Radoslav was limited to their circulation in the territory of Serbia, and the issues were concentrated mostly in the area of Ras, notably the fortress of Ras.<sup>5</sup> A find of a trachy from Sarda in the close vicinity of Scutari attests to the fact that this coinage may have been invested with broader significance.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 1.1-2: Trachea of Stephen Radoslav; Fig. 1.3: Trachy of Theodore Duca;  
Fig. 1.4: Trachy of Manuel Duca

2 V. Ivanišević, "Nalazi novca iz tvrđave Ras," *Tvrđava Ras*, ed. M. Popović (Belgrade, 1999), pp. 417-436.

3 V. Ivanišević, "Vizantijski novac (1092-1261) iz zbirke Narodnog muzeja u Požarevcu," *Numizmatičar* 14 (1991), pp. 57-72.

4 V. Ivanišević, *Novčarstvo*, pp. 87-88.

5 V. Ivanišević, "Nalazi," pp. 417-436.

6 H. Spahiu, "La ville haute-médiévale albanaise de Shurdhah (Sarda)," *Iliria* 5 (1976), p. 158, pl. VII.3.

After the deposition of King Stephen Radoslav, the minting of coins in Serbia stopped, only to be renewed, as we have said, several decades later under King Stephen Dragutin (1276-1282/1316). That time was marked by major economic changes and the development of trade in the Balkan Peninsula. The beginnings of mining, and particularly the exploitation of the silver ore, prompted the political and economic ascent of Serbia. The development of the monetary market and a shift towards silver money and the new denomination: silver grosso were one of the aspects of these changes.

These changes in the spheres of influence of the monetary systems in the Balkans are best illustrated by written documents. Byzantine gold coins – hyperpyra – played an important role on the coast as early as the first half of the 13th century. A deal from 1232 states that Ragusa shall be bound to pay to Venice an annual due of 100 old gold *perperi* – *yperperos aureos ueteros recti ponderis centum*.<sup>7</sup> An identical contract between the two cities was concluded in 1236. There is no doubt that the reference is to hyperpyron – the Byzantine gold currency used for all major monetary transactions. In the latter half of the 13th century, its role was taken over by the Venetian grosso, but the memory of the earlier monetary system remained embossed in the name of the money of account – perpero. In 1252 already, Ragusa paid its due of 112 gold perperi in Venetian grossi.<sup>8</sup> The Venetian grosso became the principal legal tender on the coast, and its influence spread gradually to the hinterland and further in the Balkan Peninsula.

When King Stephen Dragutin renewed the coinage, he founded it on the Venetian grosso, one of the most stable medieval denominations.<sup>9</sup> The significance of this issue is demonstrated by the fact that in the early 14th century the Venetian grosso was also the model for the new denomination of the Byzantine silver coin – basilicon (Fig. 2.1 and 3).

Basilicon and Serbian dinar, notwithstanding their common roots and metrological basis, belonged to two different monetary systems. The Byzantine and the Serbian monetary systems remained separate until they both disappeared altogether two centuries later. Nevertheless, numerous iconographic images and representations on the Byzantine currency, which enriched the Serbian coinage with new subjects and messages, persisted as a point of contact between them.

7 J. Tadić, *Pisma i uputstva Dubrovačke republike I* (Belgrade, 1935), 23, no. 18.

8 T. Smičiklas, *Diplomatički zbornik kraljevine Hrvatske, Dalmacije i Slavonije IV* (Zagreb, 1906), p. 498.

9 V. Ivanišević, *Novčarstvo*, pp. 72-73, pp. 90-91.



Fig. 2. 1: *Grosso of Enrico Dandolo*; Fig. 2.2: *Dinar of Stefan Dragutin*;  
 Fig. 2.3: *Basilicon of Andronicos II and Michael IX*; Fig. 4.4: *Dinar of Stephen Milutin*

The picture of the enthroned Christ, the chief representation on the Serbian currency with all its symbolism, was deeply rooted in individual beliefs. It was taken over from the Venetian *grosso* but it drew its roots from the Byzantine iconography and that is why it remained on the Serbian coinage for a long time (Fig. 2.1, 2 and 4). This image was featured on Byzantine coins ever since the time of Basil I.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to it, one also finds the picture of the bust of Christ blessing and holding the *akakia*. It was on an issue of a *trachy* minted for King Stephen Radoslav. This representation is of Byzantine origin and can be seen on anonymous *folles* of group G, attributed to the coinage of Romana IV (1068-1071), from as early as the 11th century.<sup>11</sup> This motif was subsequently represented on the coins of the Bulgarian ruler Constantine Asen (1257-1277).<sup>12</sup> Christ giving his blessing on *dinars* minted by Tsar Stephen Dušan (1331-1355) is also found in combination with figures of two angels to one side.

The representation of a ruler receiving first the banner and then the cross from St. Stephen, the patron of the Nemanjić royal dynasty, occupied an important place in the Serbian coinage (Fig. 2.2 and 4). It was a favourite representation on the coins and it would continue as such as long as the kingdom

10 P. Grierson, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection, Leo III to Michael III, 717-867*, Vol. III.1 (Washington D.C., 1973), pp. 146-154, pl. XXX.1-2.

11 P. Grierson, *Catalogue*, p. 169 and pp. 692-694, T. LXI.G.

12 J. Jurukova, V. Penčev, *Balgarski srednovjekovni pecati i moneti* (Sofia, 1990), p. 85, type I-II.

itself, but it can also be found later, even if seldom. The symbolism of this representation reflects the perception of the ruler's place on earth and his conformity with the heavenly authority. It draws its roots from the Byzantine iconography which often represents rulers and their patrons. This recognisable symbolism and the idea of the authority are clearly demonstrated already on the first Serbian coins of King Stephen Radoslav.

The image of a ruler standing and holding the sceptre is also of Byzantine origin. It was minted during the reigns of Stephen Dragutin and Stephen Vladislav II (1316/1321-c.1325). In the Byzantine coinage the standing figure of a ruler was the favourite motif ever since the time of the Macedonian dynasty and in particular those that succeeded it. We find it in Bulgaria on the coins of Theodore Svetoslav (1300-1322), which were very similar to Serbian issues.<sup>13</sup> The representation of the crown with lilies and the absence of akakia on the coins of Stephen Dragutin (Fig. 3.1) and Stephen Vladislav II (Fig. 3.2), in contrast to the issues of Theodore Svetoslav, constitutes a clear indication of Western influences (Fig. 3.3).



*Fig. 3.1: Dinar of Stephen Dragutin*



*Fig. 3.2: Dinar of Stefan Vladislav II*

13 J. Jurukova, V. Penčev, *Balgarski*, pp. 99-106.



Fig. 3.3: Coin of Theodore Svetoslav

One of the outstanding representations on the coinage of Tsar Stephen Dušan is that of a ruler standing as he is crowned by angels (Fig. 4.1). At times, to the left and to the right of his feet, are lion protomes as the throne adornment. The ruler wears the stemma and the sakkos, maniakiion and diadem, holding the sceptre with the cross in his right hand and the akakia in the left hand. The iconography was taken over from the mural painting in the Nemanjić genealogy compositions in Gračanica and Peć. This representation clearly stresses the divine origin of the imperial authority and the act of coronation itself.<sup>14</sup> Similar representations are found in the Byzantine coinage where the emperor is commonly crowned by Christ and the Mother of God. Both iconographic representations are also found on the first Serbian coins – trachea of King Stephen Radoslav.



Fig. 4.1, 2: Dinars of Stephen Dušan

The representation of the emperor and the empress holding a cross together is indubitably of Byzantine origin (Fig. 4.2). It is a common Byzantine iconographic image on the coins, clearly emphasising the holy origin of the imperial family's authority.<sup>15</sup> It draws its roots from the ancient coinage. In the Middle Ages, it represented the favourite motif in the coinage of the European

14 S. Marjanović-Dušanić, *Vladarske insignije i državna simbolika u Srbiji od XIII do XIV veka* (Belgrade, 1994), p. 91.

15 S. Marjanović-Dušanić, *Vladarske*, p. 93.



East. It is found on relatively early coins of the Bulgarian emperor Michael Shishman (1323-1330).

Epigraphic types of issues with inscriptions in several lines and a monogram on the reverse were introduced during the same period (Fig. 4.3). Both types were regularly minted until the end of the Serbian state in the mid-15th century. Dinars with inscriptions several lines long appeared first as the prototype. They underwent several variations due to the decreasing weight and size of the flan resulting in shorter inscriptions as well. On the other hand, the monogram appeared only sporadically as, for instance, on issues of imperial half-dinars.

Serbian minters also took over some details from the Byzantine coins and combined them with representations typical of other coinages. The half-dinar of Tsar Stephen Dušan, for instance, features the ruler's head with a crown – the 'stemma'. We are not aware of such representations in the Byzantine and Bulgarian coinages. It was taken over from the Hungarian coins, as demonstrated by the pictures of the crowned ruler common on Charles Robert's and Louis I coins.<sup>16</sup> It is not a faithful copy, as the Western crown with 'fleurs de lys' on the Hungarian coins was replaced by a stemma, the Byzantine-type crown, on the Serbian issue (Fig. 4.4).



Fig. 4.3: Dinar of Stephen Dušan; Fig. 4.4: Half-dinar of Stephen Dušan

The Byzantine influence on the Serbian coinage was at times very pronounced. One of the most outstanding examples was the issue of Empress Helena (1360-1365), the widow of Tsar Stephen Dušan and mother of Tsar Stephen Uroš (1355-1371), who governed the province of Serres after the death of Tsar Stephen Dušan. At the outset she did not rule independently, but after 1360 she became an independent ruler – despina. In 1365 Despot Uglješa (1365-1371) took her place. During her short reign between 1360 and 1365, three types of dinars were minted. The first issue stands out – it shows King Vukašin (1365-

16 L. Huszár, *Münzkatalog Ungarn, von 1000 bis heute* (Munich, 1979), pp. 79-87: Charles Robert denarii nos. 449, 459, 473 and 491 and parvi nos. 461-462, 467 and 493; Louis I denarii no. 526 and oboli 527.

1371) on a horse on the obverse and a helmet with a headband surrounded by an inscription in Greek on the reverse (Fig. 4.5).

Feudal issues in Serbia started in mid-14th century and enriched the Serbian coinage with new contents. Despot Uglješa's coins reflected parallel Byzantine and West European influences. The best example of this is Despot Uglješa's dinar which on the obverse shows facing Tsar Stephen Dušan, haloed with a stemma, wearing sakkos, maniakion and diadem and holding the sceptre with the cross in his right hand and the akakia in the left hand. It is one of the most "impressive" representations on the Serbian coinage. On the reverse is a cross with 'fleurs de lys' ornaments at ends, typical of West European issues (Fig. 4.6).



Fig. 4.5: Dinar of Empress Helena; Fig. 4.6: Dinar of Uglješa

Coins with the representation of a two-headed eagle are also worth mentioning, as they were the most important issue of Despot Uglješa (Fig. 4.7). They also draw their roots from the Byzantine circle and represent the insignia of the Despot;<sup>17</sup> this is the first time the two-headed eagle appears on the currency of Serbian rulers. This motif will appear later within the same context on issues of Despot Stephen Lazarević (1389-1427) (Fig. 4.8) and Djuradj Branković (c.1402-1456).



Fig. 4.7: Dinar of Uglješa; Fig. 4.8: Dinar of Stephen Lazarević

17 S. Marjanović-Dušanić, *Vladarske*, pp. 116-117.

In the latter half of the 14th century, Serbian coins move away from Byzantine models and look for their motifs primarily in Central European coinages. The Serbian and the Byzantine monetary systems parted company due, evidently, to the weakening of the political and economic power of the Byzantine Empire.

One of the aspects of the relationship between the Serbian and the Byzantine coinages is the parallel circulation of coins, especially in Serbia's newly conquered territories in Macedonia. The explanation for this phenomenon could be the uneven economic development of different parts of the Serbian state. The mono-metal monetary system, based on Serbian silver coins, prevailed in its central and northern areas. On the other hand, on the East Adriatic coast, its immediate hinterland and in southern areas, which came under Serbian rule during the 14th century, the monetary system was more advanced and meant a much more complex circulation of coins with gold, silver and especially copper denominations. The principal denomination of gold coins was the Venetian ducat, while the Byzantine hyperpyron appeared sporadically.

The largest number of transactions was in Venetian ducats. According to Ragusa sources, the ducats were widely used since the fourth decade of the 13th century and continued as the chief legal tender in the centuries that followed. Some payments were in Florentine ducats, albeit to a much lesser degree. They are mentioned mostly in documents from the third to the sixth decade of the 14th century. During this period, we also find references to the Byzantine gold issues. The gold Paleologian hyperpyra circulated in the Balkans, but much less than the Nicaean gold, notably the issues of John III Ducas, called Vatatzes (1221-1254).

Three gold coins of Andronicos II and Michael IX (1294-1320), Andronicos II (1282-1328) and Andronicos III (1328-1341) in the collection of the National Bank of Macedonia in Skopje and three other of Andronicos II in the collection of the National Museum in Belgrade attest to the circulation of the Byzantine money in the Central Balkans. In addition to these coins, the National Museum in Belgrade also has in its collections a rare hyperpyron of John V Paleologos and John Cantacuzenos (1347-1353) and this also indicates the circulation of gold Byzantine currency, albeit to a much lesser extent. The principal monetary denominations in circulation were Serbian silver dinars and Venetian silver grossi.<sup>18</sup>

On the East Adriatic coast, partly under the Serbian rule, an important place in the circulation belonged to copper coins used primarily in day-to-day transac-

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18 V. Radić, V. Ivanišević, *Vizantijski novac iz Narodnog muzeja u Beogradu* (Belgrade, 2006), p. 72.

tions. The importance of copper coins is confirmed by a Ragusa document of 1294. Because of the large quantity of imitative coins this edict prohibits the use of ‘*staminum de Dyrrachio et Romania*’, follari ‘*de Armenia et Turchia, novos et veteres*’ and copper coins without inscription and picture, coins with a hole in the centre called ‘*capucie*’ and new follari copying old models.<sup>19</sup> The presence of small change for daily use from other states and cities can be interpreted as the pursuit of gain by merchants exchanging copper coins for more valuable silver ones. Autonomous cities on the East Adriatic coast – Ragusa, Kotor, Bar, Ulcinj, Durres and Svač – had their own copper money. Of them, two communes, Kotor and Ulcinj minted coins with the names of Serbian rulers – tsars Stephen Dušan and Stephen Uroš V. These coins were minted for local use, but also found their way to more remote areas. There are recorded finds of follari of Tsar Stephen Uroš V in Bulgaria and also in Macedonia.



Map 1: Area of circulation of Byzantine coins

19 M. Rešetar, *Dubrovačka numizmatika I* (Sremski Karlovci, 1924), pp. 481-483.

On the other hand, Palaiologian copper issues, mostly those from the Thessalonica mint and, to a lesser extent, the mint in Constantinople, played an important role in the circulation in Serbia's newly conquered lands in Macedonia. This area was conquered after 1284 and bordered on Strumica, Prosek, Prilep and Ohrid. These military and political changes resulted in a significant penetration of the Serbian silver coins replacing Byzantine issues of higher value. At the same time, Byzantine copper coins remained the currency for daily use. This phenomenon is demonstrated by numerous finds of copper trachea and stamena of Michael VIII (1258-1282), Andronicos II, Andronicos II and Michael IX and Andronicos III in Ohrid, Prespa, Pelagonia, Strumica, Skopje and territories to the northwest of Tetovo. Particularly significant for our purpose are the coins found during the recent archaeological excavations of the fortress in Skopje. There were numerous Byzantine stamena, which were in parallel circulation with Serbian coins and copper follari of East Adriatic cities, especially from the Ulcinj mint.

The central and northern lands of the Serbian state offer a completely different picture. Here, the influence of the Byzantine currency declined as early as the first half of the 13th century and thereafter was present only sporadically. In some areas the circulation of Byzantine coins was cut short completely. Its influence persisted partly only in north-eastern parts of the country and along the Danube which was still an important route of communication (Map 1). The necropolis in Knjaževac brought to light a fragmented Thessalonian trachy of Andronicos II, whilst a tetarteron of Andronicos II and Michael IX struck in Thessalonica and a trachy of Andronicos III from the same mint were discovered in a settlement by the Porečka River near Donji Milanovac. The circulation of these issues has to do, perhaps, with the immediate vicinity to Bulgaria where copper denominations played an important role in circulation and thereby in exchange. This is best evidenced by a large hoard of copper coins discovered in Vidin. The hoard contained some 1365 coins, of which the majority were Palaiologian issues, those of Bulgarian rulers, John II Orsini, the Epirote despot (1323-1335), imitations of coins, copper issues of Tsar Stephen Uroš V from the Ulcinj mint and issues of the Golden Horde, etc.<sup>20</sup>

The overall decay of the Byzantine power towards the end of the 14th and in the beginning of the 15th century led to the shrinking of the area of circulation and influence of the Byzantine currency. The Serbian and the Byzantine systems separated, but both ceased to exist after a short while in the aftermath of the Ottoman conquests.

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20 V. Penčev, "Kolektivna nakhodka s medni (bilonovi) moneti ot XIII-XIV v. ot Vidin," *Numizmatika i epigrafika* 1 (2003), pp. 129-159.

