

42. The Sbeitla Hoard and the Reconstruction of Byzantine North Africa under Justinian I.

Abstract.

This chapter examines one hundred and nineteen (119) Byzantine copper coins of the Emperor Justinian acquired at Sbeitla (the Roman town of Sufetula, about 135 miles SSW of the ancient site of Carthage) in the late-1970s and said by the seller to have been found together nearby. Overstriking informs a suggested revised chronology for the dekanummia and pentanummia conventionally assigned to the Carthage mint. The evidence supports a possible reassignment of these coins to the mint of Constantine in Numidia (Constantina) in 552-553 with production possibly continuing for a lengthy period. There is a possible association with reconstruction following the suppression of a revolt by the Berbers ending in about 548 or a few years later¹.

The hoard.

The hoard consists of 107 dekanummia and 12 pentanummia of Justinian I (reigned AD 527-565) from the mint of Carthage and, less conclusively, from the mint of Constantine in Numidia. It cannot have been deposited before 554. The coins belong to a private collector in the United Kingdom who has kindly allowed me to describe them and to include several specimens in the catalogue.

Hoard description.

The composition of the hoard, with two denominations and four MIBE types, together with the fact that the possible dates are set out in the text, mean that only limited information need be given. The key issue in respect of the mint mark is whether it reads **CON** or **COR** and, for this reason, the entry is reconstructed from what can be read on the coin. Where this is not possible, the relevant box is left blank. The entries for undertype give the MIBE number where this can be ascertained or "uncertain" where the undertype cannot be identified. No entry in the box means that the coin appears to have been struck on a fresh flan. Where the die-axis is not clear due to the state of preservation of the coin, the box is also left blank. Coins marked with an asterisk are illustrated.

No.	MIBE	Mint mark	Weight	Die axis	Undertype (MIBE)	Notes
Dekanummia (107)						
1	201	CON	7.81	200		
2	201	CON	6.95		Uncertain	
3	201	CON	6.68	040		
4	201	CON	6.50	070	Uncertain	
5*	201	CON	6.43	260	200	
6	201		6.42	210	Uncertain	
7	201	CON	6.31	210		

¹ A shorter version of this paper was published in the Numismatic Chronicle for 2015 under the title The Sbeitla Hoard and the fractional coinage of North Africa under Justinian I (AD 527-565).

8	201	CON	6.30	300		
9*	201	COR	6.12	030	Uncertain	
10	201	CON	6.08	160	188b/199	(1)
11	201	CON	6.08	260	200	
12	201	CON	5.99	180		
13	201	CON	5.97	050	Uncertain	
14	201	CON	5.95	230	Uncertain	
15	201		5.92	190	200	
16	201	CON	5.77	200		
17	201		5.75	300	200	
18	201		5.65	250		
19	201	CON	5.63	250	200	
20	201		5.51	180		
21	201		5.51	110	200	
22	201	CON	5.46	030		
23	201	CON	5.44	180	Uncertain	
24	201		5.41	150		
25	201	CON	5.36	210		
26	201	CON	5.36	050		
27	201	CON	5.34	150		
28	201	CON	5.33	020		
29	201	CON	5.33	310	200	(2)
30*	201	CON	5.32	000		
31	201		5.29	240		
32	201	CON	5.25	260		
33	201		5.25	210		
34	201	CON	5.23	050		
35	201	CON	5.21	290		
36	201		5.14	110	Uncertain	
37	201	CON	5.14	270		
38	201		5.14	180		(3)
39	201	CON	5.11	210		
40	201	CON	5.11	210	200	
41	201		5.10	180		
42	201	CON	5.09	280		
43	201		5.08	290		
44	201		5.05			
45	201		5.00	030		
46	201		4.98	160		
47	201	CON	4.96	150		
48	201		4.94	140		
49	201	CON	4.90	090		
50	201		4.89	110	200	
51	201		4.89			
52	201	CON	4.89	140		
53	201		4.85	070		
54	201	CON	4.85	250		
55	201	CON	4.84	230		
56	201	CON	4.83	140		
57	201	CON	4.79	270		
58	201	CON	4.77	090		
59	201	CON	4.77	220		
60	201		4.74		200	
61	201		4.72	130		
62	201	CON	4.70	290	200	
63	201	CON	4.68	230		
64	201	CON	4.66	330	Uncertain	
65	201		4.60	330	Uncertain	

66	201		4.60		Uncertain	
67	201	CON	4.57	310		
68	201	CON	4.56	330		
69	201	CON	4.55	210	Uncertain	
70	201	CON	4.53			
71	201		4.50	260	Uncertain	
72	201	CON	4.49	050		
73	201		4.46	180		
74	201	CON	4.46	180	Uncertain	
75	201	CON	4.44	290	200	
76	201	CON	4.41		200	
77	201		4.38	050		
78	201		4.31	090		
79	201	CON	4.24	050		
80	201	CON	4.21	160	200	
81	201	CON	4.21	230		
82	201	CON	4.20	270		
83	201	CON	4.18	180		
84	201	CON	4.17	060		
85	201	CON	4.09	210		
86	201	CON	4.04	130		
87	201		4.03	040		
88	201		4.01	050		
89	201	CON	3.98	270	199	(4)
90	201	CON	3.97	040		
91	201	CON	3.96	320		
92	201		3.94	090		
93	201	CON	3.92	080		
94	201	CON	3.91	310		
95	201		3.90	090		
96	201		3.89	200	Uncertain	
97	201	CON	3.86	270	Uncertain	
98	201	CON	3.81	340		
99	201		3.76	000		
100	201	CON	3.52	180		
101	201	CON	3.50	220		
102	201		3.46	090		(5)
103	201	CON	3.24	040		
104	201		3.24	200		
105	201		3.23	180	Uncertain	
106	201	CON	2.91	000		
107	201		2.67	000		

Pentanummia (12)

108	MIBE 203		2.73	270		
109*	MIBE 204		2.46	270		(6)
110	MIBE 189, 1		3.46	140		
111	MIBE 189, 1		3.05	150		
112	MIBE 189, 1		2.78	030		
113*	MIBE 189, 1		2.59	270	200	
114	MIBE 189, 1		2.29	270	Uncertain	
115*	MIBE 189, 1		2.28	110	200	
116	MIBE 189, 1		2.27	270		
117	MIBE 189, 1		1.87	140		
118	MIBE 189, 1		1.74	270		
119	Uncertain		2.92	Uncertain		(7)

- (1) Part of the mint mark **CAR** is clearly visible as part of the undertype.
- (2) An example, one of several, with the letters of **CON** oddly elongated.
- (3) The mint mark appears to read **CObR**.
- (4) The regnal date year 13 (**X/III**) is clearly visible as part of the undertype.
- (5) The mint mark appears to read **CNO**, probable a simple die-cutter's error.
- (6) This, apparently unpublished, coin is a variant of MIBE 204 in that the profile bust of the Emperor is shown with an unusual helmet, rather than bareheaded. Despite what appears to be some double-striking, the coin is well preserved and of good style. Dealers will sometimes insert a desirable coin into hoard material to make it more saleable. The date and circumstances of the acquisition of the hoard make such a scenario unlikely, however.
- (7) The coin is corroded and worn and only the denominational mark is legible.

Commentary.

During the reign of Justinian I the Carthage mint struck a variety of coins of low denominations including dekanummia (10 nummi) and pentanummia (5 nummi). The majority of the coins have no mint mark but their distinctive design, allied to the evidence of finds, enables most of them to be attributed to the mint with some certainty.

The only comprehensive guide to the Carthaginian fractions is in *Money of the Incipient Byzantine Empire (MIBE)*². Although the arguments are elegant, they are also sometimes difficult to follow. They can be used to construct a notional chronology for the coins. The incidence of overstriking on coins from the hoard suggests that the chronology needs to be revised, however. Examination of the hoard also enables us to consider the reattribution of some of the issues recently associated with Carthage.

Dating.

Some of the coins discussed here are dated by regnal year (from the date of accession to the Imperial title although in the case of Justinian regnal dating started only in year 12) or by the year of the current indiction. The indiction was a reoccurring cycle beginning on 1 September of year one and continuing until 31 August of year 15. The indiction represented the intervals at which tax schedules were, in principle at least, revised. Hahn believes that at some mints there was also a "lustral rule" used to fix the points at which new copper coins were issued. The lustrum was a period of five years between censuses. Although it is not clear whether the relationship between censuses and indictions was always a formal

² Hahn, W., *Money of the Incipient Byzantine Empire (Anastasius I – Justinian I, 491-565)*, (Vienna 2000) (MIBE).

one administratively, Hahn suggests that some indictional cycles were divided up into lustral periods³.

Only one of the coins considered here is dated by regnal year – the dekanummium that formed part of the wider reform of the copper currency sanctioned by the Count of the Sacred Largesse, Peter Barsymas, in 539; such coins are known from the Carthage mint for regnal years 13-14 (539-541) and 16 (542-543). This leaves some 10 years at the beginning of the reign and the last 20-odd years into which to fit the rest of a complex coinage.

The types of Carthaginian dekanummia and pentanummia (after MIBE).

MIBE 188b (dekanummium): profile bust right; R. - I between two stars; **CART** below. This can be placed prior to the currency reform of 539 by virtue of its similarities to the pre-reform folles and half folles. There is no corresponding pentanummium.

MIBE 189, 1 (pentanummium): profile bust right; R. – € within wreath; II to right. The currently accepted dating assumes that II to the right of the reverse mark of value places the coin in the second year of the indictional cycle of 537-552 (that is in 538/9).

MIBE 199 (dekanummium): profile bust right; R. – I between **A/N/N/O** and regnal year; **CAR** below. Regnal years 13, 14 and 16 are known; the last date being 542/3.

MIBE 202 and 203 (pentanummia): armoured facing bust in the case of the first and a profile bust in that of the second; R. - € within wreath; cross or **B** to right. Hahn argues that on grounds of style the first belongs with coins of one nummus that are dated in line with the dekanummia. He suggests that the second type was produced at more or less the same time, perhaps towards the end of 542, when the second lustrum of indictional cycle 537-552 began, or early in 543.

MIBE 200 and 204 (dekanummia and pentanummia: profile bust; R. – the legend **VICTORIAAC** (or similar) around either a figure of Victory with the denomination mark **X** below or around € with **CAR** below. The reverse legends and the symbolic figure of Nike on the dekanummium suggest that they were struck to mark John Troglita's victory over the Berbers in 548. These coins are found overstruck on the dated dekanummia. They might have been produced five years after the last issue - around the beginning of the third lustrum.

MIBE 201 (dekanummium): profile bust right; R. - I between two crosses; **CON** or **COR** below. These "problem" coins are found overstruck on MIBE 200 and seem to be the last issue in the region produced under Justinian. MIBE attributes them to the Carthage mint in

³ Hahn, MIBE, p. 8 and pp. 67-69 For a critique of Hahn's theories, see Metcalf, D. M., *New Light on the Byzantine Coinage System*, Numismatic Circular lxxxii (1974), pp. 14-15. Metcalf says "Dr Hahn's strikingly original insight is that the designs and secret-marks of the coins were changed at regular intervals corresponding with the fifteen-year indictional system of dating, or (in the case of the copper folles) at shorter intervals, namely the five-year subdivisions of the indictions, which are termed lustra".

552 and after. They are sometimes struck on thick, heavy flans. No pentanummium counterpart has hitherto been identified.

The nature of the Sbeitla hoard.

With a single exception, the hoard consists entirely of two types of coin – the dekanummium with a reverse that has the mark of value **I** between two crosses and **CON** or **COR** in the exergue (MIBE 201); and the pentanummium with either the mark **II**, a cross or (in one case only) the letter **B** to the right of the mark of value **€** (MIB 189,1/203b). The majority of the coins in the hoard are not in good condition.

Two examples of MIBE 189, 1 in the Sbeitla hoard (numbers 113 and 115) are overstruck on the Victory pentanummia (MIBE 204). It follows that the former, known hitherto from only a few examples, should be re-dated to post-548. Since the digits **II** can only represent an indictional year, the date of issue must be 553/4, year two of the indictional cycle of 552-567, and conforming to Hahn's lustral rule. Perhaps the **CON/COR** dekanummia were issued at the same time. The composition of the Sbeitla hoard, made up overwhelmingly of these two coins, suggests that they circulated together. Both are found overstruck on **VICTORIAAC** coins. It seems that coins of both Victory types were called in to be restruck for the possible purposes suggested later in this paper.

Summary of the revised chronology showing lustra.

Type (MIBE)	Denomination (nummi)	Suggested dates	Notes
188b	10	pre-539	
Indictional cycle 537-552			
199	10	537-542 539-543 538/539	First lustrum Regnal years 13, 14, 16. Year 2 of this indiction*
202	5	539 onwards 542-547	Second lustrum
203	5	542-543 547-552	Third lustrum
200	10	548 or slightly later	(Victory)
204	5	548 or later	(Victory)
Indictional cycle 552-567			
201	10 nummi	552-557 553	First lustrum
189, 1	5 nummi	553/554	Year 2 of this indiction*

* A key element of the arguments put forward in this paper is that the pentanummia dated indictional year 2 (MIBE 189, 1) were issued in the second year of indictional cycle 552-567, rather than that of indictional cycle 537-552 as advanced by Hahn⁴, i.e., 15 years later than currently believed.

Weights and die-axes.

There is a considerable spread of weights for the dekanummia, suggestive, perhaps, of a change in the circumstances of minting and a consequent relaxation of control and/or a lengthy period of striking during which the weight of the flans gradually declined. The degree of variation in die-axes is not typical of practices at the Carthage mint where 090° (and less commonly 270°) tend to be the norm. These two axes do occur regularly among the hoard coins but alongside a majority of, apparently random, axes.

Significant variations in the quality of workmanship can be noted. The reverses of many are from neatly engraved dies. On a number, the letters of the mint mark are unnaturally elongated, however. This, together with the variation in die-axes, suggest that while experienced die cutters from Carthage may have been employed, it is possible that additional workers were also recruited from elsewhere.

The attribution of the dekanummia, which are common, has had a chequered history. The British Museum catalogue, without any explanation, gives them to Constantinople. Writing in the first volume of the catalogue of the Dumbarton Oaks collection, Bellinger, asserting their North African origin on grounds of provenance and overstriking, suggests the city of Constantine in Numidia⁵ (Constantina) after 548. (The corresponding pentanummia are not catalogued in DOC.) Grierson⁶ says that “a migratory military mint, using workmen from Carthage but employing CON or COR as a compromise between COR and CAR – is more likely”. In MIBE⁷, Hahn attributes the coins to Carthage, post-552, and offers the possible explanation that the mint marks reflect some kind of temporary supervision of the mint by the central authorities. He notes the distinctive high weight of these coins, suggesting that it might represent an attempt to bring the coinage in line with eastern standards. Inevitably, all these views are based on a significant degree of conjecture. One aspect of Grierson’s explanation, though, seems particularly odd; although Byzantine mint marks are often misleading, such a large coinage is likely to have been clearly marked and the much rarer COR (a single example out of 67 legible specimens in the hoard) can probably be put down to die cutters’ error.

Does a date in the early to mid-550s for MIBE 189, 1 and 201, allied to the circumstances of the Sbeitla hoard, offer any more concrete grounds for the origin of these anomalous dekanummia and pentanummia?

⁴ MIBE, p. 67 and synoptic chart for the copper coinage of Justinian.

⁵ Bellinger, A. R., *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection (DOC)*, Volume 1 (Washington D C 1966), p. 172.

⁶ Grierson, P., *Byzantine Coins*, London and Los Angeles, 1982, p. 75.

⁷ MIBE, p. 68.

The historical background.

From their conquest of Carthage in 439 until the deposition of King Gelimer in 534, the city was under Vandal control although often threatened by Berber tribes inhabiting the southern slopes of the Aurès mountain range⁸. Following the reconquest, Africa was placed by Justinian under a Praetorian Prefect with seven provinces each soon to have its own Magister Militum⁹. The Berber tribes continued to create unrest until their decisive defeat in 548, although sporadic fighting may have continued for a few years more. It is clear that Justinian put in place extensive military reconstruction works that lasted until the Arab conquest¹⁰.

The major source for this period is the epic poem the *Iohannis or de Bellis Libycis* of Flavius Cresconius Corippus, named after John Troglita, the Byzantine General who undertook the Berber campaigns¹¹. Whatever doubts may attach to the account of Corippus (his description of the number of troops engaged is, for example, absurd), it must be the case that the Byzantine forces controlled Carthage and some if not all of the coastal towns from which they could be reinforced by sea. The campaigns took place inland with an ebb and flow as Troglita's heavy cavalry endeavoured to destroy or expel the more mobile forces of the confederacy of Berber tribes¹². The generally accepted dates for Troglita's major campaigns are late in 546 to sometime late in 548¹³. This fighting seems mainly to have fallen into three phases and to have affected three of the provinces in particular: Byzacena, a coastal province to the south of Carthage Proconsularis (a relatively small area of land surrounding the city itself); Tripolitania to the east, a coastal strip of what is now Libya; and Numidia to the west, hemmed in by the Aurès range. Initial Byzantine success following Troglita's arrival at Carthage late in 546 was followed by a defeat in Tripolitania, opening up Byzacena to attack. Following a build up of Byzantine forces, the decisive battle took place at what Corippus calls Campi Catonis, the location of which is uncertain¹⁴. An end date for the war and the beginning of reconstruction may be marked by the despatch, in 552, of reinforcements to Sardinia.

⁸ Bury, J. B., *History of the Later Roman Empire from the death of Theodosius I to the death of Justinian* (Dover 1958), p. 141.

⁹ Cameron, A., *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity AD 395-700* (Routledge 2000) p. 117. Bury, in *History of the Later Roman Empire*, p. 140, suggests that the provinces included Sardinia.

¹⁰ Pringle, D., *The Defence of Byzantine Africa from Justinian to the Arab Conquest: An Account of the Military History and Archaeology of the African Provinces in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries*, 2 vols. *British Archaeological Reports, International Series*, vol. 99. (1981). A convenient summary of the fortification of the provinces is given by Bury in *History of the Later Roman Empire*, pp. 148-150.

¹¹ Flavius Cresconius Corippus, *The Iohannis or de Bellis Libycis*, trans. George W. Shea, Edwin Mellen Press, 1998.

¹² Cameron, *The Mediterranean World*, p. 118.

¹³ Shea, in his translation of *The Iohannis*, p. 16, noting the *Chronicle of Marcellinus Comes*, comments that fighting might have continued until as late as 551. But it seems, in any case, that Troglita could, by that time, spare the troops set to reinforce Sardinia against the Goths in the following year, an event mentioned by Procopius (*History of the Wars*, VIII. XXIV 33-39).

¹⁴ A possibility is a little way north west of the Gulf of Gabes. Pringle, *The Defence of Byzantine Africa*, p. 370, footnote 64, notes mention by Corippus, in book VIII, of *Lataris*, which may be a natural feature, in the vicinity of Lacene (Tarf el-Mia).

A possible reattribution.

There are 107 examples of MIBE 201 in the hoard. It is curious that on the 38 specimens where the mint mark cannot be read in full it is the last letter of the three that is, in some way, obscured. Perhaps this reflects some fault in the method of striking. All but one of the 69 coins with a fully legible mint mark read **CON**. **COR** simply seems to represent a rare die-cutter's mistake¹⁵. The mint signature **CON** may therefore represent the actual location of the mint – presumably Constantina. Is this consistent with what we know of Byzantine activity in the period post-550?

If the dekanummia and the pentanummia of the Sbeitla hoard belong to 553-4 and later, then Grierson's assertion of a military mint is open to question. Of course, the distinction may be a slight one; a new mint may have been opened for the purpose of paying garrison troops. Constantina (modern Constantine or Qasentina) lies in eastern Algeria about 50 miles south of the Mediterranean coast and 200 miles west of Tunis. In later Roman times it was the capital of the province of Numidia. As Numidia was certainly pacified by 553, it would have been a secure location closer to the new series of frontier fortifications and other works of reconstruction than Carthage.

If the dekanummia are reassigned to Constantina, this, of course, leaves Carthage without any fractional coinage after about 550, i.e., for the last 15 years of Justinian's reign. This situation is not unusual for the mint, however¹⁶. The mint of Constantina, rather than Carthage, may have supplied small change up to 565.

Hoard.

Pringle¹⁷ gives a brief summary (location; numbers; *tpq*) of four large (between 102 and 1668 specimens) hoards of Byzantine copper coins found in the province of Numidia. Examination of these hoards might reinforce or refute the arguments advanced here¹⁸.

Conclusions.

Although far from conclusive, the evidence of the hoard points towards a reattribution of MIBE 201 (usually marked **CON**), together with MIBE 189¹, back to the mint of Constantine in Numidia. Hahn's suggestion that the dekanummia may be the products of some kind of external supervision of the Carthage mint seems unlikely. Nor does the patterns of the metrology support his suggestion of high weights associated with bringing the coinage in

¹⁵ Examples with **COR** have been noted elsewhere. One further example is marked **CAR**.

¹⁶ No Carthaginian copper is known for the reign of Tiberius II (578-582) and relatively little seems to have been produced during the longer reign of the Emperor Phocas (602-610).

¹⁷ Pringle, *The Defence of Byzantine Africa*, p. 128.

¹⁸ Pringle, *The Defence of Byzantine Africa*, p. 419, note 36, comments on a "relative scarcity of data", deriving from lack of an adequate system for reporting and recording hoards. In writing the summary, he states that he had access to the papers of Roger Guery whose publication of his detailed material on North African Byzantine copper hoards in conjunction with Cecile Morrisson and Heidi Slim was, in 1982, "forthcoming". It is unclear whether publication ever took place. It is not mentioned in Morrisson's *L'Atelier de Carthage et la diffusion de la Monnaie Frappe dans L'Afrique Vandale et Byzantine (439-695)*, in *Antiquite Tardive* 11 (2003), pp. 65-84.

line with eastern standards. The coins seem to have been issued at the city of Constantina in 553-554 and after. Coin production there may have been authorised as part of the reconstruction programme began around 552, or to pay newly located garrison troops, or for some similar reason.

Plates.

5. (Catalogue 5.33.)		113. (Catalogue - .)	
			
9. (Catalogue 5.36.)		115. (Catalogue 5.39.)	
			
30. (Catalogue - .)		Enlargements (x1.5).*	
			Sb. 113.
109. (Catalogue 5.29 .)			Sb. 115.
			

* The undertype (the "Victory" pentanummium; MIBE 204) is recognised by the **VICTORIA** legend that appears above the profile bust of Justinian on Sb. 113 and below it on Sb. 115.