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SIX TETARTERA OF ALEXIOS I KOMNENOS FROM BRNJARCI, SKOPJE

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Abstract: *This paper will be presenting six tetartera found at the archaeological site Kale, v. Brnjarci, near Skopje, aiming to give a detailed intersection of the their numismatic value, but in an archaeological context, while considering the historical events and sources for the 11th – 12th centuries.*

Key words: medieval, numismatics, Byzantine, tetartera, Komnenos, Skopje

The site

The village of Brnjarci is located in the eastern part of the Skopje Valley at a distance of 10 kilometres northeast of the city of Skopje. It is located at the touch of the slope of Skopska Crna Gora from the northeast and the spacious valley floor to the southwest. The foothills of the south-eastern slope of Skopska Crna Gora, which descends from the north-western direction, ends with a protruding hill that separates Brnjarci from the neighbouring Aračinovo (Fig.1).

The archaeological site ***Kale*** is located on the slopes northeast of the village (Fig.2). The expert team of the Archaeological Museum of Macedonia (Director Vesela Cestoeva, expert consultant prof. d-r. Viktor Lilčić Adams) led by Vladimir Atanasov, M.A, within the framework of regular field activities, carried out reconnaissance of the site with the aim of revising and specifying parts of the perimeter of the fortification.¹

The remains of this settlement were known to the locals a long time ago. Jovan F. Trifunovski noted that:

“The name Kale refers to a rocky elevation, which lies northeast of the village. On that side is the slope of Skopska Crna Gora. The

¹ My sincere gratitude for the permission to publish the findings from the site goes to prof. d-r Viktor Lilčić Adams.

*villagers say that on the mentioned elevation there are: "walls, foundations and hewn stones."*²

Kale was scientifically researched and documented for the first time, i.e. the fortification perimeter was recorded by Viktor Lilčić Adams on August 17, 1987. It was investigated for the second time on September 24, 2005, within the framework of the project "Old cities and fortresses in the Republic of Macedonia and the Ancient Kingdom of Macedonia in the Republic of Macedonia", and for the third time on June 12, 2015 - 2016 and 2017 within the Project "Archaeological Cadastre of the Republic of Macedonia".

The coins

The *tetarteron* (Greek: [νόμισμα] τεταρτηρόν, "quarter [coin]") was a Byzantine term applied to two different coins, one gold circulating from the 960s to 1092 in parallel to the *histamenon*, and one copper used from 1092 to the second half of the 13th century.

Ever since Emperor Constantine I (r. 306–337), the Byzantine Empire's main coinage had been the high-quality *solidus* or *nomisma*, which had remained standard in weight and gold content through the centuries. The Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas (r. 963–969), however, introduced a new coin which was a 2 carats (i.e. about 1/12, despite its name) lighter than the original *nomisma*, which now became known as the *histamenon*.³

The exact reason for the introduction of the *tetarteron* is unclear. According to the historian Zonaras, this was done to increase state revenues: the taxes were to be paid as before in the *histamenon*, while the state paid its own expenses in the less valuable *tetarteron*, which was officially rated as equal to the full *histamenon*, instead.⁴ Modern scholars have alternatively suggested that the *tetarteron* was an imitation of the Muslim gold dinar, for use in the eastern provinces recently reconquered from the Arabs, or perhaps an element of an abortive monetary reform that intended to replace the *histamenon* altogether.⁵ At any rate, the *tetarteron* was issued only in small quantities in the 10th century, and only from the mid-11th century on was it minted in quantity approaching the *histamenon*.⁶

Initially, the two coins were virtually indistinguishable, except in weight. During the later reign of Basil II (r. 976–1025), the *tetarteron* began to be minted in a thicker and smaller form, while the *histamenon* conversely became thinner and wider. Only during the sole rule of Constantine VIII (r. 1025–1028), however, did the two coins become iconographically distinct as well.⁷ By the mid-11th

² Трифунговски, 1964, 21

³ Kazhdan 1991, p. 2026.; Hendy 1985, p. 507.; Grierson 1999, p. 9.

⁴ Hendy 1985, p. 507

⁵ Grierson 1982, pp. 196–197

⁶ Grierson 1982, p. 196.

⁷ Hendy 1985, p. 508.; Grierson 1999, p. 10.

century, the *tetarteron* measured 18 mm wide and its weight apparently standardized at 3.98 grams, i.e. three carats less than the *histamenon*, which now measured 25 mm in diameter (as opposed to 20 mm for the original *solidus*) and had acquired a slightly concave (scyphate) form.⁸

However, starting with Michael IV (r. 1034–1041), who was a former money lender, the gold content began to be increasingly lowered and the coins debased. After a period of relative stability in circa 1055–1070, the gold content declined dramatically in the period of crisis in the 1070s and 1080s.⁹

During the first eleven years of the reign of **Alexios I Komnenos** (r. 1081–1118), the last gold/electrum *tetartera* were issued. Alexios reformed the whole Byzantine coinage in 1092 and eliminated the gold/electrum *tetarteron* and gold/electrum *histamenon*. In its place he introduced a new gold coin called the *hyperpyron*.¹⁰ Alexios also instituted a new copper coinage (although many of the first examples were struck of lead) to replace the old follis. Apparently due to its similar dimensions and fabric to the gold *tetarteron*, it was also named *tetarteron* or *tarteron*. It has, however, also been suggested that its name derives from it being worth one quarter of the late, debased follis of the 1080s.¹¹ The new coin, flat, weighing circa 4 grams and valued (at least initially) at 864 to the gold *hyperpyron*, was struck in great quantities and in a large variety of designs, especially in the 12th century. A *half-tetarteron* was also minted. Both coins remained relatively stable in weight, but begin to appear less frequently towards the turn of the 13th century.¹²

In the 13th century, copper *tetartera* were issued by the rulers of the Empire of Thessalonica in the 1230s and 1240s, as well as by the Empire of Nicaea (1204–1261).¹³ In the restored Byzantine Empire, from 1261 on, they appear to have been replaced by a new type of copper coins named *assaria* after the ancient Roman coins.¹⁴

The *tetarteron* is categorized into three denominations:

1. Metropolitan Issue, this coin was minted exclusively in Constantinople, it also has had fluctuating amount of silver added to the denomination. It has proven to be tariffed higher than the regional issues from documents that described the buying power of the *tetarteron* in the city of Constantinople. In 1185 it had the purchase price of 10 Herring. A regional issue, minted in Thessalonica was noted with the purchase power of a small loaf of bread roughly near the same time period.

⁸ Kazhdan 1991, pp. 2026–2027; Hendy 1985, p. 510.

⁹ Grierson 1999, p. 10.; Hendy 1985, p. 509.

¹⁰ Grierson 1999, p. 11.

¹¹ Kazhdan 1991, p. 2027; Hendy 1985, p. 515; Grierson 1999, p. 21.

¹² Hendy 1985, pp. 516, 519; Grierson 1982, pp. 215–216; Grierson 1999, pp. 21, 44.

¹³ Hendy 1985, pp. 524–525.

¹⁴ Grierson 1999, p. 22.

2. Regional, Thessalonica mint and other unknown mints issued a *tetarteron* that contained no silver. The Thessalonica issues seemed to keep a very distinctive design, normally, thick and octagon shaped. Other regional issues were minted at various mints across the empire. The design was the same, however the lack of consistency in weights and in some cases smaller dies have created a classification of third denomination.

3. Half Tetarteron. This coin was almost exclusively (1 exception of Alexios III rd. coin) were minted in regional mints. In most cases the dies were smaller, in some cases the classification was made based off the individual weight of the coin.

The coins of Alexios I were minted in multiple mints to quickly fill the demand of the new coinage. It would answer some of the questions regarding the weight variations and the occasional design variation, being somewhat rare in the Empire that was always concerned by appearance and ritual, variations being considered signs of chaos, would have not be acceptable.

The specimens discovered at the site of Kale, Brnjarci belong to the locally minted, i.e. in Thessalonica, and generally do not vary in dimensions and weight (20-25 mm; 3.50, 3.88 g), except for 1 smaller specimen with dimensions 17 mm and 3.23 gr and 2 heavier samples with dimensions 19 mm / 4.07 g and 21.5 mm / 4.22 g. (Fig. 3 a-f).

Regarding the iconography of the coins, we see more or less distinguished representations of bust of Christ bearded and nimbate, wearing tunic and klobion; holding open Gospel in the left hand and pellets in each limb of nimbate cross on the obverse; and bust of emperor wearing stemma, divitision and jewelled loros of a traditional type, holding scepter cruciger in his right hand and globus cruciger in his left on the reverse.

Skopje region and Byzantium in the 11th – 12th century

Considered as one of the great Byzantine rulers, Alexios defeated the Normans, the Pechenegs, and, with the help of the First Crusaders, the Seljuks to put the empire back on its feet after years of decline. The emperor's life was recorded in the *Alexiad*, written by his eldest daughter turned out to be a historian of note, Anna Komnene, whose work on 11th-century Byzantium has become an invaluable source for her modern colleagues in that field. Her *Alexiad*¹⁵ covers the period from 1069 to 1118 and is principally a tribute to her father. The work is the only such book written by a woman in the Middle Ages.

The Byzantine Empire had been shrinking during the 11th century, but Alexios would oversee a string of victories against the peoples harassing the borders of his kingdom. The first group to be driven back and the most dangerous were the Normans. These descendants of Vikings, who had already conquered

¹⁵ *Alexiad*

Byzantine territories in southern Italy between 1057 and 1071, were led by Robert Guiscard (the "Crafty"), the Duke of Apulia. Robert, having betrothed his son to a daughter of Michael VII, was doubly dangerous as he could turn into a rallying point for disaffected members of the Byzantine court. Robert conquered Bari in 1071, Palermo in 1072, and Salerno, the last Lombard stronghold, in 1076. In 1081 Robert and his son Bohemund became even more ambitious and attacked Byzantine Greece. Alexios held the Normans back in 1082 despite defeats in the field and forced Robert to return to Italy to defend his interests at home. Alexios had been the crafty one and had signed a treaty of alliance with Robert's rival Henry IV, the King of the Romans, and paid a hefty fee in gold to Robert's nephew Abelard to raise a revolt in Italy. However, Bohemund continued with successes in Macedonia and Thessaly, and Robert's return saw a resounding defeat of Alexios' Venetian allies in 1084. Then the tide began to turn when the Norman army was hit by a devastating wave of typhoid fever in 1085 and Robert was one of its victims. Alexios then managed to retake Dyrrachion (Durazzo), an important port in Dalmatia, and the Norman conquest of Greece collapsed.¹⁶

Between 1085 and 1091 the northern frontiers of the empire saw similar incursions, in this case from the Pechenegs (aka Patzinaks), a nomadic people of the Eurasian Steppe. In past centuries the Pechenegs had served as mercenaries in the Byzantine army and been, on occasion, a useful buffer against the Bulgars and Rus, but in the mid-11th century they crossed the Danube and attacked Byzantine Thrace. They attacked Thracian cities again in 1087, and in 1090, they besieged Constantinople. The Pechenegs were joined by their allies, a force led by a former Seljuk commander, but neither could make any impression on the capital's famous fortifications, the Theodosian Walls. Alexios then responded by joining forces temporarily with the Cumans (the Turkish-speaking nomads from central Asia renowned for their archery skills) and inflicting a comprehensive defeat on the troublesome nomads on 29 April 1091 at the battle of Mount Lebounion. Resettling some of the defeated warriors, others were incorporated into the Byzantine army as mercenaries.¹⁷

After the Byzantine victory over the Pechenegs in the battle of Lebounion, Byzantine sources mention the fear "*that Bodin and Dalmatians¹⁸ intend to break the agreements and move against our territory*"¹⁹. In addition to the fear of Bodin, the great prince of Raš **Vukan** is also mentioned, since the Byzantine emperor Alexios I Komnenus received information that he was preparing for new attacks, which is why he believed that the border towards him should be further strengthened. During the following year, under his supervision, a large number of wooden and stone towers, ditches and observation posts were built on the

¹⁶ Norwich 1995, p. 25

¹⁷ Finlay 1854, pp. 101 – 111; Norwich 1995, pp. 21– 33

¹⁸ Византијски извори за историју народа Југославије III (фототипско издање оригинала из 1966). Београд: Византолошки институт САНУ. 2007

¹⁹ *Alexiad*

border with the Serbs, on the land of today's Kosovo and Metohija. However, already in 1093, Vukan invaded Byzantium, plundered parts of Kosovo, while Lipljan was captured and burned. The Byzantine emperor, upon hearing of his incursion, mobilized an army to suppress him and retake the city. Vukan himself retreated from Kosovo to Zvečan, and sent messengers with a letter to the emperor in Skopje.

Vukan later, on three occasions (1093, 1094 and 1106), made major attacks on Byzantium. However, despite significant successes in that battle (he defeated Byzantine armies twice, he penetrated to territories around today's Skopje, Tetovo and Vranje), he failed to permanently occupy parts of Byzantine territory.²⁰

The “imperial city” of Skopje and its vicinity experienced prosperity during this period. Among the buildings that Alexios restored in Skopje was the monastery of St. George Gorgos.

This prosperity will continue in the following years, when the prince bearing the same name as his grandfather, will decide to build the beautiful and intriguing church of St. Panteleimon here.

The epilogue

The site “Kale”, Brnjarci, served as the north – eastern guard castle for the mediaeval “imperial city” of Skopje. Its position made it one of the key points in the Skopje region, more precisely the proximity to the medieval city (Skopsko Kale - Kale Brnjarci 10.5 km) and the connection with local road communications (Kumanovo - Preševo) give an answer for its use until the 13th century (Fig.4).

The six samples of *tetartera* together with other artifacts and coins from the Middle Ages (rings, bracelets, encolpion, Constantine X's anonymous follis, Manuel I Komnenus' scyphate), testify to the geostrategic importance of this site, which was literally one of the guardians of the city of Skopje (together with the castles of Davina Kula, Čučer; Markovi Kuli, Vodno; Gradište, Taor and Bader) as well as to its role in the preservation of the borders and territories of Byzantium in this region under the reign of Alexios I Komnenus and beyond.

²⁰ *Alexiad*

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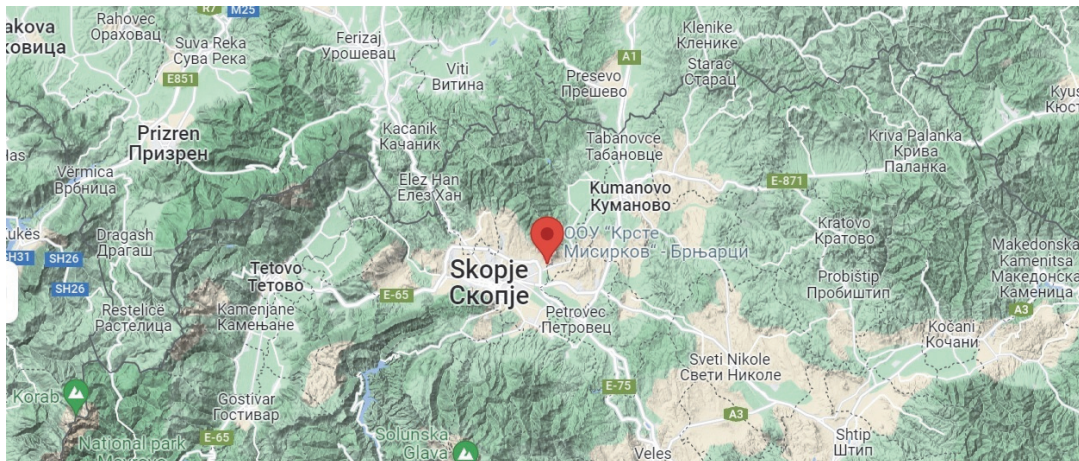


Fig. 1 Location of v. Brnjarci, Skopje

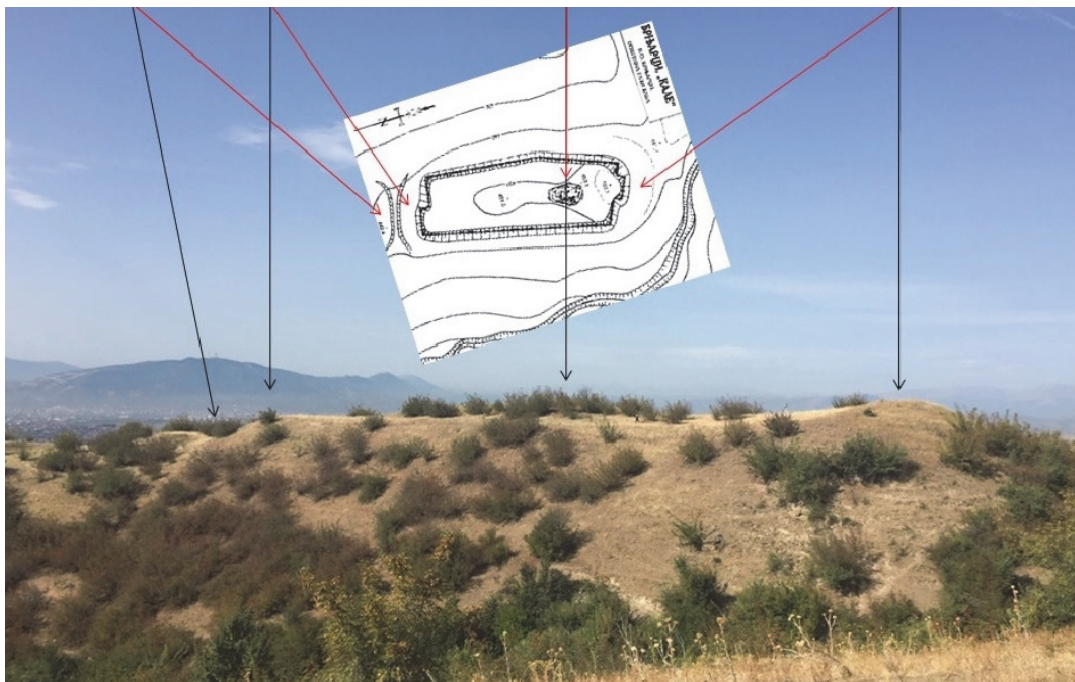


Fig. 2 Plan of Kale Brnjarci by Viktor Lilčić Adams



Fig. 3 a-f Six tetartera of Alexios I Komnenos



Fig. 4 Distance from Kale, Brnjarci to Kale, Skopje