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SCRIPTA VARIA NUMISMATICO
TUUKKA TALVIO
SEXAGENARIO DEDICATA

SEARCHING FOR CONSTANTINE THE GREAT
IN THE NORTHERN LANDS
LUCIA TRAVAINI



THIS PAPER IS INTENDED AS A HOMAGE TO TUUKKA TALVIO BY PROPOSING FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS AFTER HIS STUDIES OF BYZANTINE COIN IMITATIONS IN FINLAND IN THE 11TH CENTURY.¹ IMITATIONS OF BYZANTINE MILIARESIA HAVE BEEN PROVED QUITE NUMEROUS CONSIDERING THE RELATIVE NUMBER OF ORIGINAL SPECIMENS FOUND IN FINLAND:² BOTH GENUINE AND IMITATIVE BYZANTINE COINS OCCUR IN FINNISH GRAVES AND THEY WERE POPULAR AS JEWELRY, BEING ALMOST ALWAYS PIERCED IF NOT PROPERLY PROVIDED WITH A LOOP. THE MOST COMMON PROTOTYPES WAS THE MILIARESION OF BASIL II AND CONSTANTINE VIII (976–1025) OF CLASS IV, DATED BY GRIERSON TO THE PERIOD 989–1025³ WITH THE BUST OF EACH EMPEROR AT THE SIDE OF THE CROSS AND LEGEND ON FIVE LINES ON THE REVERSE; IMITATIONS OF SUCH PROTOTYPE, OF THE FOUR CLASSES IDENTIFIED BY GRIERSON IN THE DUMBARTON OAKS CATALOGUE, ARE ALSO THE MOST FREQUENT AMONG THE MILIARESIA IMITATIONS IN SWEDEN.⁴ OTHER IMITATIONS ARE BASED ON THE MILIARESION OF ROMANUS III WITH STANDING FIGURES OF THE VIRGIN AND OF THE EMPEROR. ALREADY IN 1978 TUUKKA TALVIO SUGGESTED THEIR POSSIBLE ROLE AS RELIGIOUS AMULETS. THE POSITION OF THE PIERCING BOTH ON THE GENUINE SPECIMENS AND THE IMITATIONS OF THE MILIARESION OF BASIL II SHOWS THAT THE BEARER WAS WEARING THE PENDANT INTENDING TO FACE THE SIDE WITH THE CROSS AND THE BUSTS WHEN HOLDING IT IN FRONT OF HIMSELF AS IT WAS HANGING AT HIS NECK; THIS IS LESS THE CASE FOR THE OTHER TYPE. HERE I WILL DISCUSS MORE ESPECIALLY THE POSSIBLE MEANING OF THE TYPE OF BASIL II, IN THE LIGHT OF RECENT RESEARCH ON RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF SOME SIMILAR COINS IN ITALY AND ELSEWHERE.

SANTALENE IN ITALY

SINGLE SPECIMENS OF THE GOLD *HISTAMENON* OF BASIL II AND CONSTANTINE VIII, CLASS 6 ACCORDING TO GRIERSON DUMBARTON OAKS CATALOGUE, ARE REPRESENTED IN THREE ITALIAN HOARDS OF THE 11TH, 12TH AND 13TH CENTURIES: THE ORDONA HOARD (APULIA), OF C.1025, CONTAINED 145 GOLD TARIS AND ONE SPECIMEN OF THE SAID *HISTAMENON*; THE ROME TORRE DELLE MILIZIE HOARD, OF C.1185, WITH 1370 FRENCH DENIERS OF CHAMPAGNE AND DENIERS OF PAVIA AND LUCCA, AND ONE SPECIMEN OF THE SAID *HISTAMENON*; THE PISA, LOGGE DEI BANCHI HOARD, OF C.1266, WITH 119 SICILIAN TARIS, 16 *AUGUSTALES* AND 1 HALF *AUGUSTALIS* OF FREDERIC II, 1 GOLD 'GROSSO' OF LUCCA, 91 FLORINS OF FLORENCE, AND ONE *HISTAMENON* OF BASIL II AND CONSTANTINE VIII. I HAD ONCE INTERPRETED THE PRESENCE OF THE *HISTAMENON* AS

A RETARDED THESAURISATION OF THE BYZANTINE GOLD COIN BEFORE ITS DEBASEMENT, ALTHOUGH SUCH *HISTAMENA* DID NOT CIRCULATE IN ITALY IN THE 12TH NOR IN THE 13TH CENTURY; NOW I AM CONVINCED OF A DIFFERENT REASON, WHICH CAN BETTER JUSTIFY THE PRESENCE, ALWAYS, OF JUST ONE PIECE: IN MEDIEVAL ITALY EACH OF THESE COINS WAS CONSIDERED TO BE A RELIGIOUS ICON, THUS PASSED FROM FATHER TO SON, AND KEPT AMONG PRECIOUS OBJECTS AND COINS. THE KEY ELEMENT FOR SUCH AN INTERPRETATION OF THE *HISTAMENON* OF BASIL II AND CONSTANTINE VIII IS TO BE FOUND IN WRITTEN EVIDENCE: SOME COIN LISTS OF THE PERIOD 1280–1315, FROM MATHEMATICAL TREATISES AND ‘PRATICHE DI MERCATURA’ (MERCHANTS’ BOOKS), MENTION GOLD *SANTALENE* AND IN ONE CASE ALSO SILVER *SANTALENE*. THESE ARE THE REFERENCES TO THE GOLD ONES:

A) SANTE ALENE VECCHIE SONO A CHARATI 24 MENO 1/3 (COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, Ms X511 AL 3; LIST OF 1280 C.);⁵

B) SANTALENE FINI SONO A KAR. 24 PER ONCIA (JACOPO DA FIRENZE, TRACTATUS ALGORISMI: LIST OF 1302 C.);

C) SANTA’ALENE D’ORO VECCHIE XXIII MENO ¼ (VENISE, BIBL. MARCIANA, COD. ITAL. CL.XI, N. 98: LIST DATED 1305);

D) SANT’ALENE D’ORO COL TAGLIO GROSSO A KA. XXIII E ¼ (FLORENCE, BN, RACC. TORDI N.139, COD. ACCIAJOLI, LIST DATED 1311–1315 C.).

THE SILVER ONE IS DESCRIBED AS SANTALENA D’AGIENTO ONCE 12 MENO 1/3 (COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, Ms X511 AL 3; LIST OF 1280 C.).⁶

WHAT SORT OF COINS ARE THE GOLD *SANTALENE*? NO MINT PLACE AND NO RULER’S NAME CAN BE ASSOCIATED TO THE TERM *SANTALENE* SO THE TERM MUST HAVE A CONNECTION WITH THE NAME OF SAINT HELENA. THERE ARE NO GOLD OR SILVER COINS BEARING THE IMAGE OF THIS SAINT IN THE 13TH CENTURY OR EARLIER, BUT THE THREE HOARDS WITH THE SINGLE *HISTAMENON* OF BASIL II AND CONSTANTINE VIII COME TO MIND: COULD THESE GOLD COINS BE *SANTALENE*? THE GOLD CONTENT INDICATED IN THE COIN LISTS CORRESPONDS RATHER EXACTLY TO THE GOLD CONTENT OF SUCH *HISTAMENA*;⁷ THE OBTVERSE SHOWS A BUST OF CHRIST AND THE REVERSE SHOWS THE BUSTS OF THE ASSOCIATED EMPERORS AT THE SIDE OF A CROSS: THE TWO BUSTS WERE POSSIBLY ‘READ’ BY MEDIEVAL ITALIANS IN THE 11TH, 12TH AND 13TH CENTURIES LIKE IMAGES OF SAINT CONSTANTINE (THE BEARDED BASIL II) AND OF SAINT HELENA (THE YOUNG CONSTANTINE VIII, WITH NO BEARD); THEY ARE SHOWN AT THE SIDE OF THE CROSS OF CHRIST (THE SPECIMENS IN THE THREE HOARDS ARE ALL OF CLASS 6, THE ONLY ONE SHOWING A PLAIN CROSS – A CROSS OF CHRIST! – INSTEAD OF THE ORNAMENTED OR PATRIARCHAL ONE OF OTHER CLASSES); THE MEDIEVAL LEGEND OF THE TRUE CROSS WELL EXPLAINS THE ROLE OF HELENA IN THE FINDING OF THE CROSS. INDEED, THE CULT OF THE CROSS WAS VERY IMPORTANT IN MEDIEVAL ITALY AND BEYOND AND CAN WELL JUSTIFY THE USE OF THESE COINS AS ICONS IN SUCH CULT AND DEVOTION. IT IS THEN POSSIBLE THAT THE COIN LISTS MENTIONING *SANTALENE* DOCUMENT THE FINAL MOMENT OF THE MONETARY LIFE OF SUCH COINS, GIVING THEIR

GOLD CONTENT EXACTLY, IN A MOMENT WHEN THEY WERE ALREADY MAINLY KEPT FOR THEIR RELIGIOUS VALUE; LATER THEY BECAME COPIED AND PRODUCED BY JEWELLERS FOR MORE SPREAD DEVOTIONAL USE.⁸

IN CONSTANTINOPLE IN THE 12TH CENTURY OTHER GOLD COINS OF CONSTANTINE AND HELENA WERE CONSIDERED TO BE VERY VALUABLE FOR THEIR PROTECTIVE POWER AGAINST ALL EVIL: A LETTER OF MICHAEL ITALIKOS WRITTEN AROUND THE HALF OF THE 12TH CENTURY MENTIONED THE POWER OF A GOLD COIN NAMED KONSTANTINATON BEARING ON ONE SIDE THE IMAGES OF THE 'VERY PIOUS' CONSTANTINE AND HELENA AND ON THE OTHER THE IMAGE OF CHRIST 'OF ROMAN TYPE', A DESCRIPTION WHICH COULD HOLD GOOD FOR A SPECIMEN, AGAIN, OF BASIL II AND CONSTANTINE VIII OR OF A SIMILAR COIN SHOWING TWO BUSTS AT THE SIDE OF A CROSS.⁹ WE MAY SUGGEST ALSO THAT THE REPUTATION OF PROTECTIVE COINS OF EMPEROR CONSTANTINE THE GREAT MUST HAVE BEEN STRONG IN CONSTANTINOPLE EVEN BEFORE THE 12TH CENTURY.

THE GREAT PIOUS CONSTANTINE AND HIS MOTHER WERE VENERATED LIKE SAINTS.¹⁰ THE TERM 'COIN OF SAINT HELENA' PERSISTED IN ITALY WELL INTO MODERN TIMES, AS WE FIND IN 16TH CENTURY ROME, IN THE PAPAL ENTOURAGE, WHEN THE TERM WAS GENERALLY ATTRIBUTED TO A VARIETY OF BYZANTINE COINS, NOT JUST THOSE OF BASIL II AND CONSTANTINE VIII.

IN 1586 A HOARD OF 125 GOLD BYZANTINE COINS WAS FOUND IN LAYING THE FOUNDATION OF THE LATERAN PALACE; THE HOARD WAS BURIED IN THE 7TH CENTURY AT THE TIME OF HERACLIUS, CONTAINING COINS OF EMPERORS THEODOSIUS, VALENTINIANUS III, MARCIANUS, LEO, JUSTINUS, JUSTINIANUS, TIBERIUS II CONSTANTINUS, MAURITIUS TIBERIUS, PHOCAS AND HERACLIUS.¹¹ THE JOURNAL NAMED *AVVISI DI ROMA*, DESCRIBING HOW THE POPE DISTRIBUTED A NUMBER OF THE COINS TO VARIOUS CARDINALS, REFERRED TO ALL SUCH COINS AS 'COINS OF SAINT HÉLÈNE'.¹² THE DISCOVERY OF THE HOARD IMPRESSED GREATLY POPE SIXTUS V (1585–90), WHO BELIEVED IT TO BE A SIGN OF PROVIDENCE: ON 1 DECEMBER 1587 THE POPE ISSUED A BULL BY WHICH EACH OF THE COINS OF THE HOARD WAS DECLARED A POWERFUL OBJECT OF CULT BEARING INDULGENCES FOR ALL THOSE WHO WOULD BEAR ONE AT THE NECK PRAYING THE CROSS WITH DEVOTION.¹³ THE BULL ALSO EXTENDED THE POWER TO SIMILAR COINS AND CERTAINLY THE DEVOTIONAL USE OF BYZANTINE COINS IN ITALY MUST HAVE SPREAD EVEN MORE.

IN ROME STILL IN THE 17TH CENTURY, IN SPITE OF THE PROGRESS OF NUMISMATIC STUDIES, THE 'SAINT HELENA' READING OF BYZANTINE COINS PERSISTED: A CROSS-RELIQUIARY IN THE VATICAN IS SURMOUNTED BY A COIN DESCRIBED AS BEARING THE IMAGES OF CONSTANTINE AND HELENA, SAID TO BE PART OF THE LATERAN HOARD; IT IS IN FACT A GOLD COIN OF MANUEL I COMNENUS (1143–80), WHICH COULD NOT BY ITS CHRONOLOGY HAVE COME FROM THAT HOARD; ACCORDING TO TORRIGIO 1635 THE IMAGE OF CHRIST EMMANUEL ON THE OBERSE WAS READ AS THE IMAGE OF CONSTANTINE AND THE IMAGE OF THE STANDING EMPEROR ON THE REVERSE WAS READ AS HELENA WITH THE LABARUM.¹⁴

DEVOTION HAD ITS PRECEDENCE OVER NUMISMATIC INTERPRETATIONS. THE CULT OF THE CROSS WAS EVER POPULAR. EVEN IN PROVENCE IN THE 16TH CENTURY, ACCORDING

TO DU PEIRESC, ROMAN COINS WERE NAMED ‘MEDAILLES DE SAINTE HÉLÈNE’;¹⁵ WHAT WAS THE DEVOTIONAL USE OF SUCH COINS IN PROVENCE IN THE MIDDLE AGES IS STILL TO BE INVESTIGATED.

WE HAVE SO FAR TRAVELLED FROM THE NORTH TO THE SOUTH OF EUROPE AND FROM THE 11TH CENTURY TO THE 16TH AND 17TH CENTURIES, AND IT IS NOW TIME TO GO BACK WHERE WE STARTED: IS IT AT ALL POSSIBLE THAT THE CULT OF THE CROSS HAD REACHED SOMEHOW THE NORTHERN LANDS IN THE 11TH CENTURY? CAN WE SEE A TRACE OF SUCH A CULT IN THE SPREAD OF BYZANTINE IMITATIONS OF THE MILIARESION OF BASIL II AND CONSTANTINE VIII? THE BYZANTINE IMITATIONS CERTAINLY TESTIFY THE INTEREST FOR THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION WHICH HOWEVER IN THE 11TH CENTURY WAS NOT YET WIDESPREAD IN FINLAND.¹⁶ MIGHT THERE POSSIBLY BE A CHANCE FOR THIS HOLDING TRUE FOR SWEDEN? HOWEVER PRIMITIVE CHRISTIAN RELIGION MIGHT HAVE BEEN, WAS THERE A DIFFUSION OF THE PROTECTIVE IMAGES OF CONSTANTINE AND HELENA AT THE SIDE OF THE CROSS OF CHRIST?

THIS NOTE IS NO MORE THAN AN INVITATION AND A WISH TO TUUKKA TALVIO AND OTHER FINNISH SCHOLARS TO INVESTIGATE THE TOPIC OF COIN IMITATIONS AND RELIGIOUS ATTITUDE IN THEIR COUNTRY.

NOTES

¹ TALVIO 1978, 1985, 1994. I WISH TO THANK MA OUTI JÄRVINEN FOR HELP WITH THE FINNISH BIBLIOGRAPHY.

² TALVIO 1978, 26.

³ GRIERSON D.O.C. III,2, 611.

⁴ MALMER 1981.

⁵ TRANSCRIPTIONS OF SUCH LISTS ARE IN TRAVAINI 2003, PASSIM. THE MANUSCRIPT OF THE COLUMBIA ARITHMETICS CAN BE DATED TO THE MID 14TH CENTURY BUT THE TEXT OF ITS COIN LIST BELONGS CERTAINLY TO AROUND 1280 (TRAVAINI, 2003, 82); ON THIS DATING JENS HØYRUP HAS SUGGESTED THAT THE ENTIRE TEXT BELONGS TO 1280 AND IN THIS CASE THE COLUMBIA MANUSCRIPT WILL BE THE MOST ANCIENT TEXT OF AN ABBACUS BOOK IN VULGAR ITALIAN: HØYRUP 2005.

⁶ SEE TRAVAINI 2001 AND 2003.

⁷ DETAILS IN TRAVAINI 2001.

⁸ DETAILS IN TRAVAINI 2007 AND 2001, INCLUDING COMMENTS ON DANTE’S CONVIVIO PASSAGE RELATED TO SILVER SANTALENE.

⁹ FOR THIS LETTER AND ITS INTERPRETATION SEE TRAVAINI 2001; PERASSI 2005; MAGUIRE 1997.

¹⁰ SEE FARMER 1996, ENTRIES CROSS, HELEN; FOR CONSTANTINE THE GREAT AND HIS MYTH IN THE MIDDLE AGES SEE LINDER 1975.

¹¹ DETAILS ON THE HOARD AND ITS INTERPRETATIONS ARE IN TRAVAINI 2007 AND IN THE PRESS.

¹² ‘LA MATTINA DI SAN GIOVANNI IL PAPA DONÒ UNA DI QUELLE MONETE DI SANTA HELENA PER UNO ALLI CARDINALI CHE ACCOMPAGNARONO S(UA) B(eatitudine) DA MONTECAVALLO A SAN GIOVANNI LATERANO, RITROVATE AL NUMERO DI 125 IN UNA CASSETTA DI FERRO MURATA IN QUELLE ROVINE CHE SI GETTANO A TERRA PER LA NUOVA FABBRICA. DETTE MONETE SONO D’ORO MA DI PREZZO DI 13 GIULI L’UNA SOLAMENTE.’

¹³ I WILL NOT GIVE FURTHER DETAILS OF THIS, AS I HAVE DEALT WITH THE TOPIC IN TRAVAINI 2007 AND TRAVAINI IN THE PRESS; THE LATIN TEXT OF THE BULL IS IN BULLARIUM DIPLOMATUM ET PRIVILEGIORUM SANCTORUM ROMANORUM PONTIFICUM TAURINENSIS EDITIO, VIII, TORINO 1863, 966–972, AND IS REPRODUCED IN TRAVAINI 2007 AND TRAVAINI IN THE PRESS.

¹⁴ F.M. TORRIGIO, LE SACRE GROTTA VATICANE, ROMA 16352, 246: «NELLA SOMMITÀ DI TALE RELIQUIARIO, FÙ POSTA UNA DI QUELLE MONETE D’ORO (COME SI DICE ALTROVE) TROVATE NEL LATERANO SOTTO SISTO V, QUI DONATA DA UN CARDINALE, E VI SI VEDE L’EFFIGIE DI COSTANTINO, & ELENA CON IL LABARO»: MORE DETAILS IN TRAVAINI 2007, 214.

¹⁵ TRAVAINI IN THE PRESS.

¹⁶ FOR CHRISTIANISATION IN FINLAND SEE PURHONEN 1998; FOR SCANDINAVIA IN GENERAL SEE BEREND (ED.) 2007.

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