Tunisia, before 1980

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TUNISIA

THE SBEITLA HOARD AND THE FRACTIONAL COINAGE OF NORTH AFRICA UNDER JUSTINIAN I (AD 527–65)

S. MANSFIELD

7. Tunisia, before 1980

[PLATE 41]

Dep. Not before 554 119 Æ

Private collection

Abstract: This paper describes a hoard of 119 Byzantine copper coins of the Emperor Justinian I said to have been found in or near Sbeitla. It is argued that the coins which predominate in the hoard (*MIBE* 201 and *MIBE* 189[1]) were struck by the mint of Constantine in Numidia and can be dated to a period after 552/3.[1] They may be associated with reconstruction following the suppression of the Berber revolt.[2]

The hoard and its historical background

Denomination (total in hoard)	*Cat. nos*	*MIBE no.*	*No. of coins in hoard*
Dekanummia (107)	1–107	201	107
Pentanummia (12)	108	203	1
	109	204	1
	110–18	189[1]	9
	119	Uncertain	1

Table. Summary of the hoard

The coins were acquired at Sbeitla (the Roman town of Sufetula, about 135 miles SSW of the ancient site of Carthage) in the late-1970s. They were said by the seller to have been found together at a location nearby.

The key issue concerning the coins themselves is the reading of the mint mark (CON or COR). For each coin the mint mark is noted in the catalogue where it is readable or can be reconstructed. If there is an undertype the *MIBE* number is given where possible, or noted as 'uncertain' where it cannot be identified; all other coins appear to have been struck on fresh flans. Coins marked with an asterisk are illustrated on **Plate 41**.

[1] W. Hahn, and M. Metlich, *Money of the Incipient Byzantine Empire (Anastasius I – Justinian I, 491–565)*, 2nd revised ed. (Vienna, 2013) (*MIBE*).

[2] It is proposed to publish a longer version of the commentary accompanying the description of the hoard in 2016.

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Carthage was under Vandal control from the time of their conquest of the city in 439 until the deposition of King Gelimer in 534. During this period it was often threatened by Berber tribes inhabiting the southern slopes of the Aures mountain range and this threat continued until the decisive defeat of the Berbers by the Byzantines in 548.[3] Sporadic fighting may have continued for a few more years. Once the region was pacified a programme of military reconstruction would have been needed.

The Vandal rulers of Carthage had produced an extensive coinage. Justinian replaced this with a full range of copper denominations including the dekanummia (10 nummi) and pentanummia (5 nummi) that are the subject of this paper. The new coinage may not have been produced until a few years after 534, although there was probably an issue of dekanummia before the general reform of the copper currency sanctioned by the Count of the Sacred Largesse in 539.[4] In line with the reform, the first dated coins from Carthage are dekanummia of regnal year 12 (538/9). These were struck up to regnal year 16 (542/3). The order and dating of the remainder of the fractions present difficulties, partly because two different (and unrelated) dating systems were used – indictional as well as regnal years.[5] Only one other issue is dated (by indiction). By its nature, this cannot be given to a single year with absolute certainty. A complex Carthaginian copper coinage has, thus, to be fitted into the last twenty or so years of Justinian's reign, that is from 542/3 to 565.

The majority of the copper fractions attributed to Carthage under Justinian have no mint mark but their distinctive design, allied to the evidence of finds, enables most of them to be given to the mint with some certainty. The only comprehensive guide is in *MIBE*. The arguments, while not always easy to follow, can be used to construct a notional chronology for the issues. Overstriking of coins present in the Sbeitla hoard suggests that the chronology needs to be revised. Examination of the hoard also enables us to consider the case for a reattribution of two of the issues (*MIBE* 189[1] and *MIBE* 201) recently associated with Carthage.

[3] J.B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian* (New York, 1958), p. 141.

[4] The essential components of this were: a new iconographical style, dating by regnal year, and larger and heavier coins. It is possible that a further, although much more minor, reform affected the Carthaginian copper after regnal year 30 (557/8) resulting in the application of a further heavy weight standard but the evidence is far from conclusive – see *MIBE* p. 68.

[5] Regnal years were reckoned from the date of accession to the Imperial title although in the case of Justinian this began only in year 12. Indictional dates were also used at certain mints including Carthage. The indiction was a recurring cycle of 15 years 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 one administratively, Hahn suggests that some indictional cycles were divided up into lustral periods. See Hahn, *MIBE*, pp. 8 and 67–9. For a critique of Hahn's theories, see D.M. Metcalf, *New Light on the Byzantine Coinage System*, *NCirc* 82 (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'.

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Dekanummia and pentanummia in the Sbeitla hoard

The hoard consists of four types of coin (see Table). All have a profile bust. The reverse of the dekanummia is the mark of value I between two crosses and CON or COR (*MIBE* 201) in the exergue. The pentanummia have the mark of value Є on their reverse, usually with two digits (II) to the right of the Є (*MIBE* 189[1]) though one has a B (*MIBE* 203b) (no. 108). The fourth type of coin, a pentanummium, also represented by a single specimen (no. 109), has a reverse legend that reads (or is meant to read – it is often incomplete) VICTORIAAC with CAR in the exergue (*MIBE* 204). It is generally accepted that coins bearing the VICTORIAAC legend (dekanummia – *MIBE* NN199 and *MIBE* 200; and pentanummia – *MIBE* 204) were issued to mark a decisive victory by the Byzantine general, John Troglita, over the Berbers in 548.[6] The legend, together with the symbolic figure of Nike on the reverse of the dekanummia, are celebratory in tone.[7]

Two examples of *MIBE* 189[1] in the Sbeitla hoard (nos 113 and 115) are overstruck on the Victory pentanummia (*MIBE* 204). It follows that the former, known hitherto from only a few examples, should, if the dating of the Victory coins is broadly correct, be re-dated to post-548. It is worth considering the coins in the context of Hahn's theory of the five-year subdivision of the indictions. The indictional cycle of 15 years into which 548 falls is 537–52. Since the digits II on the pentanummia can only represent an indictional year, the date of issue must fall within the succeeding cycle of 552–67, that is indictional year 553/4. After the Victory coins in 548 a new issue, conforming to the 'lustral rule', would be due five years later – that is in 553.

Perhaps the CON/COR dekanummia (*MIBE* 201) were issued at the same time. The composition of the Sbeitla hoard, made up overwhelmingly of these two coin types, suggests that they circulated together. Both are found overstruck on VICTORIAAC coins. It may be that coins of both Victory types were called in to be restruck as part of a coinage associated with post-conflict reconstruction, an idea expanded later in this paper.

The CON/COR dekanummia are puzzling coins. They are found overstruck on the dated dekanummia which were issued up to 542/3 (*MIBE* 199) and seem to be the last issue produced under Justinian in the region. They are sometimes struck on thick, heavy flans. They are common but no pentanummium counterpart has hitherto been identified.

Their attribution 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, Alfred Bellinger, asserting their north African origin on grounds of provenance and overstriking, suggests the city of Constantine in Numidia (Constantina) after 548.[8] Philip Grierson says that

[6] The major primary source for John Troglita is Flavius Cresconius Corippus, *The Iohannis or de Bellis Libycis*, trans. G.W. Shea (London, 1998). For the association of these coins with the victory of 548, see P. Grierson, *Byzantine Coins* (London, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982), p. 70 and *MIBE* p. 68.

[7] A dekanummium with a VICTORIAC legend around the denominational mark is listed in *MIBE* (NN199). Only one specimen appears to be known and it may be a contemporary forgery.

[8] A.R. Bellinger, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection*, Vol. 1 (Washington DC, 1966), p. 172. (*DOC*).

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'a migratory military mint, using workmen from Carthage but employing CON or COR as a compromise between CON and CAR – is more likely'.[9] In *MIBE* 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.[10] 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.

It will be argued here, based on the composition and characteristics of the Sbeitla hoard, that a date in the early to mid-550s is quite possible for the issue of *MIBE* 189[1] and *MIBE* 201.

A suggested reattribution of MIBE 189[1] and MIBE 201

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, therefore, to represent a rare die-cutter's mistake.[11] 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 both belong to 553/4 and later, then Grierson's assertion of a military mint is open to question. Pentanummia are only rarely associated with possible military issues. Of course, the distinction may be a slight one; a new mint may have been opened for the main 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 late Roman times it was the capital of the province of Numidia. As Numidia was certainly pacified by 553, Constantina would have been a secure location at which to base operations for the new frontier fortifications[12] and other works of reconstruction required after the end of the Berber war and, on the basis of proximity to where the works were carried out, be preferred to Carthage. The new fortifications ordered by Justinian lasted until the Arab conquest.

If the pentanummia as well as 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, though, unusual for the mint.[13] The mint of Constantina, rather than Carthage, may have supplied small change up to 565.

[9] P. Grierson, *Byzantine Coins* (London, 1982), p. 75.

[10] Hahn, *MIBE*, p. 68.

[11] Examples with COR have been noted elsewhere. One further example is marked CAR.

[12] D. Pringle, *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. BAR, 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. 148–50.

[13] No Carthaginian copper is known for the reign of Tiberius II (578–82) and relatively little seems to have been produced during the longer reign of the emperor Phocas (602–10).

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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 the Carthage mint where 90° (and less commonly 270°) tend to be the norm.

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. 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 recruited from elsewhere.

Hoards

Denys Pringle[14] gives a brief summary (location; numbers; *tpq*) of four large hoards (each containing between 102 and 1668 specimens) of Byzantine copper coins found in the province of Numidia. Examination of these hoards might reinforce or refute the arguments advanced here.[15]

Conclusions

Although not conclusive, the evidence of the hoard points towards a reattribution of *MIBE* 201 (usually marked **CON**), together with *MIBE* 189[1], back to the mint of Constantine in Numidia. The coins seem to have been first issued there in 553–4 and production may have continued until the end of the reign. Hahn's suggestion that the dekanummia may be the products of some kind of external supervision of the Carthage mint seems unlikely. The patterns of the metrology do not support his suggestion of high weights associated with bringing the coinage in line with eastern standards after 557/8. Grierson's idea that **COR** represented a compromise between **CON** and **CAR** is not convincing. The Constantina mint may have been set up as part of the reconstruction programme began around 552, or to pay newly located garrison troops, or for some similar reason.

No.	*MIBE*	*Mint mark*	*Weight (g)*	*Die axis (°)*	*Undertype (MIBE)*[16]	*Notes*
Dekanummia (107)						
1	201	**CON**	7.81	200		
2	201	**CON**	6.95		Uncertain	
3	201	**CON**	6.68	040		

[14] Pringle, *The Defence of Byzantine Africa*, p. 128.

[15] Pringle, *The Defence of Byzantine Africa*, p. 419, note 36. Pringle 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.

[16] If there is no comment the coin was struck on a fresh flan.

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No.	*MIBE*	*Mint mark*	*Weight (g)*	*Die axis (°)*	*Undertype (MIBE)*[16]	*Notes*
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		
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		

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No.	*MIBE*	*Mint mark*	*Weight (g)*	*Die axis (°)*	*Undertype (MIBE)*[16]	*Notes*
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		

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No.	*MIBE*	*Mint mark*	*Weight (g)*	*Die axis (°)*	*Undertype (MIBE)*[16]	*Notes*
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* 203b		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			(7)

Notes

(1) Part of the mint mark **CAR** is clearly visible on 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 year 13 (**X/III**) is clearly visible as part of the undertype.

(5) The mint mark appears to read **CNO**, probably 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.

(7) The coin is corroded and worn and only the denominational mark is legible.

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PLATE 41
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5

9

30

109

113

113 Enlargement

115

115 Enlargement

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