

The Coins of Theoderic the Ostrogoth

by Peter E. Lewis

Below the stone roof of Theoderic's Mausoleum at Ravenna. (Wikimedia Commons)

THEODERIC used to be called Theodoric, but the name Theodericus, the Latin form of Theoderic, appears on his coins and inscriptions. The Goths were Germanic people originally from northern Europe, and the two main branches were the Ostrogoths (East Goths) and the Visigoths (West Goths). When the Huns invaded Europe from Asia they

caused great migrations of people. The Visigoths invaded Italy and sacked Rome in 410 AD, but they eventually settled in Spain. The Ostrogoths invaded Italy in 489 and established the Ostrogothic Kingdom. (**Figure 1 – map**) Although the Romans called them barbarians the Goths were Christians, having been converted by Ulfilas in the 4th century.

The last ruler of the whole Roman Empire that stretched from Britain to Syria was Theodosius I. When he died in 395 the empire was divided between his two sons. Arcadius received the eastern half which continued to flourish as the Byzantine Empire, while Honorius received the western half which was invaded by the barbarians. The Ostrogothic invasion was led by Theoderic, the son of the Ostrogothic king, Theodemir.

Theoderic was born in 454 and when he was about seven he was taken as a hostage to Constantinople, the Byzan-

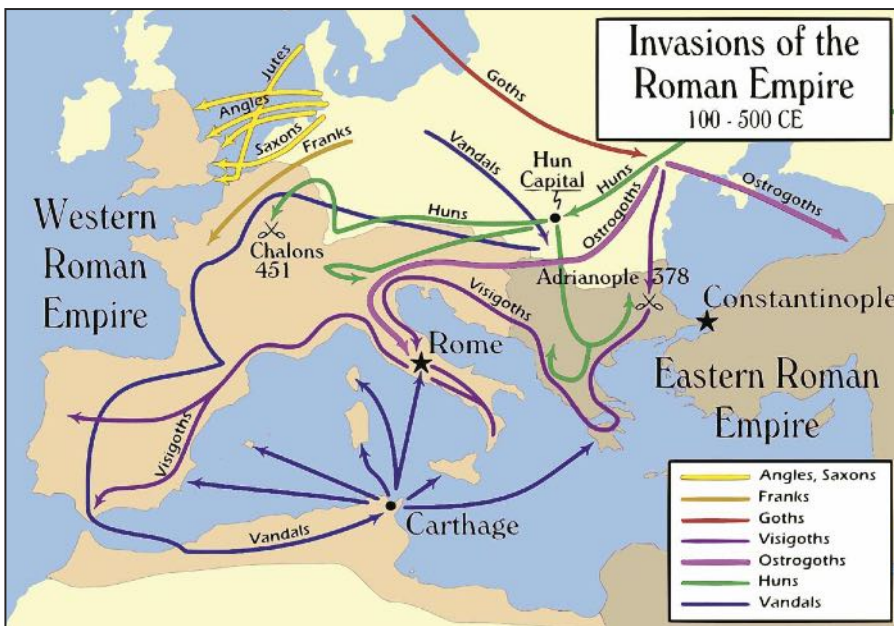


Figure 1 – Map of the barbarian invasions. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 2 – Odovacar on the obverse of a silver coin minted at Ravenna. There is a monogram of his name on the reverse. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 4 – Solidus of Theodoric in the name of Anastasius. (Bertolamic Fine Arts, Auction 67, Lot 616)

tine capital. After eleven years Theodemir died, and the Byzantine emperor Leo recognized Theodoric as king of the Ostrogoths. Theodoric then led his people to settle in the Balkans, but Leo's successor, Zeno, fearing that the Ostrogoths might cause trouble in the Byzantine Empire, ordered Theodoric to take them to Italy, overthrow its barbarian ruler, Odovacar, and govern the country in Zeno's name. After several battles Theodoric controlled all of Italy except Ravenna. In 493 Ravenna surrendered and Theodoric entered the city to talk peace with Odovacar, but when they were at dinner Theodoric suddenly killed Odovacar and his son with his sword. So in a most treacherous way began the Ostrogothic Kingdom of Italy which lasted until 552 when the last Ostrogothic king was killed. Although Theodoric ruled wisely and the country prospered, his murderous act stained his character forever.

We know what Odovacar and Theodoric looked like because there are rare coins

with fairly realistic portraits of them. (Figures 2 and 3) They both have a moustache, which suggests that it was a distinguishing feature of northern European men at the time, and they both have a peculiar hairstyle with the hair piled up at the top and like a fringe at the front. Men do not have moustaches on Byzantine coins at that time or on

the coins of the late Roman Empire.

The coins of Theodoric are dealt with in detail in the book by Philip Grierson and Mark Blackburn, *Medieval European Coinage*, Volume I: The Early Middle Ages (5th-10th centuries), published by Cambridge University Press in 1986. Much of the information in this article comes from their book. It is hoped that



Figure 5 – Solidus of Theodoric in the name of Anastasius. (Classical Numismatic Group, <https://cngcoins.org>, Auction 115, Lot 805)



Figure 3 – Theodoric on the obverse of a triple solidus or medallion minted on the 30th anniversary of his being made co-ruler with his father in 479. On the reverse Victory holds a wreath. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 6 – Solidus of Theodoric in the name of Anastasius. Theodoric's monogram is at the end of the reverse legend, and there is a monogram of Rome in the left field. (Classical Numismatic Group, Triton XIX, Lot 2198)

this brief account will stimulate interest in the coins of that fascinating period in the history of Europe.

Theoderic ruled Italy from 493 to 526 when he died of natural causes. He issued coins of gold, silver and bronze, and the chief mints were Rome, Ravenna and Milan. Although he ruled independently his gold and silver coins have the name and image of the Byzantine emperor on the obverse. The emperors are Zeno (474 – 491), Anastasius (491 – 518) and Justin I (518 – 527). The gold coins are a solidus and a tremissis (worth a third of the solidus). These gold coins have the same reverses as the Byzantine gold

coins minted at Constantinople, and at first sight it is not easy to tell the difference. In some cases the attribution to Theoderic is made only on the grounds of style and where the coins were found. According to Grierson and Blackburn, “The coinage of Ostrogothic Italy is for the most part markedly superior artistically and technically to that of Constantinople, the coins being carefully designed and struck in higher relief.” There are also clues to their Ostrogothic origin such as the obverse legends ending in PFAVG instead of PPAVG as on the Byzantine gold coins, and COMOB in the exergue instead of CONOB.



Figure 7 – Solidus of Theoderic in the name of Anastasius. Theoderic’s monogram is at the end of the reverse legend, and there is a monogram of Milan (Mediolanum) in the left field. (Numismatica Ars Classica NAC AG, Auction 93, Lot 1142).



Figure 8 – Tremissis of Theoderic in the name of Anastasius. (Sincona AG, Auction 50, Lot 1014)



Figure 9 – Tremissis of Theoderic in the name of Anastasius. (Numismatica Ars Classica NAC AG, Auction 93, Lot 1133)

(Figure 4) Sometimes there are spelling mistakes, e.g. PI instead of PF. (Figure 5) On some solidi a tiny monogram of Theoderic appears on the reverse mak-



Figure 10 – Quarter-siliqua of Theoderic in the name of Justin I. Diameter 11 mms. (Classical Numismatic Group, Auction 106, Lot 905)



Figure 11 – Half-siliqua of Theoderic in the name of Anastasius. (Numismatica Ars Classica NAC AG, Auction 93, Lot 1137)



Figure 12 – Bronze coin with Roma on the obverse and an eagle on the reverse. It was minted at Rome from 493 to 534. (Numismatica Ars Classica NAC AG, Auction 93, Lot 1115)

ing the attribution certain. (Figures 6 and 7) Theoderic's monograms are not consistent and can be difficult to decipher at times.

The tremisses of Theoderic are like the Byzantine ones but with the usual PFAVG instead of PPAVG, and COMOB instead of CONOB. (Figure 8) PFAVG stands for "Perp Felix Augustus" meaning perpetually blessed, whereas PPAVG stands for "Perp Augustus". CONOB stands for "Constantinople Obryzum" meaning refined gold of Constantinople, whereas COMOB presumably stands for "Comes Obryzum" meaning refined gold of a companion, i.e. Theoderic. On some

rare tremisses the goddess Victory on the reverse holds a wreath and a palm instead of a wreath and a small globe with a cross on it. (Figure 9) This tremissis became the model for gold coins issued by the Burgundians and other migrant people in Gaul and Spain.

It is a different situation with Theoderic's silver coins, which are easy to identify because his monogram usually appears on the reverse. (Figure 10) Even the obverses are different because although there is the name of the Byzantine emperor, the profile bust has a collar with pellets on it, which Grierson and Blackburn thought might have

been intended to indicate that it was Theoderic himself. There are two silver denominations, a half-siliqua and a quarter-siliqua, as well as some rare coins such as a double siliqua and a siliqua. A half-siliqua minted early in his reign has a star on the reverse, but Grierson and Blackburn say it is a monogram of I and X for Jesus Christ. (Figure 11) If so, it was intended to reassure the people that their new ruler was a Christian, but it probably did not ease their anxiety because they knew that the Goths were a different type of Christian. They were Arians, people who had accepted the teaching of Arius, a priest of Alexan-



Figure 13 – Bronze coin with Roma on the obverse and a she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus on the reverse. (Classical Numismatic Group, Triton XXIII, Lot 995)

dria in the 4th century. He believed that Jesus was subordinate to God the Father and not fully divine. Ulfilas, the great missionary who had converted the Goths, was an Arian, but the people of Italy were orthodox, meaning that they had accepted the decrees of the church councils held at Nicaea in 325 and Chalcedon in 451 which confirmed that Jesus was fully divine.

Although Theoderic was an Arian he protected the orthodox church, and his orthodox prime minister, Cassiodorus, stated the official policy of religious freedom: "We cannot command religion, for no one can be forced to believe against his will." The Byzantine historian, Pro-

copius, wrote, "Theoderic was exceedingly careful to observe justice . . . and attained the highest degree of wisdom and manliness. . . Both the Goths and the Romans loved him greatly."

The bronze coins issued during the reigns of Theoderic and his successor, Athalaric, were anonymous. They show no indication of who the ruler was. Grierson and Blackburn call them municipal bronze coinage of Rome. On the obverse they have the helmeted bust of the goddess Roma with the legend INVICTA (or IMVICTA) ROMA, meaning unconquerable Rome. The goddess appears as she did on the silver denarii of the Roman Republic seven hundred years earlier.

On the reverse there are symbols of ancient Rome, generally either an eagle (Figure 12) or the twins, Romulus and Remus, being suckled by a she-wolf (Figure 13). The denominations were a follis and a half-follis, showing their values XL (40) and XX (20) respectively. There was a heavy series followed by a light series, and on a half-follis in the light series there is a fig tree between two eagles on the reverse. (Figure 14) According to the Roman historian, Livy, the twins who founded Rome were suckled by the she-wolf under a fig tree.

Under Theoderic the kingdom expanded to include southern Gaul, Spain



Figure 14 – Bronze coin with Roma on the obverse and a fig-tree between eagles on the reverse. (Numismatica Ars Classica NAC AG, Auction 93, Lot 1119)



Figure 15 – Map of Theoderic's empire in 523 AD. The territories in pink are ruled by Theoderic. The stippled areas are also dominated by him at this time. (Wikimedia Commons. Author: Howard Wiseman)

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and even a large part of the Balkans around Sirmium. By 523 he ruled an empire. (Figure 15 – map) Many historians call him Theoderic the Great because of his achievements. He repaired much of the damage that invaders had done to Rome and other places in Italy. The building of the churches of Saint Apollinare and Saint Vitalis at Ravenna was begun during his reign (Figure 16). Today we can visit his mausoleum at Ravenna (Figure 17) and see the sarcophagus in which his body was laid. (Figure 18) His remains have long since disappeared, but we can hold his coins in our hands and imagine the time when the glory of Rome was briefly revived.

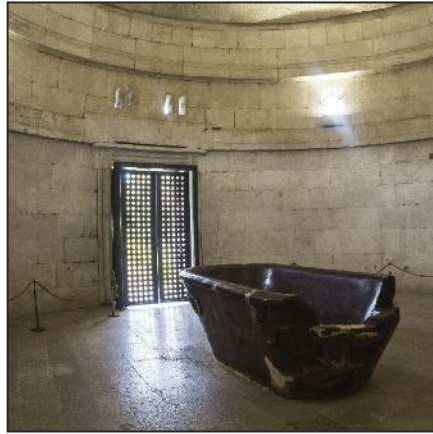


Figure 18 – Theoderic’s porphyry sarcophagus in his mausoleum at Ravenna. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 16 – Basilica of San Vitale at Ravenna. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 17 – Theoderic’s mausoleum at Ravenna. (Wikimedia Commons)

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