

The Monogram Coins of Theodosius II

by Peter E. Lewis



The Theodosian Walls of Constantinople, partly reconstructed. (Wikimedia Commons)

IN the collection of the Centre for Coins, Culture and Religious History there are some rare bronze coins of Theodosius II who became co-emperor with his father in 402 and was sole emperor of the eastern half of the Roman Empire from 408 to 450 AD. They are tiny coins but very interesting for several reasons. Towards the end of his long reign Theodosius II introduced this new type of coin with his bust on the obverse and a monogram of his name on the reverse. (**Figure 1**) Although monograms had appeared on coins before, especially on Greek coins of the fourth and third centuries BC, they did not appear as the

main type on coins during the Roman period.

On the Greek coins the names of the magistrates or officials responsible for producing the coins often appear as small monograms in the right or left fields of the reverse, and sometimes a monogram of the name of the city appears as the main type on the reverse, as on a bronze coin of Pale on the island of Kephallenia off the west coast of Greece. The Greek letters ΠΑΛ (PAL) form the monogram. (**Figure 2**) Sometimes the name of the city appears as a monogram in a wreath, as on a silver coin of Epidaurus in southern Greece. On it the Greek letters ΕΠ

(ΕΡ) are in the form of a monogram. (**Figure 3**) The wreath was the symbol of a winner, as in athletic contests and chariot races. But why has Theodosius brought back this ancient type of coinage and put his monogram on the reverse?



Figure 1 – Bronze coin (half centenionalis) of Theodosius II minted at Constantinople from 445 to 450 AD. 13 mms. 1.1 grams. Sear V 21237. (Collection of the Centre for Coins, Culture and Religious History)



Figure 2 – Bronze coin of Pale with Persephone on the obverse and a monogram on the reverse, 4th century BC. 16 mms. 3.76 grams. Sear 2941. (Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 61, Lot 234)

To answer this question we need to know something about the man himself. (Figure 4)

Theodosius II was born in 401, the son of Arcadius and the grandson of Theodosius I who was a fanatical Christian. Theodosius I closed the temples and for-

bad pagan worship throughout the empire. When Theodosius II was 9 months old he was made co-emperor with his father, becoming the youngest emperor ever. When he was 9 years old he became sole emperor on the death of his father. A regent ruled the empire until 414

when Theodosius' sister Pulcheria took control. She was only fifteen at the time but very capable and she remained in charge of the routine running of the empire even when Theodosius was an adult. He was happy for her to do this because unlike previous military emperors he was not interested in power. He was interested in matters of the mind. He founded the University of Constantinople where the subjects included philosophy, arithmetic and geometry, and he ordered that a compilation be made of all the laws created by the Christian emperors since Constantine the Great in 312. This is known as the Theodosian Code. Like Claudius in the first century and Hadrian in the second century Theodosius was an intellectual, but unlike them he was a Christian.

In volume 5 of *Roman Coins and their Values* David Sear said that Theodosius II was a man of weak character. At the time there were barbarian invasions of the empire and Theodosius' policy was to buy off the aggressors by paying huge numbers of gold coins. According to Sear, "This was hardly the traditional Roman way of confronting an enemy." David Vagi in his book *Coinage and History of the Roman Empire* disagrees with Sear: "Theodosius was kind, generous, scholarly and peaceful – indeed he possessed all the wrong qualities to lead an empire constantly under siege. He was a skilled calligrapher, and applied this



Figure 3 – Silver hemidrachm of Epidauros with Asklepios on the obverse and a monogram in a wreath on the reverse, 3rd century BC. 15 mms. 2.82 grams. Sear 2810. (LHS Numismatik AG, Auction 96, Lot 1226)



Figure 4 – Marble face of Theodosius II in the Louvre. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 5 – Bronze coin (half centenionalis) of Theodosius II probably minted at Rome from 445 to 450 AD. 11 mms. 0.61 gram. (Collection of the Centre for Coins, Culture and Religious History)

talent to his all-consuming passion of religion by patiently copying old manuscripts into the late hours of the night. He apparently did not care much for

the tedious details of running an Empire, and is said to have routinely signed official documents without inquiring into their contents. What most

historians describe as weakness in his personality, might better be described as kindness."

Note that Theodosius was a calligrapher, so we can be fairly certain that he designed the monogram on the coins himself. They were minted towards the end of his reign because mules are known with the reverse showing a monogram of Marcian who succeeded Theodosius when he died in 450 after falling off a horse. The monogram on most of Theodosius' coins is as in Figure 1, but a number of variations are known. For example, in **Figure 5** the monogram is a mirror image of that in Figure 1 and there is no legend on the obverse. Also the portrait of the emperor is crude as if made by a barbarian die-engraver. It used to be



Figure 6 – Bronze coin (half centenionalis) of Theodosius II minted at Constantinople from 445 to 450 AD. 1.95 gram. CON in the exergue. Sear V 21237. (Auktionshaus H.D. Rauch GMBH, Auction 99, Lot 395)



Figure 7 – Bronze coin (half centenionalis) of Theodosius II minted at Nicomedia from 445 to 450 AD. 12 mms. 1.57 grams. NIC in exergue. Sear V 21238. (Frank Sternberg AG, Auction 35, Lot 918.

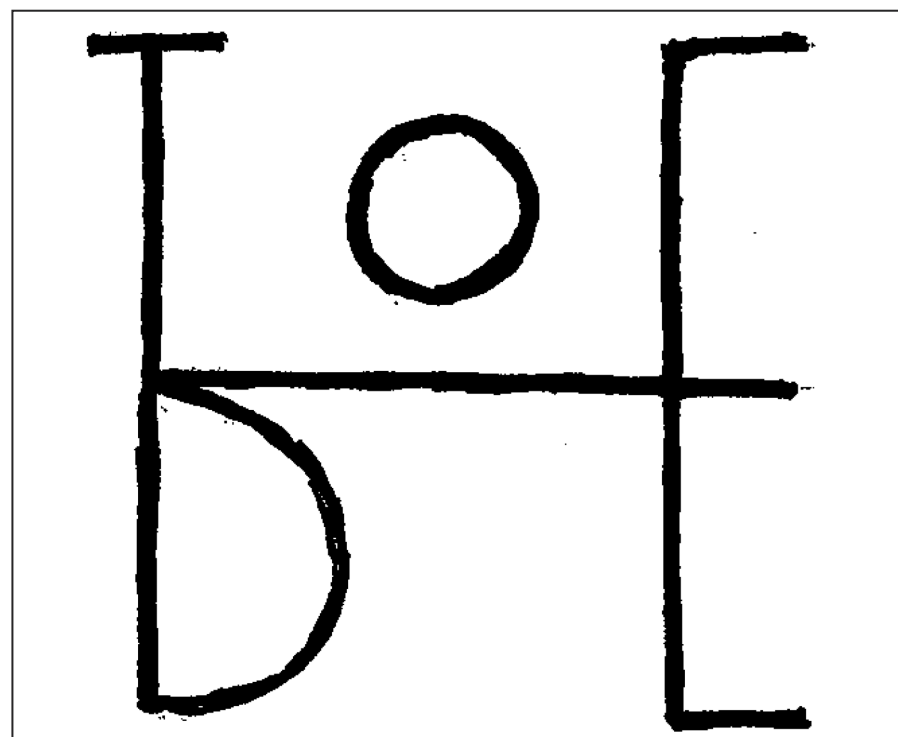


Figure 8 – Monogram of Theodosius drawn by the author with D instead of Δ. The half-circle of the D complements the full circle of the O above.



Figure 9 – Solidus of Theodosius minted at Constantinople in 425 AD. Sear V 21143. (Heritage Europe, formerly MPO Auctions, Auction 52, Lot 608)



Figure 10 – Reverse of a solidus of Theodosius II minted at Constantinople in 444 AD. Sear V 21142. There is a bust of Theodosius on the obverse. (Hahn Sale 82.595)

thought that these abnormal coins were minted by the Vandals, a barbarian tribe that invaded North Africa after crossing from Spain, but examples have been found in the Balkans, and in their book *Late Roman Bronze Coinage*, in a section entitled 'Vandalic Bronzes', R. Carson and J. Kent wrote that the most likely mint for these coins was Rome: "They are, in fact, for the large part, imperial issues of the mint of Rome and their examination has revealed many unsuspected issues and varieties." During Theodosius' reign Rome was not the city it used to be. It had been sacked by the Goths in 410 and the western emperor, Valentinian III, had made Ravenna his capital. Most of Theodosius' monogram coins were minted at Constantinople (Figure 6), or Nicomedia (Figure 7).

We are now in a position to look carefully at the monogram in Figure 1. It consists of five letters, THEOD. What is puzzling is that the first four letters are

Latin but the last is delta, the Greek letter for D. Theodosius could have made a monogram of only Latin letters as drawn in Figure 8, so why did he create this hybrid monogram?

A possible explanation is that he wanted the monogram to look like a throne. On a gold coin of Theodosius II minted in 425 he sits on a throne with delta designs in its structure while his young cousin, Valentinian III, stands at the side. (Figure 9) On a rare coin struck to mark his 18th consulship in 444 he sits again on the throne with delta designs. (Figure 10) On some of his monogram coins the O is absent, which makes the monogram look more like a throne. (Figure 11).

If Theodosius is alluding to a throne what is the meaning of the O above it? There are several possible answers, and the first to be considered is that O means zero. Perhaps at this stage in his life he was doubting the existence of God.

Despite the influence of his religious environment, especially of his excessively devout sister Pulcheria, he may have reacted against it all: there is no God!

This explanation is impossible for the simple reason that at this time there was no zero. Zero as a number was invented in India, and the earliest appearance of the number 0 occurs on an Indian monument dated 876 AD. Today our digital world of computers is based on a binary system that has only two symbols, 0 and 1. In the fifth century, although professors at the University of Constantinople taught arithmetic, they knew nothing of zero.

Was the O in Theodosius' monogram meant to be a globe representing the world? On a silver coin minted at Constantinople from 420 to 444 Theodosius stands holding a globe on the reverse. (Figure 12) Theodosius might be advocating respect for all of God's creation by putting the world on a throne, but this explanation is unlikely because ideas about conserving the planet were unknown until modern times.

If the monogram represents a throne, the O is most likely connected in some way to Theodosius' Christian faith. A circle incorporates both the beginning and the end, and could symbolize God. In the Book of Revelation at the end of the New Testament God said that he was the beginning and the end: "I am the Alpha and the Omega." (Rev. 1:8) In view of Theodosius' unusual intellectual nature it is unlikely that the monogram just means Theod. I like to think that it represents God enthroned in the heart of a Christian. In other words, it represents the Kingdom of God.

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Figure 11 – Bronze coin (half centenionalis) of Theodosius II minted at Constantinople from 445 to 450 AD. 11 mms. 1.64 grams. Sear V 21237. (Collection of the Centre for Coins, Culture and Religious History)



Figure 12 – Silver coin (light miliarensis) minted at Constantinople from 420 to 444 AD. Sear V 21172. (Leu Numismatik AG, 1991 – 2007, Auction 91, Lot 753)