

## Classification of the Aspron AR Trachy Reverse Dies of Manuel I Megas Komnenos

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### Background

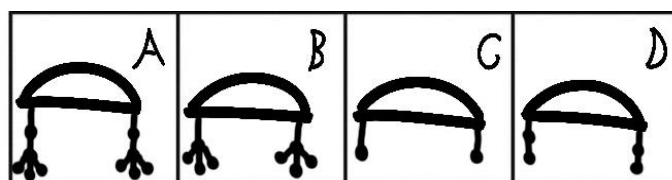
The AR aspron trachys of Manuel I Megas Komnenos present the numismatist with some difficulties. While the aspers of Manuel remain one of the most common Byzantine coin types in existence, its short-lived trachy predecessor remains known only via a handful of specimens. Once near impossible to find outside of pedigreed museum collections, a small but steady trickle of these types has been entering the market. This increase in known examples allows for a more in-depth treatment of the series as a whole. The trachys, like the asper, feature emperor Manuel on the reverse holding the labarum and akakia while the Manus Dei blesses him from above. Unlike the asper obverse which depicts St. Eugenius, the trachy obverse depicts the Theotokos seated on a backed throne with the infant Christ in her lap.

Of note is that Trebizond transitioned from the (scyphate) aspron trachy to the (flat) asper during the reign of Manuel I Megas Komnenos, who ruled 1238-1263. The restored Byzantine empire transitioned from the (scyphate) aspron trachy to the (flat) basilikon under the joint reign of Andronikos II and Michael IX, co-ruled 1294-1320. That both empires would transition from traditionally “Byzantine” flan shapes to traditionally “Western” flan shapes in a similar time frame is noteworthy. It would seem that increasing western influence changed what coin denominations were palatable to facilitate commercial exchange earlier in Trebizond than in restored Byzantium.

Academic literature is generally scarce for the empire of Trebizond. Perhaps the only three published works on or significantly related to the coinage of Trebizond are *Die Münzen der Komnenen von Trapezunt* by Otto Retowski, *An Introduction to the Coinage of the Empire of Trebizond* by Simon Bendall, and *Catalogue of the Coins of the Vandals, Ostrogoths, Lombards and of the Empires of Thessalonica, Nicaea, and Trebizond in the British Museum* by Warwick Wroth. Wroth’s work is rather outdated and generally least comprehensive. However, due to the scarcity of the aspron AR trachys of Manuel I Megas Komnenos, it is still a useful publication exhibiting known examples. Retowski’s work is the most comprehensive as pertaining to the aspron AR trachys of Manuel. He has listed 10 examples known to him. Bendall mostly summarizes the findings of Retowski and Wroth with regard to the aspron AR trachys of Manuel. Bendall distinguishes between curved and flat loroses on the emperor and notes pellet variations on the obverse. The purpose of this paper is to for the first time systematically examine and classify the AR aspron trachys of Manuel I Komnenos. In particular, this study will focus on the development of the pendilia, Manus Dei, and akakia on the reverse dies of these trachy issues and suggest a chronology based on findings. 19 examples of the AR aspron trachy of Manuel I Komnenos are known to the author, 18 of which photographs were able to be reproduced in this study.

### Pendilia Variants

The pendilia are seen in four variants on the trachys of Manuel I. Variant A has the pendilia with 5 total jewels, B with 4, C with 1, and D with 2. Variant A depicts the pendilia in a complex two-tiered system at the bottom of which extends a trilobate jewel structure. In variant B, the two-tiered structure is dropped but the trilobate structure is kept, dropping the number of jewels to 4. With variant C, the pendilia are reduced to only one jewel. Variant D depicts a two-tiered system with two jewels total. The number of hanging jewels depicted generally corresponds to the fineness of style. As the pendilia classification progresses, not only the jewels but the wider style of the dies see a general decline in detail with fewer and simpler structures represented.

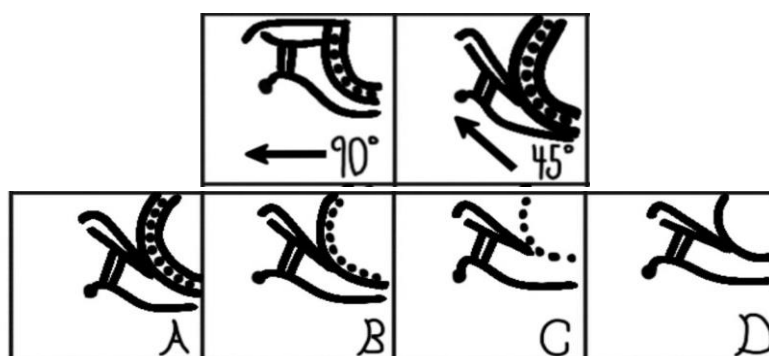


Retowski doesn't classify the pendilia of the emperor beyond a generic class encompassing the above types A and B, concluding that from the emperor "dem an jeder Seite ein Band herabhängt, das am Ende mit 3, ein Dreiech bildenden Perlen geziert ist". Neither Wroth nor Bendall classifies pendilia.

### Manus Dei Variants

Manus Dei variants can be broken into two categories, those varieties which relate to the angle of the hand itself and those varieties which relate to how detailed the cloud from which the hand extends is. The Manus Dei extends either perpendicular to the emperor or at an upwards angle of 45 degrees. The perpendicular Manus Dei corresponds to Pendilia variants A and B. The 45-degree angled Manus Dei corresponds to pendilia variants B, C, and D.

The Manus Dei is also classified by the changing design of the cloud from which the hand extends. This can be broken into four broad categories. Cloud variant A sees a dotted outline with two lined borders on either side. Variant B sees a dotted outline with a single lined border to the side. As the design becomes further simplified, variant C consists only of the dotted outline. Variant D is a crude rendition of variant C which no longer has any dots but is a single line. The hand of God itself becomes cruder throughout this process, initially expanding the size of the palm before the entire hand retracts in size. Cloud variant A corresponds to pendilia variants A and B. Cloud variant B corresponds to pendilia variant B. Cloud variant C corresponds to pendilia variants B, C, and D. Cloud variant D corresponds to pendilia variant D. Retowski, Wroth, and Bendall do not classify the Manus Dei or cloud.



### Akakia Variants

Alongside the evolution of the pendilia and Manus Dei, the akakia sees a marked change throughout the series. The akakia shortens considerably between groups A1 to C2 (see graph below). Starting out elongated and thin, the akakia becomes squat. Retowski, Wroth, and Bendall do not classify the akakia.

### Sigla Variants

The series does not display many sigla, especially in comparison to the later aspers. Sigla found to the left of the emperor are usually in between the labarum and torso. To the right of the emperor, sigla are found either above or below the outstretched arm which holds the akakia. Sigla used include a 6-sided star, a cluster of 3 dots, and a single dot. The most often used sigla is the dot

with a majority of issues featuring one or more in the aforementioned areas on the reverse. Sigla use did not correspond in a meaningful way to the development of the pendilia, Manus Dei, and akakia. Sigla are noted by Wroth, Retowski, and Bendall.

### Suggested Chronology

Despite the limited number of examples surviving<sup>1</sup>, the evolution of the pendilia, akakia, and Manus Dei can be established thanks to the asper issues whose minting immediately follows the trachy. Looking into the asper first, those elements which are only present on the asper can be assumed to be issues minted significantly later than the trachy. Those elements which are present both on the aspers and the trachys can be assumed to be minted in close chronological order. Those elements which are only present on the trachy can be assumed to be minted significantly earlier than the asper.

By working backwards from what elements the trachy and aspers share, we can determine the point the AR trachy series began. The timeline is reconstructed backwards from this point and variants are put in order of development. Not surprisingly, those trachys with the finest style and most details are furthest chronologically from the asper. Variants in this paper have generally been listed in order from most detailed to least detailed and it so happens that this is the likely order in which they were minted. Trebizond, like the restored empire, underwent extreme stylization in the mid to late 13th century.

Group	Subgroup	Pendilia	Manus Dei Angle	Cloud	Akakia
A	1	A	90	A	Long
A	2	B	90	A	Long
B	1	B	45	A	Medium
B	2	B	45	B	Medium
B	3	B	45	C	Short
C	1	C	45	C	Short
C	2	D	45	D	Short

Key in establishing the chronology at the Trebizond mint for the aspron trachys of Manuel I are the emperor's pendilia, akakia, and the Manus Dei. Starting with the trachys most like the asper, group C is composed of the trachys minted before and during the transitional period into the asper. In group C, pendilia variants C and D are found whereas A and B are not. This is like the asper, where no trilobate structures exist<sup>2</sup> and the pendilia are generally simplified and crude. Both the asper and group C trachys also share the same angle of the Manus Dei at 45 degrees upwards. Both the asper and group C trachys also share the same cloud variants C and D. Both share the short Akakia. Because both coins share the same pendilia variants, the same Manus Dei angle, the same cloud

<sup>1</sup> Which might be explained by the recycling of aspron trachys at the trebizond mint in favor of the asper, much like what occurred in the restored empire with trachys in favor of the basilikon. Grierson (1999), 112.

<sup>2</sup> "Saint Eugenius of Trebizond" legend variants, most likely issues from a mint other than Trebizond and thusly outside of the scope of this paper. See Bendall 14, 40-41 for further information on the Tripolis secondary mint attribution.

variants, and the same akakia length, it is safe to assume that the two were minted in close succession by the mint of Trebizond. There are too many similarities here and differences in other groups (explained below) for this not to be the case.

Verging from the asper and group C, group B of the trachys share some similarities yet begin to differ. Pendilia variants C and D are not found in this group. Rather, the trilobate and more detailed structure of variant B is present. From one or two jewel variants, the pendilia have 4 jewels. The Manus Dei is similar to the asper and group C in that it is angled at a 45-degree angle upwards. The Manus Dei differs in group B in that the cloud variants present are much more detailed (A, B, and C). The akakia present is both short and medium. Sharing some similarities with the asper and group C, group B shows more detail in all variants. The pendilia has a more complex trilobate structure and more detailed clouds, indicating a small yet noteworthy divergence from the asper. Group B has some similarities to group C and the asper but is different enough to be separately classified.

Group A of the aspron trachys of Manuel I Megas Komnenos is grouped and classified based on their finer style. More attention is given to the engraving of this group than any other. Group A features pendilia variants A and B, the two most complex pendilia groups. Likewise, the perpendicular Manus Dei seen with group A is not found in group B, group C, or aspers of Manuel (all of which have the 45-degree variant). The cloud variant present (A) is the most detailed, seen in some of group B and none of group C or the aspers. The long akakia is present, again reflecting some connection to group B and none to group C or the asper. We can conclude from this that the perpendicular Manus Dei predates the period of transition from trachy to asper. The long akakia is only found with pendilia variant A and the perpendicular Manus Dei. The aspers of Manuel feature the short akakia, seen on trachys with the 45-degree angled Manus Dei and pendilia variants C and D. Group A shares some similarities in terms of varieties with group B and none with C and D. Group B shares some variety similarities with group A and separate similarities with group C and the asper.

By working backwards from the asper, we are able to trace the stylistic developments of late Byzantine Trebizond in reverse. The initial production of Manuel's trachys saw a level of detail and attention not given to later coins. The pendilia and Manus Dei in particular featured more complex and elegant structures. As the series progresses from group A to B, the pendilia while still of a trilobate structure begin to simplify. The Manus Dei changes from perpendicular to an upwards angle. The akakia begins to shrink. As the series enters its third and final phase, group C coins have almost totally simplified pendilia with one or two jewels. The angled Manus Dei becomes cruder and loses detail. The akakia becomes noticeably shorter than those of group A. The stylistic variations of group C match those of the asper, the coin issue which immediately succeeds the AR trachy.

## **Conclusion**

The few surviving trachys limit the ability to perform a standalone die study. With the connection to the immediately succeeding asper, however, such a study is possible by working backwards and examining changes in style as I have done. I hope this effort has shed light on the development of the pendilia, akakia, and Manus Dei in the final AR trachy emissions of late Byzantine Trebizond. I look forward to the possible discovery of more examples and expanding this study accordingly.

## **O1 / O2 Die Match**

Roma Numismatics E-Sale 91, lot 1294 / Plated in Wroth (1911), XXXII.7  
Class A2



### **O16 / O17 Die Match**

Roma Numismatics Sale XXV, lot 1206 / Plated in Retowski (1910), 193.6  
Class C2



*(See the Barber Institute of Fine Arts example BIRBI-ET0011 for another possible die match)*

### **Examples Known to the Author**



### Photograph Origins:

*Roma Numismatics LTD*: 1, 3, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18

*Wroth (1911)*: 2, 5, 6, 7, 10

*Retowski (1910)*: 4, 16

*Uppsala University Coin Cabinet*: 8

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