

**The Gold Medal of Theodoric the Great,  
King of the Ostrogoths (AD 493-526)** by E. Tomlinson Fort



The fifth century saw the collapse of the western Roman Empire and the rise of a number of so called successor states under various Germanic speaking tribes including the Vandals (North Africa), the Franks (Gaul), the Suevi (the area of much of modern Portugal), the Visigoths (the rest of the Iberian peninsula and south western Gaul) and the Anglo-Saxons (Britain south of the Firths). One of the most interesting of these new Germanic kingdoms was that of the Ostrogoths which occupied all of the Italian peninsula and parts of the western Balkans as well.

The first and greatest of the Ostrogothic kings was Theodoric. He ruled first the Amal Goths and later a coalition of other Gothic tribes and various other groups which came to be called the Ostrogoths (for Eastern Goths). He also would seize power in Italy and by 511 control, or have dominant influence over, two thirds of the old Western Roman Empire.

Born in 454 in what is now western Austria, Theodoric was the son the Amal king Theodemir and a 'concubine' Ereleuva. In view of the fact that many early Germanic rulers practiced various types of polygamy she may have been considered a wife among the Amals. In compliance with a treaty between them and the Eastern emperor Leo I (457-474), Theodoric was sent to Constantinople as a hostage at the age of ten in 464. For the next ten years he lived in and around the eastern capital. There he would have received a traditional Roman education including the ability to speak, read and write in Greek and Latin. In 581 King Theodemir died and Theodoric eventually succeeded to the throne through a mixture of political abilities, military skill and total ruthlessness that eliminated all rivals. He also gained some imperial favour since he was made a Master of the Soldiers (*magister militum*) in 483 and he achieved the consulship in 484. However, these eastern honours seem to have done little to create any loyalty towards the eastern empire. Using the same methods that had lead him to the throne, over the next few years Theodoric built a coalition with other tribes and created a significant military force north of the Balkans that became known as the Ostrogoths. He then used this force as a means to extract payment from Constantinople to prevent him raiding into their territories.

At the time, the Ostrogoths were settled in Byzantine territory as *foederati* ('allies') of the Romans, but were becoming restless and increasingly difficult for Emperor Zeno to manage. Not long after Theodoric became king, the two men worked out an arrangement beneficial to both sides. The Ostrogoths needed a place to live, and Zeno needed help dealing with the troublesome Odovacar, the king of Italy, who had come to power in 476. Ostensibly a viceroy for Zeno, Odovacar was menacing Byzantine territory and not respecting the rights of Roman citizens in the Italian peninsula. Seeing an opportunity in pitting two Germanic speaking rulers against one another, Zeno encouraged Theodoric to look for better opportunities towards the west. This also benefitted Theodoric since occupying the north Balkans and the Hungarian plain made the Ostrogoths an obvious target for both Zeno and Odovacar should their military interests shift. Therefore, the Ostrogoths invaded Odovacar's kingdom in 488.

Once Theodoric entered the Italian peninsula, he won a series of battles between 488 and 492-493 and took the former western imperial capital of Ravenna. On 2 February of 493, Theodoric and Odovacar signed a treaty that assured both parties would rule as equals over Italy. Later a banquet was organised in order to celebrate the agreement. It was at this celebration that Theodoric personally killed Odovacar by nearly cutting him in two with a sword. Thus, he secured all of Italy, the parts northern Balkans and regions on the Hungarian plain for himself.



According to the official line in Constantinople, Theodoric was only a viceroy for the emperor; but in reality, he held all the power of an absolute ruler. He was able to avoid any imperial supervision for the simple reason that the eastern emperors were unable to enforce anything upon him or his kingdom. The legal fiction of Theodoric's dependence can be seen through the fact that he never claimed the imperial titles of either 'Caesar' or 'Augustus'. On all surviving official documents, including the medallion under discussion, he is simply styled as king (*rex*). It is not even said over whom he is king. If he tried to claim kingship over the Romans or Italy, he would have offended the Romans who lived in the peninsula, and who made up the majority of the population. If he only claimed the kingship of the Goths, this would limit his efforts to win broader support. Therefore, like the emperor Augustus, he kept his official legal position deliberately vague. Though in fact, there was no question about his authority over Italy.

Nevertheless, the king wanted to achieve unity on the Italian peninsula and thus made major efforts to gain the support of the people. Unlike Odovacar, Theodoric allowed Roman citizens within his kingdom to be subject to Roman law and the Roman judicial system. The Goths, meanwhile, lived under their own laws and customs. While on paper this was an excellent compromise, but in practice, as Moorhead has pointed out, the situation was far more complex and often Romans lost out in legal situations where they came into conflict with Ostrogoths. Thus, it would seem that Ostrogoths were often a little 'more equal' than the Roman citizens who made up the majority of the population of Italy.

Similarly he adopted, what was essentially, a policy of freedom of religion. Most of the Germanic peoples who settled in the former western Roman Empire are referred to by contemporary sources as Arian Christians. What this actually said about their belief system(s) is far from certain. What we do know is that they rejected the doctrines of the council of Nicaea (325) regarding the nature of Christ. This set them apart from Catholic Christians, who saw them as heretics, since they had adopted the Nicene Creed. Unlike the Vandals, who had occupied North Africa the Ostrogoths made no attempt to impose their religion by force and/or persecution. Theodoric seems to have made no move against Catholics and likewise little effort to prevent Goths from converting to Catholicism or Romans from becoming 'Arians.' In fact, during the Laurentine Schism between Rome and Constantinople (498-506) Theodoric played an important diplomatic role in reconciling the papacy and the eastern empire.

Theodoric's tolerance also extended to Jews. In 519, when a mob had burned down the synagogues of Ravenna, Theodoric ordered the town to rebuild them at its own expense. Equally impressive, he appointed at least one Jew, Symmachus (described in the sources as a '*scholasticus*') to his administration to issue orders on the king's behalf. At the time, Roman law specifically excluded Jews from such positions but Theodoric would seem to have cared more about his officials loyalty and administrative ability than their religious preferences.

In his foreign policy Theodoric sought peace with the eastern empire. This does not seem to have been done to any desire for alliance. Rather it was more likely because he knew that the eastern empire was too rich and powerful for him to ever hope of subjugating. In his youth he had seen the massive walls of Constantinople that would remain an impenetrable barrier for centuries to come. Likewise, its economy was far stronger than that of the former western empire. This in turn meant that the eastern empire could produce far more troops than Theodoric at the height of his power. In fact the main reason why the empire had not made military moves against the west was that its troops were stationed along its frontiers with the Persian Empire. To have sent the bulk of the eastern forces west would have left much of the eastern frontier undermanned.

However, an Ostrogothic invasion to the east would necessitate the taking of Constantinople to cross into Asia. A task that no army at this time was able to do. Similarly the Ostrogoths did not have the ability to create, a navy large enough to bypass the Hellespont and invade Asia Minor by sea. A land invasion around the Black Sea would be theoretically possible but it would involve lengthy supply lines and possibly antagonizing the tribes living around it. Moreover, it would bring the Ostrogothic army very close to the Persian western border and thus antagonize two major military powers instead of one. For these reasons, Theodoric attempted to keep his relations with Constantinople as cordial as possible. If the Byzantines were not a problem he could devote his attention and military resources to other fields.

Regarding the Visigothic kingdom which occupied much of the Iberian peninsula as well as what is now the Provençal region of modern France (the area along the Mediterranean coast) Theodoric was even more successful.

In 507, the Visigothic king Alaric II (484-507) was killed in battle against Clovis I, king of the Franks (481-511). Alaric was succeeded by Gesalec, an illegitimate son, who initially had Theodoric's support. However, Gesalec proved to be an incompetent ruler and that was overthrown by his own subjects back by Theodoric. Officially the kingship passed to Alaric II's infant grandson Amalric (511-531). However, real power passed to Theodoric, who was named as his guardian. The Ostrogothic king had the Visigothic treasury moved from Seville to Ravenna and ruled the kingdom by his own authority. However, it remains a major question as to how much authority Theodoric was actually able to exert in the Visigothic kingdom. He certainly never traveled there and the sources give us little information about his handling of the Visigothic royal administration.

The only area of the west that Theodoric could not place under his influence was the kingdom of the Franks — most of modern France, Belgium and parts of western Germany. This region had been under the rule of Clovis I. Attempts were made to establish friendly, or at least correct relations, between the two kings. Sometime around 493 the Gothic king married Audofled, Clovis's sister. She would give Theodoric a daughter Amalasantha so biologically, at least, the marriage had some success. However, diplomatically in the long run it did little. Clovis would go on to become a major thorn in Theodoric's side. However, neither king had the resources or manpower to either conquer and/or politically dominate the other. Consequently raids across the loosely defined borders occurred throughout their reigns. In 511 Clovis died and following Frankish practice his kingdom was divided among his three sons, who along with their descendants, spent much of the rest of their lives in conflict with one another in largely failed attempts to reconstitute Clovis's entire kingdom. See the works of the Frankish historian Gregory of Tours (d. 594) for the bloody details. These dynastic struggles brought Frankish interference with the territories controlled by Theodoric to a more manageable level.

Theodoric's coinage might seem odd to those unfamiliar with the political and monetary situation that existed in the Mediterranean region during his reign. It essentially followed the pattern of that of the late Roman coinage and what his predecessor, Odovacar, had produced. The monetary system in Italy was a trimetallic one. Coins were struck in three metals — gold, silver and bronze.

The gold came in three denominations: the solidus (valued at 12,000 nummi), the largest denomination; the semissis or one half a solidus (valued at 6,000 nummi) and the tremissis, being worth one third of a solidus (4,000 nummi). The silver coins were produced in two denominations the half siliqua (250 nummi) and the quarter siliqua (125 nummi). The copper coinages were more complex with denominations of 40, 20, 10 and 5 nummi.

The chief mints were Rome and Ravenna. The latter distinguished by the occasional use of the mintmark RV that sometimes occurs on the reverse field. Milan (signified by the mint mark MD) seems to have been a small mint during Theodoric's reign but it would rise in prominence after his death in 526. The copper coinages seem to have only been struck at Rome where the traditional SC (for *Senatus Consulto*, 'by the authority of the senate') appears on the reverses of the 40 and 20 nummi pieces. Probably it was an indication that the Roman senate had some control, or at least share in the profits, over the copper series. Sadly, a large number of coins from Theodoric's reign do not have mintmarks. In view of Rome's activity for the copper series it is almost certain that a lot of the coinage can be assigned there. Since Rome had been a centre of coin production for centuries it was probably felt that there was no need to mark the coins struck there. But coins without mintmarks have also been assigned to Ravenna and Milan. Such ambiguity has meant that scholars have had to depend upon find spots, stylistic comparisons and die links for many arguments. Despite this far from perfect system over the decades the vast majority of coins produced under Theodoric's rule have been assigned to what seem to be their proper mint. However, numerous questions still remain and work on the series continues to this day.

All the coins carry the names of the eastern emperors Anastasius I (491-518) or Justin I (518-527). The reason for this seems to be political, economic and tradition. To have struck coins in the name of a Germanic king would both anger the eastern emperor and might cause people to question their trust of the coins being issued. The coins of the Germanic rulers were at this time always struck to the imperial standard, at least in theory. Though in the case of Theodoric, as Grierson and Blackburn have noted, the Italian coinage is struck to a higher technical standard than that produced at Constantinople. Some Germanic kings might distinguish their issues by using a small monogram on the reverse. This is certainly the case with some coins struck under Theodoric that carry the Greek letter 'theta' (Θ) at the end of the legend or in the field on the reverse.

Politically, the authority to coin in gold was seen as an imperial prerogative. If the kings of the Vandals,

Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Franks, and other Germanic peoples had struck coinage this would have been an obvious challenge to imperial authority. Officially many Germanic rulers, including Theodoric, were officials of the empire. Had Theodoric struck coinage in his own name he would have been openly challenging Anastasius or Justin I. As has been discussed above it was in his political interest to maintain proper relations with Constantinople.

However, one must remember that while the coinage of Italy bore the name of the eastern emperor, all of the profits of mints — the seigniorage — went to the treasury in Ravenna and not Constantinople. Soothing the imperial ego while adding to the funds that went into the royal coffers was probably not a bad policy as far as the Ostrogothic king was concerned.

While all of Theodoric's coinage bears the name of the eastern ruler there is one unique exception: A large gold medallion that carries the king's name and stylized portrait. The piece was found in Sinigallia, Italy, in 1894, and it is now in the Museo Nazionale (Rome). The obverse of this piece reads REX THEODORICVS PIVS PRINCIPIS ['King Theodoric, the Pius Prince'] around a bare headed facing bust of Theodoric holding Victory on a globe in his left hand while his right hand is in a gesture of address. Not that the king does not wear the imperial diadem. Thus, the image of Theodoric does not present a direct challenge to the authority of the emperor in Constantinople.

The reverse consists of the inscription REX THEODORICVS VICTOR GENTIVM ['King Theodoric, the conqueror of peoples'] with COMOB [the abbreviation for *Comitatus obryzum*, a reference to the piece being struck at the location where the king was located] in the exergue around Victory advancing right shouldering a palm and holding up a wreath. The medal was mounted as a brooch in antiquity and its original weight cannot be determined.

The mint is likely either Rome or Ravenna. The clasp, which has been mounted on the reverse, has covered any mintmark, assuming that there was one. The COMB is an indication of the king was in residence when the piece was struck. However, since no mintmark is visible, we cannot know the location.

Equally, there has been much discussion since it was discovered as a single find in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The traditional view is that it was produced as part of the king's tricennalia, which celebrated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Theodoric's accession as king of the Amal Goths in 500. That event was marked by a major celebration in Rome. If the medal was intended as a part of this celebration then it would seem likely that it was struck in the eternal city.

In 1985, Grierson argued against this and instead suggested a date of 508/9. He and Tomasini had maintained earlier that it was part of a series of silver and gold coins (all in the name of Anastasius I). The coins from this series are extremely rare, the common element being the style of the reverse. Since this same reverse also appears on the medal, the coins and medal are likely to have been struck at roughly the same time. Their overall rarity suggests that this period was short, probably not more than a year. This in turn could mean that they intended to celebrate some type of Ostrogothic military and/or political achievement. Grierson therefore proposed that they were intended to celebrate the Ostrogothic victory in placing Gesalic on the Visigothic throne.

A final possible date for the medal was proposed by Tomasini and Grierson (though he had rejected in by 1985), and more recently supported by Heather, is that this brief series was struck in 511. This year marked Theodoric's take over of the Visigothic kingdom. Equally important, the king celebrated both the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his succession and the two thousandth anniversary of the formation of the Goths. The later was a pure invention, but it was intended to demonstrate that the Gothic race pre-dated Rome. The traditional date for the foundation of the city is 753 BC. If Theodoric's propaganda was to be believed, the Goths had been formed in 1489 BC. It could thus be argued that their 'history' was more distinguished than that of Rome.

### **Further Reading:**

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