

REPORT OF A VISIGOTHIC TREMISSIS  
FOUND NEAR IDANHA-A-VELHA

John Stewart Huffstot

A gold coin of the Visigothic period, the property of a lady living in Lisbon, has come to the attention of the author. The coin is a tremissis, struck in Toledo under the joint reign of Chindasvinth and Reccesvinth (A.D. 649-653) (see Figure 1, photographs on Plate I, and detailed description, below).



Fig. 1 — Drawing by the author of the Penha Garcia tremissis (3 ×).

According to the present owner, the coin was found by her great great grandfather ca. 1820-30, while working the fields on the family's farm, in the vicinity of Penha Garcia, in the Beira Baixa region of Portugal. It is unfortunate that this farm is no longer owned by the family, and in fact, the exact location cannot be established by the surviving family members beyond the admittedly vague description of «near Penha Garcia». There is also a risk that with the

passage of so many years (more than a century and a half) since the coin was found, inaccuracies may have accrued concerning the circumstances of the find. There are some factors, however, which serve to mitigate the doubts which naturally arise regarding the coin's provenance:

- The family is certain about the existence of its properties in that region and at that time.
- The family's tradition asserts that the coin was found by their ancestor while he was working on the family land, and not that he had acquired it in any other way.
- The coin has remained in the family's continuous possession through the years and the story of its origins has been passed down from one generation to the next in fairly simple terms.
- There is no evidence that any member of the family, in any generation, has been an active coin collector.

It may be, therefore, that there is no compelling reason to reject the oral tradition even at this late date. It is the author's opinion that the family's belief pertaining to the coin's find spot is certainly genuine and probably correct, as far as it goes. The reliability of the coin's alleged provenance is thus something less than 100 %, but still high enough, the author judges, that the information merits consideration.

While admitting to the above qualifications, what can now be said of the probable discovery location is not without interest. It places the spot where the coin would have been lost in antiquity (and found in the nineteenth century) within the local sphere of modern Idanha-a-Velha (ancient Egitania). The village of Penha Garcia is approximately 11 or 12 km. East and slightly to the North of Idanha-a-Velha and about 9 km. West of the Spanish border. The coin was apparently lost, then, somewhere to the East of Egitania, anywhere from several to a maximum of about 20 km. (considering the proximity to Spain). Egitania is known to have been a center of activity in the Visigothic Kingdom and this specimen, which was struck in Toledo, adds further testimony to the already-recognized long distance circulation of the Visigothic coinage <sup>(1)</sup>.

---

<sup>(1)</sup> See, for example, D. M. Metcalf, «Some Geographical Aspects of Early Medieval Monetary Circulation in the Iberian Peninsula», in *Problems of Medieval Coinage in the Iberian Area — 2*, edited by Mário G. Marques and M. Crusafont i Sabater, Aviles, 1986, pp. 307-324.

The probability that the coin was lost some number of kilometers from the nearest major urban center is significant, and lends support to the suggestion made by D. M. Metcalf <sup>(2)</sup> that contrary to the long-held belief that these gold coins existed only for non-commercial reasons and despite the high unit value which they must have had (representing considerable purchasing power), they did nevertheless have a role in commerce, even in transactions which were carried out in the countryside. The uncertainty surrounding the find spot cannot be ignored, but even allowing a large margin of error in terms of distance from the village of Penha Garcia, the location of loss (and subsequent modern-day recovery) must remain fairly well removed from urban Egitania — some distance, it can be supposed, into what were the surrounding rural environs. It would be better, of course, to know the precise distance and location, but it is enough to determine only that the coin was lost outside of the city to make us wonder about the purpose for which it was evidently taken out into the Visigothic countryside.

The rendering of the bust in life-like relief (unlike the stylized and often abstract linear fashion which is more common in the Visigothic series) places this bust into the category of Miles' Type 2h <sup>(3)</sup>. Miles' drawings in the key to his bust types are, as he points out, only to be taken as rough guides, and little resemblance actually exists between the bust features on the coin and the figure in the key. There is a greater resemblance, however, to coin # 346(a) in his corpus (also described as «Type 2h» and illustrated by photograph on Plate XXV, as # 16), although a number of differences remain <sup>(4)</sup>. Our «Penha Garcia» specimen has facial features which are perhaps more «robust», including a bulbous lip, the suggestion of a beard (?), puffy cheek, large eye and most notably, a very prominent nose with a well-defined nostril. The nose is further characterized by a curious globular element at the tip. This element appears to be deliberate work on the part of the die engraver, although blundering or damage to the die should not be ruled out. Under some lighting conditions this globular element could even be interpreted as the lateral nostril bulge on the far (left)

---

<sup>(2)</sup> D. M. Metcalf, «For What Purposes Were Suevic and Visigothic Tremisses Used? The Contribution of Topographical Analysis, Illustrated by Some Comments on Single Finds from the Alentejo, and on the Mint of Elvora», in *Problems of Medieval Coinage in the Iberian Area* — 3, edited by Mário G. Marques and D. M. Metcalf, Santarém, 1988, pp. 15-35.

<sup>(3)</sup> G. C. Miles, *The Coinage of the Visigoths of Spain, Leovigild to Achila II*, The American Numismatic Society, New York, 1952, pp. 54-65.

<sup>(4)</sup> Miles attributes the coin which he illustrates to «Reinhart, pl. 12, no. 16 (Shore)». The author has been unable to verify that illustration, but believes the coin to be the same specimen which Reinhart illustrates in «Os Elmos Germânicos no Figurado das Moedas Visigodas», see note 5, below.

side of the nose, as if viewed obliquely from the front and right (see detail photograph, Plate I). If we are to accept this notion, we must also entertain the rather fanciful possibility that the die engraver was intentionally employing mixed perspective in his work, i.e. head in strict profile with a 3/4 frontal view of the nose. Though probably unlikely, the fact remains that under at least some viewing conditions, the «oblique angle» of the nose is fairly convincing, visually speaking, even if unintentional.

It may be that the die engraver was attempting to represent a nose guard on the helmet, extending down in front of the face. This is not likely, however, as no such feature seems to be identifiable on the coins of any other Visigothic ruler, in either profile or facing busts, where it might be more obvious. The notion of a nose guard is further discouraged by the fact that, according to the analysis undertaken by Wilhelm Reinhart<sup>(5)</sup>, the Germanic arched helmet which is evidently represented on the coins of Chindasvinth and Reccesvinth lacked this feature altogether.

In his 1872 work, Aloiss Heiss illustrates a drawing of a specimen of similar type — coin # 5 (of Toletum), described on page 122 and appearing on Plate VIII<sup>(6)</sup>. The bust on Heiss' specimen, too, appears to be more «gracile» than the bust on the Penha Garcia coin, having thinner cheek, a smaller nose which lacks the nostril, no ear and four (rather than three) «tassels» which seem to come from the back of the head instead of from the robe, the die engraver perhaps confusing those elements of the drapery with the infulas which are often depicted and which seem to be in evidence here, as well.

A third illustrated specimen of a coin with the «2h» bust type can be found in the catalogue of the National Archaeological Museum in Madrid, by Felipe Mateu Y Llopis<sup>(7)</sup>. Coin # 137 (the only specimen of this type in the Museum's collection, described on pages 295-6, and illustrated on Plate XIV) seems to be much the same as the specimen illustrated by Miles and Reinhart, although judging from the photographs, the coins themselves are different.

The Penha Garcia specimen is a well-preserved example of an issue which is not altogether common. Of the 513 tremisses struck in Toledo which are

(5) W. Reinhart, «Os Elmos Germânicos no Figurado das Moedas Visigodas», in *Nummus*, no. 10, Vol. III-3, Porto, December, 1955, pp. 157-161. N.B. This is a Portuguese translation and re-publication of an article appearing in the Second Annual *Jahrbuch für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte*, 1950-51, Bayerischen Numismatischen Gesellschaft, München.

(6) A. Heiss, *Description Générale des Monnaies Wisigoths d'Espagne*, Paris, 1872.

(7) F. Mateu Y Llopis, *Catálogo de las Monedas Previsigodas y Visigodas del Gabinete Numismático del Museo Arqueológico Nacional*, Madrid, 1936.

included in Miles' 1952 corpus, only six are of the joint reign of Chindasvinth/Reccesvinth<sup>(8)</sup>. Of those six coins, Miles was able to record the weight of only two, one at 1.60 gm and the other at 1.49 gm<sup>(9)</sup>. Mateu Y Llopis records the weight of the Madrid coin at 1.52 gm<sup>(10)</sup>. The Penha Garcia specimen is a bit lighter at 1.46 gm, pulling the four-coin average down to 1.5175 gm, less than two milligrams from the tremissis' theoretical weight of 1.516 gm<sup>(11)</sup>.

The Penha Garcia coin marks a small but useful addition to the study of the Visigothic coinage. Although its devices, including legends, can be recognized on earlier-published coins, this specific bust is apparently now illustrated for the first time. Its dimensions and weight are consistent with the infrequent data which have been gathered from those few coins of Toledo and the joint Chindasvinth/Reccesvinth reign which have been recorded, thus providing a measure of confirmation. Its provenance, qualified as it is, contributes to the emerging reassessment of Visigothic monetary use which suggests that at least some of the tremisses entered into commerce.

---


(8) Miles, *op. cit.*, p. 102.


(9) *Op. cit.*, p. 162.

(10) Mateu Y Llopis, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

(11) Miles, *op. cit.*, p. 154. N.B. It is unclear to the author why Miles appears not to have included in his own work in 1952, the weight of the Madrid coin, which Mateu Y Llopis had published in 1936.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE COIN

Obverse: Draped bust wearing infulas and triangular helmet, in profile to right. Surrounded by legend beginning at 12 o'clock . Surrounded by serrated border.

Reverse: Cruciform monogram of Toletum (composed of the letter «O», surrounded in clockwise order, beginning at 12 o'clock by the upright letters «T», «E», «L» and «T»). Surrounded by the legend beginning at 12 o'clock, . Surrounded by serrated border.

Weight: 1.46 gm

Diameter: Average: 17.9 mm      Max: 18 mm      Min: 17.8 mm

Axis: 6 o'clock (exactly)

Condition: There is some striking weakness in the rim and legends at 8 to 9 o'clock on the obverse and at 9 to 10 o'clock on the reverse. Aside from a very slight punch mark on the reverse (almost dead center), wear is difficult to detect. The coin is virtually as struck.

Published parallels:

Heiss, 1872

Coin # 5 (Reccesvinthe, 649-653) Toletum  
(Plate VIII — 5)

Mateu Y Llopis, 1936

Coin # 137  
(Plate XIV)

Miles, 1952

Coin # 346(a)  
(Plate XXV, # 16)

— and —

Forgery # 69, p. 478  
(Plate C, # 17)

N.B. same type as the forgery listed above by Miles, but the Penha Garcia specimen clearly differs —



Obverse and Reverse of the Penha Garcia tremissis (3 ×).



Detail of the bust under conditions which suggest a «non-profile» angle of the nose (5 ×).

