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The Melgueil Denier

Federico Marcatili

Independent Researcher, moderator of the medieval section for Tuttomunistica.com (Italia)

Abstract: In 2010, in OMNI 2, Jérôme Nigou published the following study: “Un denier féodal inédit pour le Languedoc”. Our article deals with the Melgueil denier with the aim to present some new die varieties and an unpublished type till now.

Keywords: Melgueil, Denier, Varieties.

1. The historical context

The coinage of the Counts of Melgueil (Poey D'Avant distinguishes the Counts from the Bishops as they only rise to power in 1215) is one of the oldest currency of southern France. The first issue has been dated around 949 A.D. but some authors believe it could have been produced even earlier.

Between the 9th and the 14th century the French monetary system was composed of royal and feudal coins that circulated at the same time.

The Carolingian dynasty had imposed a monopoly on the production of coins, imposing a regal right on the production of coins. The weakening of the central government, with time, led other power centers to take up the lucrative business of minting coins creating in this way what we now call the “feudal coinage”. In our case, between the 9th and the 10th century, the Counts of Melgueil started to produce coins without the authorization of the central power.

The denier of Melgueil became the main currency for the region of Montpellier and was also widely used between Chaors, Rodez, Mende and Orange all the way to Perpignan and Elne. Its success lasted until the 13th century and managed to be preferred to other competing local issues produced in Anduze, Somières, Mende, Saint-Gilles, Béziers, Carcassonne and even on issues from larger mints in Barcellona or Toulouse.

2. The Styling

The Melgueil denier aspect was pretty irregular due to the rudimentary production methods. These coins could also appear dark due to the irregular portion of silver used in the alloy. Generally, the extremely light weight would also make them very fragile. The obol, according to the laws promulgated in 1273, had a theoretical weight of 0,5 grams; between 1123 and 1315, the weight of the deniers varied between 1,05 and 1,3 grams. These thin and light coins would also bend quite easily.

As for the legend, we can state that in nearly all cases these coins tend to be very similar. The obverse has a reinforced cross (a Christian symbol used in nearly all medieval coins) composed by a fascium and two mitres (or banners), some specimen can be found with a globe or a triangle above the cross. The reverse has four rings around a small central globe. The writing is quite difficult to

read. The obverse is usually centered around the name RAIMVDS (or its variants RIMVNDS, RAIMVNOS, IAMVNOS, IAIMVNOS), understood to be the abbreviation of Raimundus or Ramundus, one of the first rulers to replace its name to the king'one. The true identity of Raimundus has not been established yet , some historian suggesting this person could be Raimond I of Narbonne while others prefer the hypothesis of William Raimond, first bishop-count of Melgueil.

On the reverse of the coin we find the legend NAIDONA (or NARBONVS, NARBONA, NAIOBONA), a deformation of Narbona.

Following is an example of the denier of Melgueil (cf. Fig.1)



Fig.1: Private collection

D / cross composed of a fascium and two mitres or banners, globe in the first quarted; legend:
RAMVNDS (S lying) within a circle of dots
R / four rings around a dot; legend: NAIDONA inside a circle of dots

The reverse legend referring to Narbonne could appear strange because it was minted in Melgueil and not in Narbonne. A while ago this coin was attributed to Narbonne but Poey d'Avant changed the attribution to Maguelonne with a long dissertation on page 286 of his second volume. However, there is a Narbonne obol very similar to the one attributed to Maguelonne (cf. Fig. 2).



Fig.2: Monnaies d'Antan, Auction 9 Lot 883, 12. May 2011
Pierre Ier (1079-1085)
A/ PETRYS EPOS. Croix
R/ NARBONA C. Quatre annelets
Denier RRR TB+

The obol struck in Narbonne is issued with the name of Raymond Ier and has a globe in the fourth quarter while the Melguie specimen have the same symbol in the first one. Poey D'Avant also describes other types of legends for this deniers in his second volume starting from number 3839 – table LXXXV, numbers 15 - 20.



3939 – RAINVNO. Reinforced cross with globe in first quarter. R) NARBONA. Same type - denier
Pl. LXXXV, n° 15

3841 – I AMVNDS. Cross. R) NARBONA. Same type denier
Pl. LXXXV, n° 16

3843 – RAMVNDS (S rotated by 90 degrees) cross composed by fascium and two mitres or banners , dot in first quarter. R) variant NAIbONA - denier

Pl. LXXXV, n° 17

3844 – same legend and same type – obol
Pl. Pl. XXXV, n° 18

3845 – same legend and same type but the two mitres has rounded ends - denier
Pl. LXXXV, n° 19

3846 – Same legend and same type – obol
Pl. LXXXV, n° 20

The style of the letter S used in the legend is particularly variable.

3. Devaluation of the denier of Melgueil until its disappearance.

In 1097 the silver content of the denier of Melgueil was greatly reduced.

This strong inflationary movement is confirmed and grows in the 12th and 13th century. In 1174 for example 218 deniers were needed for a silver mark (a mark weighs 244 grams and a denier 1.123 grams). In 1261, a new parity is fixed at 240 deniers per mark (the theoretical weight for the denier falls to 1.020 gr).

Even with a constant devaluation and the issue of a large number of coins, the monetary mass was still insufficient for the need of the economy, and this money shortage represented a serious problem for the population. In 1273, persistent shortages in the circulation of the denier of Melgueil led James I the Lord of Montpellier and King of Aragon to coin the so-called gros of Montpellier (cf. Fig 3).

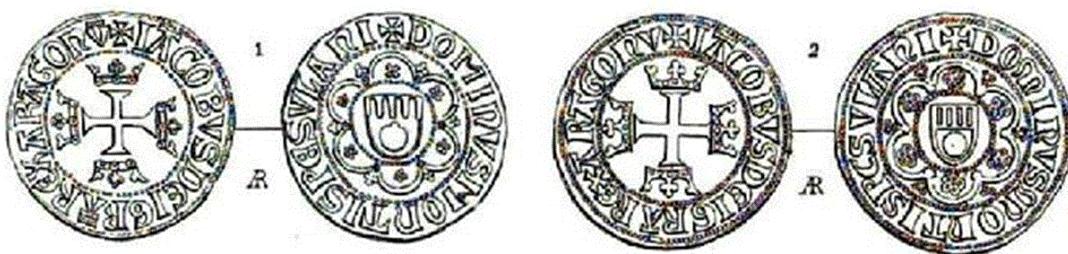


Fig. 3: Poey d'Avant: Monnaies feudales de France, volume II Table LXXXVI

This coin on the reverse has a cross with a crown at each of the four ends (a royal symbol) while on the obverse a frame formed by six crowns encases the Aragonese coat of arms.

Surely the devaluation favoured the Counts because they could pay their debts and gather more currency easily. However, the devaluation could reduce their fixed tributes and generated inflation, the commerce was disrupted and the currency not trusted. The two different currencies circulated together for a certain time, with the effect that the old currency was used for its intrinsic value while the new one for its legal tender. This instability made large profits for the local moneychangers.

In 1292, Philippe "le bel", reduced the use of the coin to the dioceses of Maguelonne. While, in 1317, Philippe "le longue" reserved the minting right to the king alone in the barony of Montpellier. Soon after the denier tournois, issued by the king, took over as main currency, the coinage of Melgueil ends. Maguelonne today does not exist anymore, in its place Villeneuve les Maguelone was founded.

4. Some die varieties

(All coins presented here are property of a private collection)

At a first glance the deniers of Melgueil could appear very similar but with a closer look one can appreciate the changing features.

A few examples of this type will be discussed here to highlight some differences from the main type.

Variant 1



Specimen without a wedge in the upper part of the fascium.

Variant 2

Specimen with lot of differences from the mainstream pieces: larger fascium and rounded edges, small wedge at the bottom (near invisible), mitres with rounded edges, large dot in the first quarter, degenerate legend engraved with a different style.

Variant 3

Specimen with a near invisible wedge at the top of the fascium.

Variant 4

Specimen with no wedge at the top of the fascium and badly engraved legends.

Variant 5

Specimen without the globe in the first quarter

Variant 6

Specimen with legend of a different style.

Variant 7

Specimen with mitres not aligned.

Variant 8

Obol with mitres positioned on a vertical plane with into the second quadrant two triangles

Variant 9

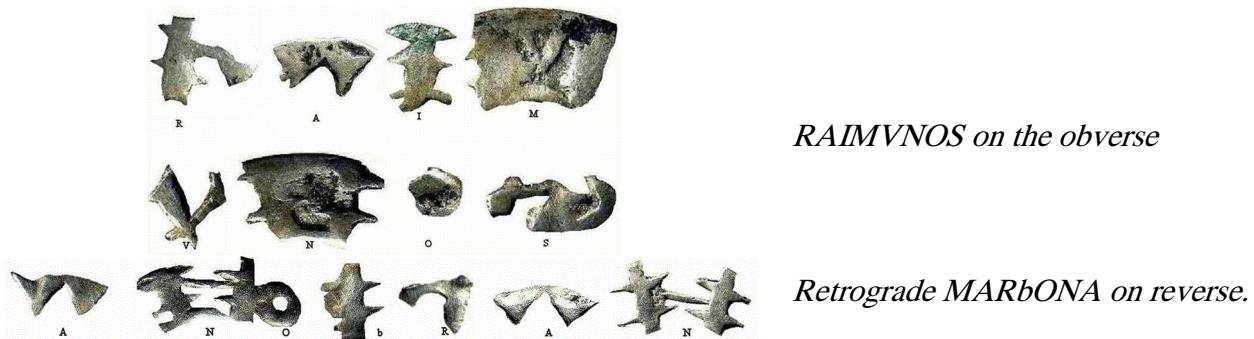
Specimen with legend in latin alphabet.

5. Analysis of the 2nd variant

After careful consideration we have decided to analyze this specimen in more depth because of its peculiar characteristics.



Following are the letters cut from the two faces of the coin:



The legend on the reverse of this denier is engraved anticlockwise but a similar denier with clockwise legend is also known.

The style of the legend seems closer to the type described above (Volume II - tavola LXXXV, numeri 15 – 20) . Number 15 in particular, has the letter R of RAMVNS matching the same R in RAIMVNOS from variant 2. In this specimen, the letter S is similar to the latin character, but we must remember that this letter is represented in various graphic styles. Here are some examples:



Most of the letters are also pretty close in their form to the latin alphabet. So the problem arises whether the specimen of variant 2 was struck successively to the ones that D'Avant describes in his book, or whether, variant 2 was the precursor to the specimen presented on table LXXXV.

A laboratory analysis could determine the percentage of silver of the coin and hence a date and could validate one of the two hypothesis.

6. An unpublished type

Let me introduce an unpublished Melgueil denier, one in which the legends seems to be even more degenerate even in the context of the usual engraving. This specimen also has the obverse legend RAMVNOS starts at 10 o'clock and not at 11 o'clock, while the reverse legend NAIDONA starts at 9 o'clock and not at 10.



This coin was for advertised for sale by Jean-Christophe Hugon Numismatique. In the following pictures we compare a normal denier and the unpublished one:

Obverse:



Reverse :



I hope I will find and study a second specimen of this type to confirm that the coin is genuine and not an imitative issue or a contemporary forgery.

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