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Rebecca Darley describes how the Byzantine Empire and its early Islamic neighbours expressed their rivalry by the way in which power temporal and divine was represented on coinage

Faith

In AD 613 the east Roman, or Byzantine, emperor Herakleios issued a silver coin bearing the desperate petition, ‘God help the Romans’, made at least in part from melted church plate requisitioned from the ecclesiastical buildings of Constantinople (1). The Byzantine Empire had been at war with Persia for over a decade and was running out of resources.

Two generations later the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik minted the first aniconic Muslim coinage, rejecting depictions

of religious and political figures in favour of words of faith. It bore the inscription, ‘There is no God but the one God’ and was used beyond his reign, as in the example of a half dinar of Umar II (2).

These two coins form the starting-point for the Barber Institute of Fine Arts’ current numismatic exhibition. They express in microcosm the twin themes of religious expression and economic imperative that determined the course of monetary developments between the 4th and 8th centuries

in the Eastern Mediterranean. This transitional period from the Classical or antique period of Hellenistic Greek and Roman cultural ascendancy to the medieval world is termed late antiquity.

It is a period of deep significance as the Christianisation of the Roman (Byzantine) Empire in the 4th to 6th centuries and the rise of Islam and the establishment of a Muslim state in the eastern Mediterranean, Middle East and North Africa in the seventh and eighth are events which have defined much of the shape of subsequent world history. It is also a period for which coinage offers a unique insight into political, religious and economic changes often unclear in written sources.

At the start of the 4th century the Mediterranean was dominated by the increasingly Christian Roman Empire but its eastern and western halves were already beginning to develop distinct political identities. From the reign of Constantine I (306-337), Christianity was actively promoted by the state and Constantine moved the



1. Silver hexagram, Herakleios, 613-620, Constantinople, 23mm, 6.73g. Barber Institute B3052.



2. Gold half dinar, Umar II, 718/719, mint location unknown, 15mm, 2.06g. Barber Institute A-B72.



and fortune

1. and 2. A folio of a 9th-century Qur'an and a 13th-century Byzantine prayer scroll also illustrate the development, visible on coinage, of Christian and Islamic visualisations of the divine in the medieval world.

1. This 9th-century Qur'an, written in wide elegant Kufic script on vellum, uses coloured ink and gold to decorate and elucidate the word of God, but employs no figural imagery. Its production location is unknown. © Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections.

2. This beautifully illuminated manuscript on vellum is the private prayer scroll of the Byzantine princess, Eudokia Doukas, is on public display for the first time. It combines personal petitions with lavish images, including this imagined scene of the princess receiving the blessing of the 4th-century Christian saint, John Chrysostom. It was made in Constantinople. © Private collection.

capital of the empire to Constantinople. As the west gradually came under the rule of non-Roman powers, the empire in the east evolved new strategies of government and a cultural identity which modern historians term 'Byzantine' (from Byzantium, the



3. Map showing the Byzantine Empire at its largest extent circa 565. Territories under Byzantine rule in 527 are coloured in red.; those added by the wars of Justinian I (527-565) in brown. Major minting locations also marked.



4. Copper follis, Justinian I, 539, Constantinople, 40mm, 21.28g, Barber Institute B0424.



5. Copper follis, Herakleios, 610, Alexandretta, 29mm, 8.22g, Barber Institute B2716.



7. Gold solidus, Herakleios, 610-613, Constantinople, 21mm, 4.33g, Barber Institute B2724.



8. Gold solidus, Herakleios and Herakleios Constantine, 613-616, Constantinople, 20mm, 4.30g, Barber Institute B2752.



9. Gold solidus, Herakleios, Herakleios Constantine and Heraklonas, 632-635, Constantinople, 19mm, 4.37g, Barber Institute B2905.



11. Silver drachm, Umayyad governors, late 7th century, lint location unknown, 26mm, 2.68g, Barber Institute S0923.

settlement refounded as Constantinople). Its inhabitants, however, thought of themselves as Romans and many of their political and social systems continued Roman models (3).

The role of money as a vital component of state and private commerce was one legacy of the classical Roman past. Coinage was used to pay civil servants and the army, to conduct a high volume of day-to-day transactions and usually to pay taxes. In addition to serving an important economic function, coinage also provided a means by which imperial authority could be represented to a large proportion of the empire's population. Simply the ability to mint coinage was a statement of authority in late antiquity, and messages of succession and religious settlement could also be conveyed.

A *follis* of the emperor Justinian (4), a copper coin worth 40 nummi (the lowest unit of value in the Byzantine monetary system) and among the most widely used copper coin in the empire demonstrates the visible economic character of money in late antiquity. It shows the location at which it was minted, including both the city (CON = Constantinople) and the workshop within the mint (B). It also displays the year in which it was minted (the 12th of Justinian's reign, 539), the reigning emperor (the authority which gave it legitimacy as coinage) and its value or denomination ('M' being the Greek numeral 40).

The 7th-century coinage of the emperor Herakleios (608-641) provides a valuable case study of the complexity of political messages coinage might carry. He came to power as a result of an armed rebellion and his first coins were minted on his journey from his home in Carthage to Constantinople to overthrow the incumbent emperor, Phokas (602-608). Coins minted in Alexandretta

show Herakleios and his father wearing consular robes (5?). By issuing coins in his name own name Herakleios was usurping a right reserved for the emperor, yet his clothing evoked the alternative political authority of the Roman senate. Only after his conquest of Constantinople and official recognition as emperor did Herakleios issue coins bearing his portrait in full imperial regalia (6?).

Herakleios' rebellion occurred at a time of war between Byzantium and its eastern neighbor, Persia, leading to the issue of the first coin illustrated in this article (1). The desperate situation of the Byzantine Empire turned remarkably between 624, and 630 however, when Herakleios defeated the Persians completely. It is illustrative of how much remains to be understood about the role of coins as media for political messages that this astonishing change in imperial fortune is not marked in the numismatic record.

In comparison, issues of imperial succession received significant numismatic attention. From 626 Herakleios appeared with his son Herakleios Constantine (later the emperor Constantine III) (8). From 632 a third figure also appears: Heraklonas was Herakleios' son by his second wife, Martina (9). Since she was also his niece, Herakleios' marriage to Martina was deemed incestuous and, therefore, invalid by the Church. By depicting Heraklonas on his coins Herakleios was making a very public statement that (contrary to the judgement of the Church) he considered him a rightful son and heir. The interplay of faith and fortune on Byzantine coinage was not, therefore, always straightforward. If it is surprising to a modern scholar Herakleios' greatest triumph did not appear on his coinage, it is

perhaps unsurprising that the biggest crisis he faced did not.

In 622 the Prophet Muhammad journeyed from Mecca to Medina, where he established the nascent Muslim community. Within the Prophet's lifetime the community returned to and conquered Mecca. From there, the new religious movement, founded on the Abrahamaic scriptures and the revelation of the Qur'an, expanded out of Arabia.

By the 690s it had completely absorbed the former Persian Empire and around two-thirds of the lands formerly held by Byzantium. This Muslim state was led by a Caliph, or 'successor' of Muhammad. In the late 7th and early 8th centuries the Caliphs were drawn from the Umayyad family, lending their name to the state the Umayyad Caliphate (661-759).

The historical sources for the rise of Islam are fragmentary and often unclear, as is our understanding of Islam in its earliest period, but it seems clear that the earliest Arab conquerors were uninterested in disrupting existing administrative and religious practices in their territories. The easiest models to use were those already available, a strategy most immediately visible on coinage. In lands once ruled by the Persians, Umayyad local governors issued coins imitating Persian types but often with Arabic legends outside the main design (11).

In areas formerly ruled by Byzantium it seems likely that as early as the 640s local authorities (whether Muslim or Christian) began producing coins to make up for a lack of centralised production. These were based on various Byzantine prototypes but retained different features and made different modifications to reflect local needs.

One coin from Emesa (Homs) (12)



12. Copper imitation follis, minting authority unknown, c. 650-690, probably minted Emesa, 24mm, 3.42g, Barber Institute A-B16.

13. Copper imitation follis, minting authority unknown, 650s, Skythopolis, 29mm, 10.84g, Barber Institute A-B01.

14. Gold imitation solidus, Umayyad, late 7th century, Carthage, 14mm, 4.32g, Barber Institute A-B71.



15. Gold imitation solidus, Umayyad, late 7th century, mint location unknown, 19mm, 4.49g, Barber Institute A-B30.

16. Copper imitation follis, Umayyad, circa 670-690, Aleppo, 18mm, 4.53g, Barber Institute A-B36.

17. Gold solidus, Justinian II, 692-695, Constantinople, 19mm, 4.32g, Barber Institute B4384.



19. Bronze coin, Fahr al-Din Qara Arslan, 1144-1174, mint location unknown, 26mm, 8.0g, Barber Institute TK433.

displays a standing figure carrying a cross, as on Byzantine types, but the reverse bears the Arabic word for 'good/legal', suggesting a local population literate in Arabic and possibly some local doubts about the validity of the coin. Another (13) imitates the Byzantine prototype down to the mint mark, 'NIK' (Nikomedeia); however this was kept as a redundant but familiar design feature. The obverse carries the name of the actual minting location in Greek: Skythopolis (Beth Shean).

By the late 7th century the need for a unified system of government for what had become the single largest political power in the Mediterranean and middle East became apparent. Local issues prefigured Umayyad experiments with coinage at a state level. Initially this took the form of almost unmodified imitation, retaining even overt Christian symbolism (14).

As the Caliphate developed a clear political identity, framed in dialogue with and opposition to the Christian Byzantine Empire its experimentation abandoned Christian iconography. The Byzantine image of a cross on steps lost its cross bars to become a pole on steps, possibly representing the political unity represented by the Caliph (15). A standing figure also appeared on coinage,

probably representing a standing the Caliph (16). Modifying Byzantine types and maintaining Byzantine structures of governance and representation was not the long term strategy adopted by the Caliphate, however. In the 690s the Caliph Abd al-Malik initiated reforms, which restructured the Caliphate fiscally and structurally. The gold coin mentioned at the start of this article (2) was the numismatic declaration of more formalised Islamic sentiments. The coins used only the word of God to assert the political and spiritual authority of the Caliph.

The relationship between Byzantium and the Umayyad Caliphate in late antiquity was usually adversarial, and coinage represented a sphere in which interplay and opposition could be expressed both ways. Within the same decade as Abd al-Malik's coin reform Byzantine coinage, too, underwent a striking design modification. During his first reign (685-695), the emperor Justinian II replaced for the first time the Byzantine emperor on the obverse (front) of his gold coins, emblazoning them instead with an image of Christ Pantokrator ('ruler of all') (17).

The positions chosen by the Byzantine and Umayyad states in the late 7th and early 8th centuries have defined world history since late antiquity. Christianity and Islam became the basis for competing political and cultural identities in constant interaction. Choices about visualizing the divine, such as those made by Justinian II in the form of an image of Christ and Abd al-Malik, in the form of the divine word, continue to resonate in the Christian and Muslim artistic representation of the modern world and debates about depicting religious figures and negotiating political and religious landscapes.

As in the modern world, however, the medieval period provides ample evidence for syncretism, experimentation and complex appropriation of cultural symbolism, as well as the development of strict political and theological principles. Faith and Fortune examines the development of distinct Christian and Muslim investment in sacred image and sacred word through the medium of coinage, but it also showcases the rarely displayed coinage of the Muslim Artuqid state, which ruled in Anatolia from the 12th century (18).

Turkmen coinage in many respects provides a fitting epilogue to the numismatic experiments of late antiquity and an appropriate prologue to the complexities of modern inter-religious dialogue and contest. It is fascinating for its use of symbols of power and religious significance drawn from both Muslim and Christian tradition. This included coins bearing on one side the Arabic calligraphic design pioneered under Abd al-Malik, and on the other side the image of Christ Pantokrator, probably diminishing earlier Byzantine coin types (19).

The relationship between the neighbouring Byzantine and early Muslim empires was one that involved trade, intellectual exchange and military confrontation. The images and words on the coins show how they were used by each power to assert cultural difference and promote its own concept of the divine. ■

Faith & Fortune: Visualising the Divine on Byzantine and Early Islamic Coinage is on show at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Birmingham (barber.org.uk/faith-fortune/) until 30 November 2014.