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A Follis of Leontius II from Carthage?

by

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A Follis of Leontius II from Carthage?

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Abstract: It is argued that a newly published type of follis tentatively identified as a new Arab-Byzantine type may be a follis of the emperor Leontius II (695–8) possibly struck at Carthage in celebration of the brief Byzantine recapture of the city in 697.

The main purpose of this paper is to publish the third known, and best preserved, example of a previously unknown type of follis that was recently discussed by Maria Vrij.[2] I will also attempt to reassess the date and significance of this type. Vrij discovered two examples (UI0017 and UI0018) in a tray of unidentified coins in the collection of the Barber Institute of Fine Arts in Birmingham, England. She was unable to discover any record of their provenance, and so assumed that they were part of the collection that Philip Whitting had donated to the Institute about 50 years previously. Unfortunately, these Barber specimens are in poor condition, being heavily worn and somewhat corroded, but the main features of their design remain distinguishable and were sketched by Vrij. I reproduce here a photograph of UI0017 and her sketch of the same piece (Fig. 1).

There are minor differences between the obverse dies of UI0017 and UI0018, but there is no reason to doubt that they depict the same obverse type which, at first glance, seems unexceptional.[3] It depicts the bust of an emperor, with a *globus cruciger* to his left, above an exergual line. The emperor appears to wear a diadem surmounted by a cross, and his hair descends to about halfway down the side of his face. His face is round and he clearly does not possess a long beard. He may have a closely cut beard that follows the contours of his face but the coins are so worn it is impossible to be sure. No legend is visible on the obverse of either specimen, although this may be partly due to their poor condition. In contrast, the reverse type is clearly unique. It depicts a square M with a small cross above it, and Greek letters, topped by a macron, either side: IC to its left, XC to its right. Beneath the denomination

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[2] M. Vrij, 'A new coin type from the mid-seventh century?', in T. Goodwin (ed.), *Coinage and History in the Seventh Century Near East* 6 (London, 2020), pp. 35–46. She refers briefly to this third example (p. 41), but was unaware of its whereabouts. The owner of this third specimen (to whom I am most grateful) reports that he bought it from a dealer in Egypt over 40 years ago. Yet even if this coin was discovered there, that would prove little about where it was originally struck, since individual coins can sometimes travel unexpected distances.

[3] On UI0017, the cross of the *globus cruciger* inclines slightly towards the bust, but on UI0018, it inclines slightly away from the bust. On UI0017, the profile of the hairstyle is more angular in appearance, while on UI0018, it is more rounded.

M, where one would normally expect to find a mintmark, are the letters N and K in ligature. Minor differences in the relative shapes and sizes of the letters prove that two different dies were used for the reverses.



Fig. 1. (a) Unidentified follis (22mm, 3.36g); Barber Institute of Fine Arts, no. UI0017. © Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham; (b) Sketch of identifiable features on UI0017. © Maria Vrij. (2x)



Fig. 2. Third specimen of unidentified follis (21x19mm, 5.93g). Private Collection. (2x)

The new coin

The third specimen, published here for the first time (Fig. 2), is in much better condition than either UI0017 or UI0018 though it is still quite worn and a lot of details remain obscure. It seems to share the same obverse die as UI0018, but its reverse die is new.[4] On the obverse one can detect prominent eye ridges and a startlingly

[4] The obverse of this third specimen and that of UI0018 share two minor features, far more visible on the former, what appears to be a small letter I at 9 o'clock and a small letter T at 10 o'clock. Are these the remnants of an obverse legend?

large nose, but one still cannot see whether the bust was truly clean shaven or wore a light beard. The emperor's right arm appears to bend at right angles in front of him, but it is not clear why it should do this or whether he is holding anything.[5] If his right arm does bend in front of him, the *globus cruciger* stands unsupported besides him, which seems unlikely. The reverse depicts a very light line running through the ligatured letters N and K, the significance of which is uncertain. It could be part of an undertype. There also appears to be a large pellet in front of the K and another above the C of XC. This new specimen confirms the main features of the reverse as sketched by Vrij based on the Barber specimens. Finally, one should note that the new specimen weighs 5.93 grams, whereas UI0017 and UI0018 weigh 3.36 and 5.08 grams respectively.

An Arab-Byzantine type from an ecclesiastical mint?

Vrij suggested this new type 'probably forms part of the Arab-Byzantine series of coinage, and was probably produced by an ecclesiastically-controlled mint somewhere along the North African coast between Carthage and Jerusalem'.[6] Her main reason for thinking it may have been produced at an ecclesiastical mint seems to have been the heightened religiosity suggested by the use of the letters IC and XC in abbreviation of the names of Jesus Christ (Ἰησοῦς Χριστός) on either side of the M on the reverse. She draws attention to the fact that *nomina sacra*, the abbreviations of divine names or titles, occur on the later anonymous folles of the tenth and eleventh centuries, and that the titles of the *Theotokos* appear on the coinage in the ninth century, and concludes that the occurrences of such names on official Byzantine coins 'all post-date the removal of the M denomination mark', that is, the mid-ninth century.[7] This is not strictly accurate. Under Justin II and Sophia (565–74), the mint at Thessalonica struck half-folles almost certainly displaying *nomina sacra* above the denomination mark where a small cross had traditionally appeared alone (*MIBEC* 70c–f) (Fig. 3).[8] Similarly, the mint at Constantinople depicted a number of letters, or monograms, above the denomination mark of the follis during the period 629–35 (*MIB* 164b–e) where comparison with the marks on the half-folles of Justin II just noted reveals that these letters, or monograms, were also *nomina sacra*.[9] The use of *nomina sacra* on official Byzantine coinage occurred much earlier and more frequently than Vrij allows, even if there is no exact parallel to the use of IC and XC together as on the new type.[10] Consequently, any attempt to attribute the production of this newly discovered type to some form of ecclesiastical body solely because it depicts *nomina sacra* fails to convince.

[5] It looks as if the emperor is holding a small cross in front of his chest, but this apparent cross may represent no more than an optical illusion caused by the patterns on his cuirass.

[6] Vrij, 'A new coin type', p. 46.

[7] Vrij, 'A new coin type', p. 37.

[8] See Hahn and Metlich, *MIBEC*, p. 30.

[9] D. Woods, 'Greek monograms and countermarks in seventh-century Syria', in Goodwin, *Coinage and History in the Seventh Century Near East* 6, pp. 101–20.

[10] S. Bendall, 'The Byzantine coinage of the mint of Jerusalem', *RN* 159 (2003), pp. 307–22, p. 316, tentatively suggests that the letters IX occurring at the end of the reverse legend on a solidus (*MIB* 77) struck by an eastern military mint during the early reign of Heraclius may abbreviate the name of Jesus Christ in Greek.



Fig. 3. Half-follis of Justin and Sophia, Thessalonica (20mm, 5.45g); *MIBEC* 70e. Ex Savoca Numismatik, Online Auction 12 (22 January 2017), lot 700. The letters ϴC in abbreviation of θεός 'God' or the associated adjective θεῖος 'divine' appear at the top of the reverse. (2x)

The legends convey a far more explicit and militant display of Christianity than anything found on Arab-Byzantine coins which indicates it does not belong to the series. In particular the obvious interpretation, as Vrij duly notes, of the letters N and K in ligature in the reverse exergue, is that they abbreviate the Greek verb NIKA, read either as the present indicative 'She/he/it conquers' or as the present imperative 'Conquer'. This interpretation is supported by the presence of this verb on seventh-century Byzantine coinage, whether as part of the legend XC NIKA 'Christ conquers' on the reverse of a follis struck at Jerusalem in 614 (*MIB* X28) or as part of the obverse legend ЄN TϬTO NIKA 'Conquer in this!' on most of the folles struck at Constantinople during the period 641–58.[11] In association with the abbreviations IC and XC the reverse legend reads IC XC NIKA 'Jesus Christ conquers'. No Arab-Byzantine coin depicts a meaningful new legend in any way comparable to this. Their meaningful legends are restricted to brief, mainly single word, statements of quality or mint-names.

An official Byzantine type of Constans II or Leontius II?

The identification of the imperial bust on the obverse of this new type is vital for its dating, but no emperor seems to have used a bust depicting his right arm bending at a right angle in front of him, if this is what this obverse shows. Hence, one is forced to focus on other factors, such as the length and shape of the hair and the absence of any significant beard. Vrij briefly compares it to the busts of a wide range of emperors from Phocas (602–10) to Michael III (842–67) to reach the conclusion that it most resembles that of Constans II (641–68) on the so-called IMPЄR CONSƬ type of follis struck in Constantinople and for Sicily in 643/4 (Fig. 4a).[12] While, however, her general points about the changing style of the imperial bust from the early seventh to the mid-ninth centuries are correct –faces became long rather than round and the hair became longer, descending from the level of the ears to that of the lower jaw – these generalisations do not fully reflect the complexity of the process. For example, the

[11] On the type from Jerusalem, see S. Mansfield, 'Heraclean folles of Jerusalem', in A. Oddy (ed.), *Coinage and History in the Seventh Century Near East 2* (London, 2010), pp. 49–55.

[12] Vrij, 'A new coin type', pp. 38–9.

standard bust of the Emperor Leontius II is a clear exception to this process, since it depicts him with a distinctly rounded face and hair that does not descend any further than the ears (Fig. 4b). Vrij does not seem, though, to have considered the possibility that the bust on the new type may represent Leontius rather than Constans II.



Fig. 4. (a) Follis of Constans II, Constantinople (24mm, 5.7g); *MIB* 166. Ex Ancient Coins Canada, NumisMall, SKU w44548; (b) Follis of Leontius, Constantinople (25mm, 10.92g); *MIB* 32. Ex Classical Numismatic Group, Triton XIV (4 January 2011), lot 1165. (2x)

In attempting to identify the mint for this new type, Vrij focuses on what she rightly identifies as one of its more unusual features, the presence of an exergual line beneath the obverse bust. She also considers examples where there is no actual exergual line, but where the bust is noticeably truncated before the die border. She limits her search for coins displaying either of these features to the reign of Heraclius (610–41) and Constans II but finds none. She does not consider the presence of these features on coins struck later in the seventh century. In the reign of Leontius II, the mint at Syracuse in Sicily struck a type of follis (*DOC* 17; *MIB* 36) which displays the same style of truncated bust (Fig. 5). This is the only occasion during his reign when any mint depicted such a bust. One possibility, therefore, if the bust does represent Leontius, is that the authority responsible for striking this new type may have been influenced by the Syracuse follis and this new type was struck somewhere in the general vicinity of Syracuse.



Fig. 5. Follis of Leontius, Syracuse (19mm, 3.21g); *DOC* 17, *MIB* 36. Ex Classical Numismatic Group, E-Auction 398 (31 May 2017), lot 626. (2x)

Syracuse struck two types of folles during the brief reign of Leontius. The obverse of the second type (*DOC* 18; *MIB* 37) depicts the standing figure of the emperor with an *akakia* in his right hand and a *globus cruciger* in his left. The reverse of the first type with the imperial bust on the obverse (*MIB* 36) depicts a square M as the denomination mark, while the reverse of the type with the standing figure (*MIB* 37) depicts a cursive M. It is clear, therefore, that the new type under discussion is much closer in its overall design to *MIB* 36 than to *MIB* 37. There remain three key differences between the two known types of Syracuse and the new type. The first is that both known types include a monogram of the name Leontius above the denomination mark, whereas the new type does not. The second is that both known types include the mintmark SCL in the exergue on the reverse, making it quite clear that they were struck in Sicily, whereas the new type depicts the ligatured letters N and K. The third is that the two known types display practically no religious symbolism on their reverses in contrast to the display of religious enthusiasm on the reverse of the new type. Accordingly, it cannot be assumed that this new type was struck at Syracuse.

In support of the identification of the mint as Carthage: the significance of the reverse legend

As one seeks to understand why a mint situated at or near Syracuse should have started to proclaim that IC XC NIKA 'Jesus Christ conquers' during the reign of Leontius, one naturally focuses on events in the nearest major theatre of war, Africa. The Arab conquest of Byzantine Africa had climaxed shortly before the reign of Leontius with the capture of its capital, Carthage, in 695.[13] Leontius subsequently sent a large fleet which recaptured Carthage, perhaps late in 697. This victory was short-lived. The Arabs soon sent a larger force to take Carthage again, driving away the Byzantine fleet with relative ease, probably in early 698. One obvious possibility, therefore, is that the authority responsible for striking this new coin type chose a

[13] The earliest and most reliable accounts of the Byzantine loss, recapture, and loss once more of Carthage are relatively short and vague, so very little is known for sure about these events. See Nicephorus, *Breviarium* 41 and Theophanes, *Chronographia* AM 6190 drawing on a common source. In general, see W.E. Kaegi, *Muslim Expansion and Byzantine Collapse in North Africa* (Cambridge, 2010).

reverse design to celebrate the recapture of Carthage. The design and the invocation of the name of Jesus Christ in particular may have been influenced by the new type of solidus introduced by Justinian II in 692. This depicted the bust of Christ on the obverse surrounded by a legend including his name and declaring him to be King of Rulers.[14] This redefined what forms of religious expression were now acceptable on the coinage.

If the reverse of the new type celebrates the recapture of Carthage it raises the possibility that the type may have been struck there, rather than at Syracuse. A mint had operated at Carthage since the Byzantines had recaptured it from the Vandals in 533, so it would not be surprising if the striking of copper coinage were resumed there shortly after its recapture. Furthermore, it makes more sense that a mint at Carthage should have celebrated its deliverance from the enemy than a mint at Syracuse. Indeed, the sudden re-opening of a mint with new engravers unaccustomed to such work may explain some of the obvious crudities of this type. More important, the attribution of this new type to Carthage rather than to Syracuse may also resolve the problem posed by the apparent absence of a mintmark. As noted earlier, the letters N and K occur in ligature beneath the denomination M, where one would normally expect to find a mintmark. At one level, they are clearly intended to abbreviate the legend NIKA. At another level, however, they may also act as a mintmark. The key point here is that most of the last folles known to have been struck at Carthage (during the first reign of Justinian II in 685–95 (*MIB* 53–56)), bore the pseudo-Greek mintmark KΓѠ. This has been so described because it abbreviates the Latin name *Karthago* rather than the Greek form Καρχηδών, but does so using Greek rather than Latin letters.[15] It is possible, therefore, that the letters N and K were also intended to transliterate into Greek an abbreviation of the Latin phrase *N*(*ummi*) *K*(*arthagienses*) 'copper coins of Carthage', or even to abbreviate the same phrase in Greek.[16] That might help explain why the term NIKA was not spelled out in full. Indeed, such wordplay, where a letter was used to serve more than one function, had also featured on the coinage at Carthage during the sixth century.[17] Finally, the scarcity of this type is explained if it was produced briefly by an emergency mint in a newly liberated Carthage just before the city was lost once more.

[14] The mint at Constantinople used the same obverse on a solidus (*DOC* 7–8; *MIB* 8–9), a semissis (*DOC* 10; *MIB* 12), a tremissis (*DOC* 14; *MIB* 16), a miliarensis (*MIB* 38), and a hexagram (*DOC* 17; *MIB* 40). The mint at Sardinia also struck a solidus of this type (*MIB* 20). In general, see J.D. Breckenbridge, *The Numismatic Iconography of Justinian II* (New York, 1959), esp. pp. 46–62.

[15] The mint at Carthage had normally used the mintmark KRTG in abbreviation of *Karthago* throughout the sixth and seventh centuries.

[16] The mint at Carthage had frequently included the letters N or N and M together in abbreviation of the Latin tern *nummi* on the reverse of various denomination copper coins struck throughout the sixth and early seventh centuries. See e.g. Justin II, *MIBEC* 77, 80a–b, 82; Maurice, *MIBEC* 116–19, 121–23, 125–28, 130–32, 135; Phocas, *MIBEC* 100–01; Heraclius, *MIB* 237–38. In purely linguistic terms, the use of N and K in abbreviation of *N*(*ummi*) *K*(*arthagienses*) would parallel the use of S and M, in abbreviation of *Sacra Moneta*, or just the M alone, followed by a letter abbreviating the adjectival form of a town name on many late third- and fourth-century coins.

[17] See Justin II, *MIBEC* 75, where a large K serves as both denomination and mintmark; Justin II, *MIBEC* 79, where a large I serves as both denomination and the initial of the imperial name.

Some further observations

The suggestion that this new type of follis was struck at Carthage following the recovery of the city in 697 is further supported by the strong similarities between it and a type of follis struck at Jerusalem in 614 (*MIB* X28), as already noted. The first similarity is that both types depict a unique form of the imperial bust on the obverse, as if the die-engraver was not familiar with the correct form of the bust or did not appreciate it was important to adhere to it as closely as possible.[18] The second similarity lies in the heightened religiosity displayed by both types on the reverse as demonstrated by their almost identical declarations that Christ conquers. The third and most interesting similarity lies in the rapid changes of fortunes experienced by Byzantine forces at the two cities: Jerusalem in 614 and Carthage in the mid-690s. In each case, a relentless foreign enemy initially conquers the city, the Persians in 614 and the Arabs in the 690s, Byzantine forces then enjoy a surprising victory in managing to retake the city, but the enemy returns in even greater force to take the city once more.[19] It is arguable, therefore, that both types represent initial, local celebrations of an unexpected Byzantine victory.

Finally, it should be noted that the weights of the three specimens of the new type do not assist in its dating in the absence of any firm indication of the mint. The average weights of the follis could vary dramatically from one mint to another over much of the seventh century.

Mint	*Emperor*	*Average (g)*	*Max. (g)*
Carthage?	New Type	4.79	5.93
Carthage	Justinian II	4.70	5.90
Constantinople	Leontius II	*c*.6.50	7.90
Sicily	Leontius II	*c*.3.60	4.30

Table 1. Weights of folles of Justinian II and Leontius II[20]

Although one cannot place too much reliance on such a small sample of the new type (3 coins), table 1 could suggest there was an attempt to resume striking at Carthage under Leontius II at about the same weight as before under Justinian II. This presumably represented the weight of much of the coinage still in circulation. By contrast the table shows that the average weights of the folles struck at Constantinople and Sicily under Leontius II were different. Hence if this new type was struck under Leontius, it is unlikely to have been struck at either Constantinople or Sicily.

As an alternative attribution, could this type have been struck during the early reign of Constans II, before he was depicted with a long beard?

[18] The bust on *MIB* X28 bears a much closer resemblance to the standard bust of the emperor Phocas than to that of Heraclius whom it is supposed to represent.

[19] On the events at Jerusalem in 614, see R.W. Thomson and J. Howard-Johnston, *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos* (Liverpool, 1999), pp. 68–9.

[20] See Grierson, *DOC* 2.1, pp. 22–32.

Mint	*Constans II: date (class)*	*Max. average (g)*	*Min. average (g)*	*Max. (g)*
Constantinople	641–8 (classes 1–4)	*c*.5.0	*c*.4.4	9.1
Carthage[21]	641–8 (classes 1–2)	9.2	8.4	9.2
Sicily	641–8 (classes 1–4)	5.0	4.6	5.9

Table 2. Weights of folles of Constans II

Table 2 shows that the weight of this new type of follis is also consistent with folles struck at Constantinople and Sicily (or any mint following their standards) during the period 641–8. In other words, the weight of these coins is of no use in determining whether this new type was struck under Constans II or Leontius II.

Conclusion

In summary, the new type of follis published by Vrij presents a particular challenge to those seeking to explain its origin both because of an apparent lack of mintmark and the uncertainty concerning the identity of the emperor depicted on the obverse. It is certainly a very unusual type by any standards. The bust may be that of Leontius II, modelled to some extent on a type of follis struck at Syracuse. It is also arguable that the reverse may celebrate the Byzantine recapture of Carthage from the Arabs in 697, and that this type may plausibly have been struck in Carthage itself. Grierson once said of Carthage that 'no coins are known of the re-occupation of 697/98, though they may yet be found' (*DOC* 2.2, p. 610). I venture to suggest that this possibility may now have been realised.

[21] *DOC* 2.1, p. 30, table 6, based on the weight of two specimens only.