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The Byzantine Eagle Countermark: Creating a Pseudo-Consular Coinage under the Heraclii?

David Woods

A CATALOGUE of 25 sixth-century *folles* has recently been published: the *folles* all bear the same countermark depicting a standing bird, probably an eagle, with its wings raised high above its head and a pellet between them, within a circular punch-mark about 8 mm. in diameter.[1] Of these 25 coins, 24 are *folles* of either Justin I (518–527) or the early reign of Justinian I (527–565), before his reform of the coinage in 539, and the exception a *follis* of Maurice Tiberius (582–602). In each case, the countermark has been placed on the reverse of the coin, and, with only 4 exceptions, it has been placed over either the mintmark or the *officina* number. The host coins are usually very worn, and the mintmark often unreadable, but of the 14 coins on which it can still be read, 4 were struck in Antioch and 10 in Constantinople. Finally, only 6 of these coins have been found during excavations, 2 at Nag Hammadi in Thebais and 4 at Caesarea Maritima in Palaestina Prima.[2] Of the rest, where provenance is known, 1 was

[1] Wolfgang Schulze, "The Byzantine 'Eagle' Countermark—Re-attributed from Egypt to Palestine," *INR* 4 (2009) 113–120.

[2] For the coins from Nag Hammadi see James E. Goehring, "Two New Examples of the Byzantine 'Eagle' Countermark," *NC* 143 (1983) 218–220. For the coins from Caesarea, see Jane D. Evans "Heraclian Countermarks on Coins Found in Caesarea," *AJN* 5–6 (1993–1994) 97–104, at 102–104. See also Jane D. Evans, *The Joint Expedition to Caesarea Maritima Excavation Reports* VI *The Coins and the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine Economy of Palestine* (Boston 2006), coins nos. 2218, 2360, 2363, 2394.

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acquired in Egypt, 2 in Jordan, and 11 in Israel.

This note has two purposes, first, to publish 2 new examples of this countermark, and second, to propose a new explanation of its date and purpose. To begin, therefore, a new specimen of this countermark was offered for sale online by an Israeli dealer in February 2014 (*fig.* 1):[3]



Figure 1: pre-539 *follis*, Constantinople (d. 30 mm.)
Reverse, eagle countermark

In this case, the host coin was struck at Constantinople, has a diameter of 30 mm., and weighs 13.05 g. Most importantly, the countermark was placed on the upper reverse, obscuring the cross that ought to have appeared in the field above the denomination M. Although the coin is heavily encrusted, the *officina* appears to be A, and there is a star in the field to the right of the denomination M on the reverse. While the obverse legend has been obscured by wear for the most part, the fact that the imperial bust is in profile facing right proves that this coin was struck before the front-facing bust became standard on the *follis* in 539 following Justinian's reform of the coinage.

The second new specimen of this countermark was part of a

[3] It was sold by Sahar Coins, Bet Shean, Israel, as part of a lot of two countermarked *folles*, where the second was a *follis* of Maurice Tiberius with a Class 1 monogram of Heraclius.

private collection in the USA offered for sale online in 2014 (*fig.* 2):[4]



Figure 2: *follis* of Justin I, Antioch (d. 39/32 mm.)
Reverse, eagle countermark

In this case, the host coin[5] was struck at Antioch, has a maximum diameter of 39 mm., and weighs 12.54 g. The countermark was placed on the upper reverse once more, straddling the border at a point where the irregular flan greatly exceeds the border. Although quite worn again, this coin is cleaner than the last, and the obverse legend reveals that it was struck under Justin I.

The discovery of these new specimens raises the number of known specimens to 27. More importantly, it raises the number of countermarks known to have been placed elsewhere than over the mintmark or the *officina* number from 4 out of 25 (16%) to 6 out of 27 (22%). This warns against any decision to read too much into the placement of this countermark. Finally, the discovery of these new specimens confirms the pattern already noticed, that this countermark was mainly used on coins

[4] It was sold by Dr. Warren Esty on behalf of the Rev. C. Daniel Clark, a retired Methodist minister and part-time coin-dealer. Unfortunately, no record of its origin was preserved.

[5] See Wolfgang Hahn and Michael Metlich, *Money of the Incipient Byzantine Empire: Anastasius I – Justinian I 491–565*[2] (Vienna 2013), Justin no. 58.

of Justin I and the pre-reform coins of Justinian I, and that its use on a *follis* of Maurice Tiberius must be regarded as an increasingly isolated example, and a careless accident rather than part of some deliberate policy. However, it also increases the mystery surrounding the origin and use of this countermark, the fact that some authority acting sometime during or after the reign of Maurice should have deliberately targeted the *folles* of Justin and the early reign of Justinian I for countermarking while avoiding those struck during the succeeding period of fifty years or more.

Bendall, the first to publish this countermark, suggested that it was contemporary with the coins on which it was struck, that is, a period up until about 539, because he was not then aware that it had also been used on a *follis* of Maurice.[6] He also contrasted the choice of the eagle as a countermark to the choice of the imperial monogram in the case of the countermarks used under Heraclius (610–641) and his successors to suggest that it probably belonged to a very different period.

In contrast, Hahn preferred to date this countermark to the reign of Heraclius both because the habit of countermarking reached its height during his reign and because the same eagle was also depicted on the obverse of a 3-nummi coin issued at Alexandria under Heraclius.[7] Since he dated the 3-nummi piece to the period ca. 613–617, he also dated the use of the countermark to the same period. The main weakness of this argument, however, is that it assumes that the depiction of the eagle as it appeared both on the 3-nummi coin and in the countermark was much more unusual than it really was, so that its two appearances in this manner had to be closely related. In reality, this style of eagle was a common feature on the obverse

[6] Simon Bendall, "An 'Eagle' Countermark on Sixth-Century Byzantine Coins," *NC* 136 (1976) 230.

[7] Wolfgang Hahn, "Alexandrian 3-Nummi and 1-Nummus Types under Heraclius," *NC* 138 (1978) 181–183. For the 3-nummi piece with eagle see his *Moneta Imperii Byzantini* III *Von Heraclius bis Leo III (610–720)* (Vienna 1981), Heraclius no. 213.



Figure 3: half-siliqua (d. 15 mm.) struck by Odovacar (476–493) at Milan in the name of the emperor Zeno. Reverse, eagle

Roma Numismatics, Auction X (27 September 2015), lot 915
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of many lead seals found at Constantinople and Cyprus, for example, and which cannot be dated precisely, but are conventionally assigned to the seventh century, although their production may in fact range from the late sixth century to the early eighth.[8] The significance of the use of the eagle on these seals is not clear, other than that it seems to have symbolised the state, or some level of official within the state administration, but all that matters here is that many people throughout the empire ought to have been familiar with this style of depiction of an eagle as a result of its use in this manner. Furthermore, a number of gold rings from the same approximate period also depict the same style of eagle.[9] Finally, Odovacar (476–493) had struck a half-siliqua in the name of the emperor Zeno (476–477, 480–491) at Milan (*fig.* 3) and Ravenna with a reverse

[8] In general see David M. Metcalf, *Byzantine Lead Seals from Cyprus* (Nicosia 2004) 101–111.

[9] See e.g. Marvin C. Ross, *Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Mediaeval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection* II *Jewelry, Enamels, and Art of the Migration Period*[2] (Washington 2005) 60.

depicting a similar eagle, although with a cross between its wings and standing on a branch.[10] So the probability is that the depiction of this style of eagle was relatively common throughout the empire for a period of several centuries, and there are no grounds for assuming some special association with either Heraclius or Alexandria.

Schulze included a short discussion of the eagle countermark in an earlier work treating the use of countermarks more generally in seventh-century Syria, at which time he was able to catalogue only 14 known specimens, and did not then venture to date it any more precisely than to say that it was probably used during the seventh century.[11] However, in his more recent discussion of this topic, when he was able to catalogue 25 specimens, as already noted, he argued that this countermark was probably used at Caesarea Maritima during the Arab siege of the city ca. 639–641, and that the authorities used it to revalue older coins that had fallen out of circulation during a shortage of cash in the besieged city.[12] While this is an interesting suggestion, it suffers from a number of weaknesses.

The first weakness concerns the interpretation of this countermark as a device to revalue older coins when in 21 out of the 25 cases known to Schulze the countermark was punched over the mintmark or *officina* number rather than over the denomination mark M. This deliberate avoidance of the denomination mark suggests that, far from trying to revalue these coins, those punching the countermark took careful pains not to obscure the denomination mark in any way because they did not want to seem to be revaluing them.

The second weakness concerns the reading of the eagle of the

[10] J. P. C. Kent, *RIC* X (London 1994), nos. 3621–3624 (Milan), 3647–3648 (Ravenna). Hahn, *NC* 138 (1978) 181 n.3, dismisses this as "a remote parallel," describing it "of no consequence for our present considerations."

[11] Wolfgang Schulze, "Countermarks from before the Arab Conquest," in Wolfgang Schulze and Tony Goodwin (eds.), *Countermarking in Seventh Century Syria* (*ONS Newsletter* Suppl. 183 [2011]) 23–40, at 39–40.

[12] Schulze, *INR* 4 (2009) 118–119.

countermark as an urban symbol, regardless of the precise identity of the city involved. This reading rests on the fact once more that in 21 out of the 25 cases known to Schulze the countermark was punched over the mintmark or *officina* number. Even when that number is reduced to 21 out of 27 examples by the publication here of two further examples, this number remains significant. However, one needs to ask what the alternatives were for those punching the countermark. If they punched it over the denomination M, they could have seemed to be revaluing the coins, and they may have wished to avoid that. As for the fields to the sides of and above the denomination M, the vast majority of the *folles* struck pre-539 depicted a cross in the field above the M, and many also included a cross to either side of this mark.[13] Consequently, many workmen may have wished to avoid punching the countermark over one of these crosses out of religious sensibilities. In this way, they may have developed a habit of punching the countermark over the mintmark or *officina* number instead, even when there were no actual crosses in the fields to the side of the M. Furthermore, if the countermark had been intended as a new mintmark replacing the original of the host coin, this fact could have been made much clearer by maintaining the traditional form of a mintmark in abbreviation of the name of the relevant city or region. It is this last point which so distinguishes the use of the eagle countermark from, for example, the countermarking performed under Heraclius in Sicily ca. 620. In that case, two countermarks were used simultaneously, and one was always placed over the mintmark of the host coin, much as in the present instance, but it abbreviated the name of Sicily, so placing its function as a new mintmark beyond any doubt.[14]

The third weakness is that the main ground Schulze has for

[13] For a cross to one or more sides of the M see Hahn and Metlich, *Money of the Incipient Byzantine Empire*, Justin I nos. 12, 13, 15, 16 (Constantinople), and 58 (Antioch); Justinian I nos. 84, 85, 87 (Constantinople) .

[14] See Philip Grierson, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection* II.1 (Washington 1968) 53–55.

locating the use of this countermark in Caesarea in particular is that Caesarea had depicted a similar eagle on some of the civic issues which it had struck during the second and third centuries A.D. However, there are two problems here. The first is that the eagle of the countermark raises its wings much higher than does the eagle on the issues struck by Caesarea, because that eagle was normally depicted with its wings much further outspread in order to support some large object above it, usually a wreath or roundel of some type.[15] Hence Schulze exaggerates the similarity between the eagle of the countermark and that of the coinage of Caesarea over 300 years previously. The second problem is that Caesarea was not the only city in the region to strike coins depicting that particular type of eagle. The coinage of Neapolis often depicted the same style of eagle also, except that this eagle used its wings to support Mount Gerizim instead of a wreath or roundel.[16] Hence the association between Caesarea and the eagle with outspread wings is not as exclusive as Schulze assumes.

The fourth weakness in Schulze's argument is that he fails adequately to explain why the authority responsible for this countermark targeted the *folles* produced before Justinian's reform of the coinage in 539 and ignored the *folles* produced during the next 100 years, if one accepts his argument. If the purpose of this countermark had been to push more coins back into circulation, then this authority ought to have been equally willing to use it upon the post-reform coins of Justinian, and those of all his successors also. Schulze speaks vaguely of putting worn coins back into circulation, but wear is not simply a matter of age, and there is no reason why some later issues which had enjoyed greater circulation could not have become as worn as many pre-reform coins. Here one may contrast the

[15] See e.g. *Roman Provincial Coinage* (online version) IV, temporary no. 10177 (Lucius Verus); IX, temporary nos. 2046–2047 (Decius), 2058 (Etruscilla), 2066 (Etruscus), 2097–2098 (Gallus).

[16] See e.g. *Roman Provincial Coinage* IX, temporary nos. 2123–2127, 2144 (Gallus), 2135–2141, 2148–2149 (Volusian).

use of the eagle countermark to that of the two monogrammatic countermarks apparently used in Palaestina Prima during the period ca. 633–636.[17] It is noteworthy that of the 173 host coins for these monogrammatic countermarks, only 1 belonged to the reign of Justin I, 1 to the reign of Justinian I, and 1 to the reign of Justin II, while 29 belonged to the reign of Maurice and 135 to the earlier years of Heraclius. The marked contrast between the dates of the host coins for the eagle countermark and those of the host coins for the monogrammatic countermarks deserves some explanation. Here one should note that, while there does seem to have been some sort of interruption of the coin supply to Caesarea during the period 539–565, the supply was resumed, and this alone cannot explain why the authorities there should seem to have targeted the pre-539 coins alone for countermarking, according to Schulze's interpretation.[18]

Finally, the fifth weakness is that the dating of this countermark to ca. 639–641 means that it seems inconsistent with the clear preference for the use of the imperial monogram as the countermark of choice both before and after that period, whether the monogrammatic countermarks of Heraclius probably used in Palaestina Prima ca. 633–636, as already noted, or the monogram of Constans II (or Constantine IV) used as a countermark on Cyprus ca. 660–673.[19] In this context, one

[17] See Wolfgang Schulze, Ingrid Schulze, and Wolfgang Leimenstoll, "Heraclian Countermarks on Byzantine Copper Coins in Seventh-Century Syria," *BMGS* 30 (2006) 1–27. Schulze, in *Countermarking in Seventh Century Syria* 23–24, refers to these as Class 1 countermarks which he divides into Type 1, with 18 variants, and Type 2, with 5 variants. However, the two types are so similar that it is doubtful whether they were ever really intended as distinct countermarks, all the more so in the case of their numerous minor variants.

[18] On the interruption of the coin supply see Evans, *The Joint Expedition to Caesarea* 22, 47.

[19] For the countermark from Cyprus see Class 7 in Schulze, *Countermarking in Seventh Century Syria* 30–39.

notes that the sudden abandonment of the imperial monogram as the countermark of choice might also have provoked unnecessary controversy and dangerous suspicions concerning one's loyalty to the emperor, and it is doubtful whether any Byzantine official would have wanted to risk this.

So what alternatives, if any, are there to Schulze's interpretation of the date and purpose of the eagle countermark? One possibility that at least deserves to be mentioned is that this countermark may have been used simultaneously with one or both of the monogrammatic countermarks used in Palaestina Prima ca. 633–636. After all, if these countermarks were being used to revalue the coinage, there is no reason why it cannot have been revalued so as to create two new denominations, one denoted by a monogrammatic countermark and a second denoted by the eagle countermark, where, given the relative scarcity of coins with the latter countermark, this may have been intended to act as the higher denomination. There are perhaps two main advantages to this interpretation. First, it may explain why the eagle countermark took the form that it did, because the imperial monogram was already in use and it was important that the second countermark be easily distinguishable from this monogram. A slight variant of the imperial monogram may not have been distinct enough, but an eagle would still look sufficiently imperial without running the risk of confusion with the other countermark. Second, it may also help explain why the authority responsible for the eagle countermark targeted for this countermark the *folles* produced before the reform of 539, while that responsible for the monogrammatic countermarks favoured the coinage of Maurice and later for those countermarks, because these were really the same authority implementing a co-ordinated plan of complementary countermarks. A key point here is that the pre-reform *folles* all bore a very distinct profile bust in contrast to the front-facing bust that became standard after the reform. Hence it increased the ease with which the two new denominations could be distinguished from one another if the eagle countermark signaling the higher denomination was reserved for the host coins with a profile bust, which were fewer in number anyway, and

the monogrammatic countermarks signaling the lower denomination were reserved for the more numerous host coins with a front facing bust.

Against this interpretation, however, one notes, first, that the placing of the eagle countermark reveals a care and consistency absent in the placing of the monogrammatic countermarks of ca. 633–636, which seem to have been arbitrarily struck anywhere on either obverse or reverse. This contrast in approaches may suggest different authorities or contexts also. Next, it ought to have been possible to create a countermark personal to an emperor while also avoiding his monogram so that one should not have needed to resort to a symbol as impersonal as an eagle. Here one thinks of the use of the imperial bust as a countermark in Sicily under Heraclius, whether one bust in the case of Heraclius himself ca. 620 or two busts in the case of Heraclius and his son Heraclius Constantine ca. 631–641.[20] Finally, it is perhaps unnecessarily complex to argue that two completely different countermarks were applied simultaneously in order to create two new denomination coins when there is no clear parallel for such behaviour during the other instances of countermarking under Heraclius.

Other possibilities need to be explored, and the obvious place to start is with the significance of the eagle itself. Here one must acknowledge that the eagle was a common symbol in the ancient and early medieval worlds with a wide variety of potential meanings depending upon the context.[21] In a traditional Roman context, before the Christianization of the empire beginning with the reign of Constantine I (306–337), an eagle might have been used to symbolize the power of the state, when the main standard of the Roman army was the *aquila* or

[20] See Grierson, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins* II.1 53–55.

[21] Of course, the symbolic use of the eagle long preceded Greco-Roman civilisation and was not confined to the Mediterranean world. For a summary of the evidence, with the emphasis on one particular type, see Rudolf Wittkower, "Eagle and Serpent. A Study in the Migration of Symbols," *JWarb* 2 (1939) 293–325.

eagle-standard. It might also have been used to symbolize the *apotheosis* of the emperor, or other member of the imperial family, because it had been the custom to release an eagle from the funeral pyre of the emperor in order to symbolize the ascent of his soul to heaven.[22] Similarly, the eagle might also have been used to symbolize the god Jupiter, because Jupiter was believed to use eagles as his messengers and was even alleged to have transformed himself into one once in order to kidnap Ganymede. In a Christian context, an eagle was the symbol of St. John the Evangelist and, depending on the precise context, might even have been used to allude to a variety of passages in the Bible where the eagle is mentioned positively.[23] With the Christianization of the empire, the eagle-standard was replaced by the *labarum* as the main symbol of the Roman state and, eventually, by the cross itself.[24] However, the eagle did retain some symbolic power, although at a secondary level. For example, Christian emperors continued to allow themselves to be depicted on the coinage with the *scipio*, an eagle-sceptre, as late as the reign of Philippicus (711–713), although a cross was often depicted in association with the eagle.[25] Finally, one should not forget that the Roman love of visual puns continued into late antiquity, and that the Latin term for an eagle (*aquila*) was also a relatively common male

[22] For the release of the eagle at an imperial funeral see e.g. Herodian 4.2.10. Consequently, an eagle often featured as the main device upon the reverse of so-called consecration coins struck in memory of deceased members of the imperial family. In general see Simon Price, "From Noble Funerals to Divine Cult: The Consecration of Roman Emperors," in D. Cannadine and S. Price (eds.), *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge 1987) 56–105.

[23] On the eagle as a symbol of St. John the Evangelist see e.g. Augustine *De consensu evangelistarum* 1.6.9. For biblical passages in positive reference to eagles see e.g. Exod 19:4, Deut 32:11, Is 40:31.

[24] The *aquila* disappeared from the coinage under Constantine I, although it made a brief re-appearance under the usurper Magnentius. See J. P. C. Kent, *RIC* VIII (London 1981), Rome nos. 177, 179.

[25] Grierson, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins* II.2, Philippicus nos. 1–16, 19.

name, so that an eagle was an obvious choice of symbol for someone whose name, or *signum*, was Aquila, or something similar, or even instead Aetius, derived from the Greek term for an eagle (ἀετός).[26]

As far as the present countermark is concerned, it is clear that many of the traditional symbolic functions of the eagle are irrelevant. It would be absurd to suggest that it contains any reference either to Jupiter or to the *apotheosis* of some imperial figure. Furthermore, it is also clear that many of the potential Christian symbolic functions of the eagle are equally irrelevant here. For example, it would make no sense to interpret the eagle of this countermark as a symbol of St. John the Evangelist. Nor can one plausibly explain it in allusion to some biblical passage. Finally, it would surely have been regarded as tantamount to rebellion should some official have dared to countermark the coinage with an eagle in play upon his own name at this point in time. Perhaps the most productive approach here is to pay proper attention to the context and ask what an eagle would have meant to most of those handling the countermarked coins in the context of the other types of coins circulating alongside them. In this context, the probability is that it would have reminded them of the eagle that topped the *scipio* or consular sceptre as depicted on many of the coins of Tiberius Constantine (*fig.* 4), Maurice Tiberius, and Phocas even.[27]

So does it make any historical sense at all that, sometime during the late sixth or early seventh century, someone should have begun countermarking the imperial coinage with a sym-

[26] It is arguable that an eagle was depicted on the coinage at Arles in 360–363 in play upon the name of a senior official there. See David Woods, "Julian, Arles, and the Eagle," *JLA* 7 (2014) 49–64.

[27] Hahn, *NC* 138 (1978) 181, makes this point in so far as he links the eagle of the countermark to that of the 3-nummi coin with eagle at Alexandria, and that eagle to that of the *scipio* on the coins of these earlier emperors.



Figure 4: *Follis* struck at Constantinople in 578/9 (d. 35 mm.)
Obverse, Tiberius Constantine, consular sceptre topped by an eagle
Numismatica Ars Classica, Auction 84 (May 2015), lot 1336
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www.arsclassicacoins.com

bol intended to recall the office of consul? One immediately thinks here of the initial revolt by the exarch of Africa Heraclius and his son Heraclius, the future emperor, against Phocas in 608. The peculiarity of this revolt was that father and son declared themselves consuls rather than emperors during it, and in this way they seem to have wished to emphasize their obedience to the senate and civil authority rather than to appear the military opportunists that they actually were.[28] Before their final deposition of Phocas in October 610, the legends of their coins always referred to them as consuls, and the obverse always depicted one or both in consular robes.[29] The mint at Carthage only depicted a single bust in consular robes on its copper output, with or without a beard according to whether it was meant to represent Heraclius father or son. Otherwise, all

[28] W. E. Kaegi, *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium* (Cambridge 2003) 40–42.

[29] See Wolfgang Hahn and Michael Metlich, *Money of the Incipient Byzantine Empire Continued: Justin II – Revolt of the Heraclii, 565–610* (Vienna 2009) 203–206.



Figure 5: half-*follis* struck at Carthage 608–610 (d. 20 mm.)
Obverse, Heraclius, consular sceptre topped by an eagle
Classical Numismatic Group, Printed Auct. 99 (May 2015), lot 779
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www.cngcoins.com

the gold and copper coins depicted joint busts in consular robes. For whatever reason, the joint busts seem never to have been depicted holding consular sceptres, whereas the single consular bust from Carthage was nearly always depicted holding a consular sceptre with eagle (*fig.* 5). Admittedly, this eagle was different to that used in the countermark, since it seems always to have held it wings closed tightly against its body rather than spread wide and high above its head. However, the same mints had often depicted different styles of eagle upon the sceptre of the same emperor during the late sixth century in such a way as to suggest that no particular importance was to be attached to the precise form of the eagle.[30] Similarly, no

[30] A third style of eagle, with wings only a little spread to either side, seems to have been the dominant style overall. Unfortunately, the standard catalogues do not differentiate between the styles of eagle, and there does not seem to be any systematic study of this issue. Grierson, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins* II.1 87–88, discusses sceptres in brief, but only distinguishes between the cross-sceptre and the eagle-sceptre, not between the different types of eagle-sceptre. My comments here are based on a quick survey of

particular significance ought to be attached to the fact that the authority responsible for the countermark chose to prefer one style of eagle to the other. The key point here is that, in the context of the coinage of this period, an eagle had effectively become a symbol of the consulship, regardless of the precise position of its wings.[31]

It is arguable, therefore, that the use of the eagle countermark better fits the period of the revolt of the Heraclii, 608–610, when they were anxious to stress their submission to legitimate civilian authority and did not want to be seeming to act in the manner of emperors when they had not yet been elected to this role, than it does any subsequent period. Five arguments may be adduced in support of this interpretation, the first being that it explains the choice of an eagle as a countermark rather than a monogram. The advantage of the eagle was that it symbolised a traditional civil office, that of consul, and did not necessarily hint at imperial pretensions in the way that a personal monogram would have. As such, it emphasized the restraint of the Heraclii and their submission to the appropriate civil authority.

Secondly, the identification of the eagle countermark as a product of the period of the revolt of the Heraclii perhaps better explains the territorial spread of finds from Nag Hammadi to Caesarea Maritima than does the claim that it was a product of a besieged Caesarea. At the same time that the future emperor Heraclius led a naval expedition towards Constantinople in 609, his cousin Nicetas pursued an advance by land through

the standard catalogues and auction material. While the eagle with wings outspread above its head, and cross between these, dominated on the consular coinage of Tiberius Constantine, it became far less common on the consular coinage of Maurice, and was very rare on that of Phocas.

[31] The wide variety of styles of eagles on the *scipio* as depicted on the surviving ivory diptychs of the fifth and sixth centuries proves that there had never been such a thing as a standard consular *scipio*. In general see Cecilia Olovsdotter, *The Consular Image: An Iconological Study of the Consular Diptychs* (Oxford 2005) 74–79.

Egypt and may have advanced into Palestine and Syria during 610.[32] It is possible that it was he who authorized the use of the eagle countermark and that he did so not to revalue coinage but for propaganda and symbolic purposes, in order to signify that the illegitimate rule of the military usurper Phocas had now been replaced by that of consuls. His forces then brought the countermarked coins with them, or simply continued countermarking them, as they advanced into Palestine, not least towards the key political and administrative centre Caesarea.

Thirdly, the suggestion that Nicetas authorized the use of the eagle countermark may help explain the rather late date by which his new military mint at Alexandria seems to have begun striking coins, only in indiction 14 beginning September 610, late, that is, if, as seems likely, he had completed his conquest of most of Egypt by the spring of 610.[33] The countermarking of coins may have begun in summer 610 as the prelude to the striking of the new consular coinage, and in that sense, as a temporary expedient before the striking of new coins in the names of the two Heraclii as consuls, the coins bearing the eagle countermark may be described as pseudo-consular coins.

Fourthly, this interpretation may also explain why the authority responsible for striking this countermark targeted the *folles* produced before the reform of 539. The key point here is that the front-facing bust that replaced the profile bust as the standard imperial bust after 539 was much more militaristic in that the emperor was now depicted with a helmet and shield.

[32] Kaegi, *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium* 44–53.

[33] I follow Hahn and Metlich, *Money of the Incipient Byzantine Empire Continued* 71, who attribute the copper coins marked ΑΛЄΞΑΝΔ to Alexandria in Egypt rather than to Alexandria ad Issum in Cilicia (Alexandretta), and deny the existence of any such coins dated to indiction 13, describing such claims as the results of the misreading of coins properly dated to indiction 14. However, the present interpretation would not exclude the possibility that some coins may yet be discovered to have been struck in indiction 13, in which case the countermarked coins should be interpreted as a prelude to them rather than to those dated indiction 14.

In contrast, the profile bust had depicted a diademed, draped, and cuirassed emperor where the cuirass was greatly obscured by a cloak. The result was that the bust used before 539 seemed much more civilian in appearance than that used subsequently. Hence the authority responsible for the use of the eagle countermark may have preferred to target the pre-539 coinage because it thought that the more civilian-appearing bust better suited the message that it intended to convey by means of this countermark. Yet this is not to say that the question of wear had nothing to do with this choice. After all, the mints at Constantinople and Antioch had struck *folles* depicting a consular bust under most of the emperors, sometimes for prolonged periods, and these ought to have seemed a better target set for countermarking if the only factor at play here was consistency between the eagle countermark and the bust on the host coin.[34] However, these coins would have been far more recent and unworn in general than the pre-539 issues. Hence the decision to target the pre-539 coins in particular is best explained as the result of a combination of two factors, both consistency with the intended message of the eagle countermark and wear, where wear was relevant not only because heavily worn coins risked passing out of circulation and so needed their period of circulation to be prolonged in some way, but also because the countermark was much more obvious on such coins also, and so better served its symbolic or propaganda purposes.

Finally, the dating of the use of the eagle countermark to the revolt of the Heraclii in 610 coheres nicely with the countermarking performed under Heraclius in Sicily ca. 620 in that the relevant authorities targeted the same group of host coins in each case, pre-539 *folles* with profile bust. It is not clear why the authority responsible for the countermarking in Sicily ca. 620 should have targeted these coins in particular, but one pos-

[34] See e.g. Hahn and Metlich, *Money of the Incipient Byzantine Empire Continued*, Tiberius II nos. 24–25 (Constantinople), 47 (Antioch); Maurice nos. 68 (Constantinople), 95–96 (Antioch).

sibility is that it may have been influenced by knowledge that the last programme of countermarking under Heraclius had targeted this very group also.

In conclusion, there is no easy and obvious answer to the question who it was that stamped the eagle countermark on the *folles* dating from before the coinage reform of 539, or why this authority did so. However, the possibility that Nicetas, the cousin of the future emperor Heraclius, ordered the countermarking of these coins as he advanced from Egypt into Palestine during the summer of 610 in order to signal the change of government from Phocas to the Heraclii as consuls has perhaps greater explanatory potential than any of the interpretations offered heretofore. It best explains the choice of the eagle for the countermark, the provenance of surviving specimens from Egypt and Israel, and the decision to target for the countermarking the *folles* struck before the reform of 539. However, further discoveries may yet change the parameters of the debate.

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