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Constans II, Cherson or Bosporus, and the Reform of the Copper Coinage under Constantine IV

by

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Abstract. It is argued that an unusually heavy copper type of Constans II which has traditionally been dated to about 658/9 and attributed to either Cherson or Bosporus was probably a half-follis struck in Constantinople just before the accession of Constantine IV in 668 and his reform of the copper coinage.

A copper type of Constans II (641–68),which has usually been dated to about 658/9 and attributed to either Cherson or Bosporus, should be re-attributed (**Fig. 1**). The reverse depicts a standing figure, with a long beard, wearing a chlamys and a crown with a small cross on top. He faces forwards and holds a long cross in his right hand. To the right of him, the letter K appears above the letter B. The obverse depicts two standing figures, again facing forwards. The taller figure is identical to the bearded figure of the reverse except that he holds a *globus cruciger* in his right hand rather than a long cross. The shorter figure is clean-shaven, dressed and crowned in the same manner as the bearded figure, and also bears a *globus cruciger* in his right hand. A small cross occurs between the two figures just above their heads. There is no legend or letters on the obverse. Despite the absence of legends, it is generally agreed that the bearded figure represents Constans II and the shorter figure his eldest son Constantine IV (668–85). A comparison with the depiction of Constans II elsewhere on his coinage easily proves as much. Finally, one notes that this type is relatively rare. Sidorenko was only able to catalogue 15 examples in his invaluable study of the coinage attributed to Bosporus, although at least four new examples have appeared on the market since.[1]



Fig. 1. Half-follis of Constans II attributed to Cherson or Bosporus (25mm, 6.18g), *DOC* 210 = *MIB* 227. © Numismatik Lanz

This type presents three immediate difficulties: the identification of its denomination, the mint which struck it and its date.

[1] V. Sidorenko, 'The copper coinage of Byzantine Bosporos', in A. Aibabin and H. Ivakin (eds), *Kiev-Cherson-Constantinople: Ukrainian Papers at the XXth International Congress of Byzantine Studies (Paris, 19–25 August 2001)* (Paris, 2007), pp. 77–119. The four new examples are: Stack's (New York), *Moneta Imperii Romani Byzantini* (12 January 2009), lot 3157 (6.32g); CNG, E-Auction 322 (12 March 2014), lot 647 (31mm, 7.33g); Stavros Nicolaides (Cyprus), ebay (24 December 2018), (29mm, 8.36g) (= Fig. 2); Numismatik Lanz, ebay (28 July 2019), (25mm, 6.18g) (= Fig. 1).

The denomination

It has been identified both as a half-follis (20-nummi) and as a double-follis (80-nummi).[2] The problem here lies in the inconsistency between the apparent intended weight of this type, its only plausible denomination mark, and the normal weight of the various copper denominations struck at the different mints, particularly Constantinople. The average diameter of this type is about 26 millimetres with a maximum of 32 millimetres, and a minimum of 23 millimetres.[3] The average weight is about 6.71 grams with a maximum of 9.23 grams, and minimum (unpierced) of 4.91 grams. Sidorenko claims that most of the examples he catalogued were overstruck on the trimmed flans of earlier Constantinopolitan folles of either Heraclius (610–41) or, less commonly, Phocas (602–10). The second example illustrated here (**Fig. 2**) is the second heaviest now known (but was unknown to Sidorenko), and is clearly overstruck on a Constantinopolitan follis of Justin I (518–27).[4] One suspects that the weight of the heaviest known example is also because it was overstruck on a coin of much earlier date with a thicker flan. The average weight of the type seems to be about 30% greater than the average weight of the different types of folles struck under Constans at Constantinople until 644, and 50–100% greater than the average weight of any of the different types of folles struck there during the rest of his reign. This is certainly problematic, all the more so when the only plausible denomination mark on this type, the letter K, seems to identify it as a half-follis rather than a full follis.[5] On the face of it, therefore, this apparent half-follis seems to weigh about three to four times more than it should according to the varying weight standards in Constantinople under Constans II. This remains a problem even if this type was struck in Cherson (or Bosporus) because the coins struck there had traditionally followed the same weight standard as in Constantinople.



Fig. 2. Half-follis of Constans II attributed to Cherson or Bosporus (29mm, 8.36g), *DOC* 210 = *MIB* 227, struck over a Constantinopolitan follis of Justin I, *MIBE* 11

[2] Grierson, *DOC* 2.1, p. 38, identifies it as a half-follis; Hahn, *MIB* 3, p. 147, tentatively identifies it as a double-follis.

[3] For full details of weights and diameters, see Sidorenko, 'The copper coinage of Byzantine Bosporos', p. 102.

[4] The undertype seems to be Justin I, *MIBE* 11. The reverse of the overtype was struck over the reverse of the earlier coin at an angle of almost 90°, so that the large star that had originally appeared to the right of the large denomination letter M on the undertype is visible immediately above the head of Constans, while the letter K of the overtype faces into the last letter of the mintmark CON from the undertype. Similarly, the last part of the obverse legend from the undertype – NVSPPA – is still visible to the lower right of the smaller figure on the obverse of the overtype.

[5] On the weight of Constantinopolitan folles under Constans II, see Grierson, *DOC* 2.1, pp. 25–6.

The mint

Three main factors have contributed to the identification of the mint as either Cherson or Bosporus.[6] First, the more figural type of this coin, with a standing figure on the reverse as well as on the obverse, closely resembles that of the copper coins firmly attributable to Cherson during the late sixth and early seventh centuries.[7] Second, when more examples were published with proper provenances, it quickly became clear that all had been found in Crimea. Nine had been found near Kerch, which encouraged their attribution to Bosporus rather than to Cherson.[8] Finally, the letter B on the reverse beneath the K has encouraged some to interpret this as a mintmark abbreviating the name of Bosporus, despite the fact that no earlier coin attributed to the region had borne any sort of mintmark allowing it to be unambiguously attributed to Bosporus rather than Cherson.[9] Yet none of these arguments is very strong. Most important, it needs to be emphasised, at the risk of seeming pedantic, that the fact that all examples with a firm provenance have been found in Crimea proves only that this was where the type circulated, not that it was struck there. It remains equally possible that it was struck elsewhere, most likely at Constantinople, the nearest operational imperial mint, and then shipped to the Crimea for circulation there.



Fig. 3. (a) Follis of Constans II, Constantinople (19mm, 3.61g), *DOC* 84 = *MIB* 175; (b) Follis of Maurice, Cherson / Bosporus (30mm, 13.57g), *DOC* 303 = *MIBEC* 157. Ex CNG, Auction 88 (14 September 2011), lot 1569, www.cngcoins.com

Two main factors suggest this type was struck in Constantinople rather than in the Crimea. First, the letter K (= 20) to denote a half-follis coin is inconsistent with the practice at Cherson which had traditionally marked its copper coinage in multiples of pentanummia, although there were a few minor exceptions. Hence it

[6] V.V. Guruleva, 'Coins of Constans II struck in Cherson', in I. Ševčenko, G.G. Litaurin and W.K. Hanak (eds), *Acts. XVIIIth International Congress of Byzantine Studies. Selected Papers: Moscow 1991* (1996), vol. 4, pp. 252–7, at 255–7, also argues that traces of undertype suggest that one example of the Constans type has been struck over a follis of Heraclius struck in Cherson. If true, that would strengthen the case that this type was struck in Cherson, but, as Sidorenko, 'The copper coinage of Byzantine Bosporos', p. 96, notes, the 'very feeble traces' of the undertype do not support such an identification.

[7] Grierson, *DOC* 2.1, p. 39; Hahn, *MIB* 3, p. 148.

[8] Sidorenko, 'The copper coinage of Byzantine Bosporos', p. 97.

[9] Sidorenko, 'The copper coinage of Byzantine Bosporos', attributes several groups of coins to Bosporus rather than to Cherson on the basis of patterns of find-spot and minor variations in style from that of similar coins which can be firmly attributed to Cherson as they name the city. These variations include the lack of a mintmark. In favour of interpreting the letter B as an abbreviation of the name of Bosporus, see Grierson, *DOC* 2.1, p. 39; Sidorenko, 'The copper coinage of Byzantine Bosporos', p. 97.

had normally struck folles marked with the letter H (= 8), to denote they were worth eight pentanummia (8 x 5), rather than with the letter M (= 40) standard elsewhere, and half-folles marked with the letter Δ (= 4), to denote they were worth four pentanummia (4 x 5), rather than with the letter K (= 20) standard elsewhere. Second, the reverse of this type bears far greater similarity to the obverse of the type of follis struck at Constantinople during the period 659–64 (**Fig. 3a**) than it does to the reverse, or obverse, of any type previously struck at Cherson (or Bosporus).[10] The reverse of both folles and half-folles struck at Cherson (or Bosporus) had typically depicted a single standing figure with a long cross in his right hand and, to the right of him, a large denomination mark almost as tall as him (**Fig. 3b**). The obverse of the follis struck at Constantinople from 659 to 664 depicts two much smaller letters, one above the other, to the right of a standing figure with long cross, the denomination mark M above the letter denoting the officina, in the same way that the denomination mark K is depicted above the letter B on the reverse of the type under discussion. This parallelism suggests not only that the letter K is a denomination mark, but also that the letter B denotes the officina.

The date

Two main factors have encouraged commentators to date this type to 658/9 or to the immediately preceding period. First, it seemed possible that the letter B (= 2) could refer to the second indiction year, that is, 658/9.[11] Second, as the obverse depicts only two standing figures, Constans II with one son, this could suggest the type was struck when Constans ruled in association with one son only during the period from the coronation of his eldest son Constantine IV in April 654 until the coronation of his two younger sons, Heraclius and Tiberius, in June 659.[12]

On the first point, one notes that it was extremely unusual for copper coins to be dated by indictional rather than regnal year.[13] Furthermore, as just noted, the parallel with the obverse of the follis struck at Constantinople from 659 to 664 suggests that the B denotes the officina. This means that this type did not bear a date. While this was unusual for copper coinage, it sometimes occurred. For example, none of the folles or half-folles struck at Cherson had ever displayed dates. More important, the mint at Constantinople struck an undated follis under Constans II which has been tentatively dated to the period 666–8.[14]

On the second point, one notes that it is more appropriate to heed the iconographic conventions observed on coins of the same denomination, that is, on other half-folles, rather than those on precious metal coinage or full folles. This is an important distinction because the iconographic conventions observed on the higher denomination

[10] *DOC* 82–86 (Class 9); *MIB* 175.

[11] Hahn, *MIB* 3, p. 148. A second indiction year occurred earlier in 643/4 also but, since Constans ruled alone then, this date can be excluded from consideration.

[12] Grierson, *DOC* 2.2, p. 510. Sidorenko, 'The copper coinage of Byzantine Bosporos', p. 97, seeks to reduce this period to 655–9 on the basis that the folles of Constantinople did not depict Constans in association with his eldest son until his fifteenth regnal year, 655/6.

[13] It was used on folles of Constans struck at Syracuse in 652/3 (*DOC* 179; *MIB* 208).

[14] *DOC* 88–89 (Class 11); *MIB* 177–178.

coins do not seem to have applied to half-folles. For example, the obverse of the final type of half-follis struck at Constantinople, which bore no date and can only be roughly dated to the 660s, depicted the bearded bust of Constans alone, and none of his sons were shown on the reverse, in complete contradiction of the conventions observed on the higher denomination coins during the same period.[15] If it were not for the fact that the same dies were sometimes used for the obverses of decanummia firmly dated to the 660s, one would not hesitate to date this half-follis to the period 651–4. More important perhaps, the half-folles of Constantine IV never depicted his two brothers, despite the fact that their figures were included on solidi, hexagrams and folles struck before 681, although on the reverse rather than on the obverse.[16] In short, one cannot rely on the fact that this half-follis depicts only two emperors as ground to restrict its date to 658/9 or shortly beforehand.

The weight

Constantine IV reformed the weight of the copper coinage at Constantinople immediately following his accession as senior Augustus in October or early November 668,[17] increasing the average weight of the follis from 4.3 grams, during the last years of Constans, to 17.2 grams. The average-weight of the half-follis was increased proportionately so that when the first were struck in 673 they weighed an average of 9.4 grams.[18] This massive increase in the weight of the copper coinage immediately upon Constantine's accession strongly indicates that he, or his officials, had been considering such action even before his accession. It is not clear what provoked Constantine to undertake such a radical reform, but one can hardly avoid the conclusion that it was connected to the financial stress of the recent Arab siege of Constantinople probably only lifted in the early summer of 668.[19] It is plausible, therefore, that the striking of the type under discussion represented a tentative first step in the reform of the copper coinage struck at Constantinople. It started before it was known that Constans II had been murdered in Syracuse and climaxed shortly thereafter in the full reform instituted by Constantine IV immediately upon his accession as senior Augustus.

But why begin this reform with coins destined for circulation in the Crimea? One possibility is that this demonstrates the new importance attached to trade with Crimea following the recent Arab siege of Constantinople. Muslim forces still posed a serious threat to Constantinople's communications and trade with the rest of the Byzantine empire through the Sea of Marmara and the Aegean Sea even after the end of the siege, so the trade routes northwards to Cherson and the other Greek cities of the Black Sea littoral probably provided the safest and easiest means by which to re-supply Constantinople in case of a renewed Arab siege. Yet there is a

[15] *DOC* 95; *MIB* 185.

[16] On the half-folles of Constantine IV, see *DOC* 36–37; *MIB* 83–87.

[17] On his date of accession, see M. Jankowiak, 'The first Arab siege of Constantinople', *Travaux et Mémoires* 17 (2013), pp. 237–320, at 307–8.

[18] See Grierson, *DOC* 2.1, pp. 25–8.

[19] So suggests Jankowiak, 'The first Arab siege of Constantinople', pp. 314–15.

second possibility also. These coins may have originally been struck for ordinary distribution in Constantinople itself, but the arrival of news of the death of Constans II in Sicily before they could be put into circulation may have caused them to be distributed in the Crimea instead.[20] In support of this one notes that the new type displays nothing to suggest that it had been designed and struck specifically for use in the Crimea, while its failure to bear the Constantinopolitan mintmark would be entirely consistent with similar absences on other copper types struck there during the same approximate period. In particular, one notes that none of six types of half-follis struck at Constantinople under Constans II bear a mintmark.[21] Furthermore, there was a relatively recent precedent for the export of a limited new Constantinopolitan type for circulation in an overseas region: the export of the *Inper Const* follis, struck only in regnal year 3 (643/4), to Cyprus.[22]

Conclusion

The arguments for attributing the copper type of Constans II traditionally attributed to Cherson or Bosporus to either of those cities and dating it to 658/9, or shortly before, are far weaker than have traditionally been realised. The denomination mark is that preferred at Constantinople rather than at Cherson or Bosporus. The figural style is as reminiscent of the figural style preferred on all denominations struck at Constantinople after 659, with the exception of the fractions of the follis, as it is of the coins attributable to Cherson or Bosporus. The lack of both mintmark and date is consistent with the absence of the same on several types of copper coins struck at Constantinople during the late 660s, and the dramatically increased weight of the coin seems to anticipate the reform of the copper coinage at Constantinople instituted by Constantine IV immediately upon his accession in 668. Consequently, rather than assume that a mint at Cherson or Bosporus suddenly resumed striking copper coins for this single issue several decades after copper coins had last been struck in the region under Heraclius, the more logical conclusion is that this type was struck at Constantinople, shortly before news of the death of Constans II reached the city in late 668, as yet another new type beginning the reform of the copper coinage.

[20] I owe this suggestion to the anonymous reader.

[21] *DOC* 90–95; *MIB* 180–185.

[22] *MIB* 166. On the problems posed by this type, see D.M. Metcalf, 'Byzantine, Islamic, and Crusader coins from Saranda Kolones, Paphos', *NC* 163 (2003), pp. 205–26, at 206–7; M. Phillips, 'The import of Byzantine coins to Syria revisited', in T. Goodwin (ed.), *Arab-Byzantine Coins and History* (London, 2012), pp. 39–72, at 42, 50–1. The type is also heavily represented in the finds from the island of Rhodes, A.M. Kasdagli, *Coins in Rhodes* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 32–3.