

A Compelling Case for Authenticity

By Justin Robinson



My interest in history began as a small boy when I asked my mother about the strange photograph of a bearded man that appeared on the cover of a book she was reading. The book was Ian Wilson's 'The Turin Shroud' and it became the first 'grown up' book I ever read.

Today, I am employed as a historian for one of the largest coin companies in Europe. The company sells a wide range of rare coins, and my job is to investigate the stories behind the coins. A couple of years ago the company acquired a large number of gold Histamenon Nomisma struck during the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Michael IV (1034-1041). All were in very good condition and each bore an image of Christ on them. My colleagues in the sales department wanted some interesting stories about the coin that they could share with their customers, so I told them the best one I knew.

I gave them a presentation on the Shroud and showed them the evidence that it was most likely in Constantinople when the coins were struck. I also suggested that the coin artists could have modelled the face on the coin on the face mysteriously imprinted on the linen cloth in the Cathedral. They found it fascinating, and so did our customers. All the coins found happy customers within 24 hours.

Since then, I've had the fun of helping to find more Byzantine gold coins from suppliers around the world. I've even prepared a special chart for our purchasing team to show which fine details to look out for. Sadly, many of these ancient coins lack distinctive detail particularly around the facial area because, as the most prominent part of the coin, this is the area most prone to wear. Examples that do show good facial details are rare, and therefore much harder to source.

Since gold coins are sadly well out of my budget, I have always kept an eye out for a bronze follis from Constantinople that depicts the face of Christ with a nice amount of fine detail. Byzantine Emperors between 969AD and 1092 AD instructed the Mint to depict Christ on these coins instead of their own names and portrait. As a result they are known today as 'anonymous folles'. They would have changed hands far more often than gold coins as they circulated through the Empire. This makes it even harder to find good examples that still retain fine details, as the majority of surviving examples are very badly worn.

In February 2018 I was going through an online list of Byzantine Folles in Berlin when I suddenly found myself staring at a startlingly familiar face. It appeared on one of the first anonymous folles to be struck, during the reign of the Emperor John I Tzimiskes (969- 976AD). The Emperor's decision to replace his own portrait with the image of Christ may have been prompted by a new acquisition.

Constantinople had recently taken ownership of the holiest relic in Christendom, an ancient cloth known as the Image of Edessa or Mandylion which was said to bear a mysterious image of Christ '*not made by human hands*'. Although the cloth was considered too holy to go on public display, one assumes that our coin engraver was granted the privilege of a special viewing in order to capture a good likeness.

The cloth arrived in Constantinople amidst much rejoicing on August 15th 944AD after being acquired from the city of Edessa (today, Urfa in Southern Turkey). Contemporary paintings made of the image suggest that it was kept in a wide rectangular frame, with a circular hole cut into the centre through which the bearded face could be viewed. It is interesting to note

that artists began to depict this face as being framed within a circle, which later became known as a halo or nimbus, and a medieval symbol of divinity.



The first coins to depict an image of Christ were struck during the reign of Emperor Justinian II (692 - 695AD). At that time, it would appear that coin artists journeyed to Edessa to see the image, because the gold solidus and the smaller gold tremissis (one-third the weight of the solidus) both incorporate many fine details of the distinctive long haired and bearded face mysteriously imprinted on the cloth.

However, the Mint appears to have been reluctant to keep sending their artists on long distance business trips, and later gold coins depicting Christ became increasingly inferior copies of the first strikes. In the eighth century,

a fierce debate raged through the Eastern Church about whether it was heretical to make images of the Son of God. Many paintings of Christ were destroyed, and no coins were struck bearing his image for over a century.

Engraving a portrait onto a small circular die required formidable talent, consummate patience and perfect vision. Given the large number of circulating bronze folles required for the Byzantine Empire, a relatively simple design would have been required, so that the Mint could replace the dies quickly as they wore out. This posed a challenge to the coin engraver entrusted with designing the image to appear on the coin; there would be no time to create the elaborate and exquisitely detailed dies which had been crafted for the more prestigious gold coins.

Our engraver appears to have taken a novel approach to replicating the face on his design for the bronze folles. Unable to create a beautiful portrait

incorporating detailed facial features, he instead carefully copied the faint lines that make up the ghost-like image. The result may have lacked the elegance of the gold coins, but accurately replicated the mysterious face on Constantinople's most important holy relic.

To make the coins, the image would be cut directly into a small metal die. Dies were usually made from hardened bronze or iron, and two would be required for a coin. The obverse or lower die would be fixed into an anvil, and a blank flan, heated to make it more malleable, would be placed on top of it. The upper, or reverse die was cut directly into the end of a small metal punch that was placed over the blank. The punch would then be struck sharply with a hammer to stamp the designs on each side of the flan, thereby creating the coin.



The lower die would generally be used for the more detailed image as it was always better protected within the anvil and consequently sustained less damage than the upper die which would be struck

repeatedly. Coin dies naturally had a very limited lifespan and would be destroyed at the end of their use to prevent them falling into the hands of counterfeiters. For this reason, few ancient dies have survived to the present day. But we can see what the original image engraved into the die would have looked like, simply by flipping the image that appears on the struck coin.

It is the opinion of this author that the image struck on a Bronze Follis by an anonymous engraver at the Mint of Constantinople in the tenth century is compelling evidence that the Cloth of Edessa and the Shroud of Turin are the same historical artefact. When flipped and viewed alongside an image of the face on the Shroud, the similarities are extraordinary, especially when you consider that our engraver was working on an area little more than a centimetre in diameter.



Most striking of all is the distinctive ‘cross’ shape incorporating the eyebrows, forehead and nose. There is a long horizontal band above the eyes, bisected by a long vertical line that starts at the hairline and extends downwards to become a long nose. The base of the nose connects to a smaller horizontal line that forms the moustache, which slopes down slightly on the left-hand side.

There is a distinctive mark on the right cheek, and beneath the moustache is a small square and a forked beard. The long hair, which hangs down on both sides of the face has two parallel strands of hair at the bottom left of the image. All of these features can be seen clearly on the image on the Shroud, and the result is a coin that I would suggest resembles the Shroud image far too closely to be dismissed as a coincidence.
