

IMITATIONS OF THE FOLLES OF CONSTANS II

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INTRODUCTION

This paper considers the Byzantine style copper coins, which imitate the folles of Constans II, and which are generally described as "Arab imitations". It is based on a presentation made at the ONS Study Day held at the British Museum on April 4th 1992, but modified as necessary in the light of the subsequent discussions.

The coins usually appear on the market in large unprovenanced lots mixed with regular Byzantine coins, and apparently originating from Syria, Lebanon or Israel. The observations in this paper are based largely on the examination of a number of these lots and also the author's collection of about 400 coins. Although these coins have been known to numismatists for many years, the literature on them is confined to articles by Kirkbride¹ (in which he catalogued and illustrated 63 examples), Metcalf^{1,2} and part of a plate in Hahn.²

THE PROTOTYPES

The prototypes generally appear to be as follows (all Constantinople mint):

1. Folles of years 1-6, with an obverse of Constans, beardless, standing holding a long cross and globus cruciger and the legend "ENTUTONIKA". The reverse has a cursive M, usually with ANA-NEOS on either side and the officina and regnal year below. (BCV 1000-1003).³ See Catalogue nos. 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 12, 15 and 21.

2. Folles of year 3 with an obverse facing bust of Constans holding a globus cruciger and the legend "INPER. CONST". The reverse has an uncial M with "ANA-NEOS" to the left and below, and the regnal year to the right. (BCV 1004). See Catalogue nos. 3, 10 and 11.

3. Folles of year 11, with a similar obverse to those of year 3, except that Constans has a long beard. The reverse has an uncial M with "ANA-NEOS" on either side and the regnal year below. (BCV 1006). See Catalogue nos. 6 and 14.

The majority of imitations are clearly based on prototype 1, but those based on 2 and 3 are not uncommon. Other prototypes are possibilities, for example a small proportion of the standing figure imitations show beards (e.g. Cat. 17) and could very well be based on folles from later in Constans' reign. However, I am more inclined to regard them as rather freer adaptations of 1, the beard being merely added because it was normal wear. It is also possible that some coins apparently based on 2 or 3 were really copied from gold or silver prototypes.

I have not covered two extensive series of imitations, namely those with a three figure obverse which are based on folles of years 17-19 of Heraclius minted in Cyprus, and those with a two figure obverse. These latter usually have one figure in military dress and so could either be based on Heraclius folles of years 20-30 or on Constans folles of year 15 onwards. However, as their module is often larger than the Constans coins, I have assumed that they are generally based on Heraclian prototypes and are therefore outside the scope of this paper. It is however quite possible that some of the Heraclius imitations are in fact contemporary with the Constans imitations and it should be noted that a number of the two figure types have anomalous cursive M reverses, which suggests that they were minted after Heraclius' death.

THE IMITATIONS

Whilst it would be premature to attempt a definitive classification of this extensive series, it is possible to assign most of them to one of four categories in terms of style and fabric:

- A. Passable imitations
- B. Crude imitations with vestigial legends
- C. Free adaptations of good Byzantine style
- D. Free adaptations with new stylistic components

These four categories are considered in more detail below:

A. Passable imitations, usually of the beardless standing emperor types (e.g. Cat. 21) and usually with a cursive M reverse, but occasionally with an anomalous uncial M (Cat. 1). The legends are usually blundered and often completely nonsensical, but sometimes the obverse legend is perfectly reproduced and occasionally it is missing completely. There is very rarely any attempt to give a regnal year, but it is not uncommon to find a "mint signature" in the exergue (e.g. Cat. 1, 19). The module and method of preparation of the flans for this category seems to be almost identical to those of the regular Constantinople issues. For the purposes of broad classification it seems sensible to include within this group a series of imitations of the bearded bust type recently published by Mansfield⁴ all of which have a "year XX" reverse. (See Cat. 6 for a closely related type).

B. Crude imitations, usually of the standing emperor type, usually with either no obverse legend or just a few blundered letters and a nonsensical reverse legend (e.g. Cat. 4, 7). It is possible to identify two quite common stylistic traits within this category which indicate that the die cutter was either "copying copies" or working largely from memory:

i) Coins in which the standing figure has a robe of pronounced triangular shape (Cat. 4).

ii) Coins in which the head of the very simplified standing figure has almost the appearance of having a pair of rams' horns attached to it (Cat. 7). The module is usually smaller than average and is often triangular, indicating a reused quartered flan as a blank.

The practice of using quartered flans was not uncommon in regular Byzantine mints, but within category B are many examples where the flans seem to have been prepared in this rather distinctive manner:

i) Coins with a roughly rectangular flan of normal thickness, which has the appearance of having been chiselled from a sheet of metal (Cat. 5, 7).

ii) Coins of similar shape to i) but much thinner and with the appearance of having been snipped from a thin metal sheet. The corners of the flan are also often snipped.

Note that there is no absolute distinction between categories A and B and a number of coins on the borderline could be regarded as belonging to either.

C. Well produced coins of bold purely Byzantine style, imitating both standing figure and imperial bust types, but clearly not intended to be close copies of their prototypes (Cat. 8, 9, 10, 11). They have quite well formed letters, although the inscriptions make little sense and the flans of some specimens are distinctly larger than those of the prototypes. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that these coins were deliberately intended to be "different", for whatever reason.

D. Coins in which the die engravers are beginning to innovate artistically and deviate from the standard Byzantine iconography by adding imaginative details to the emperor's robe or headdress and replacing parts of the legend by stars, crescents or scrolls (Cat. 17). Pellets sometimes appear between the upright strokes of the cursive M (Cat. 15, 16). This is not just a case of the die engravers misunderstanding the iconography and legends of the prototypes but a genuine exploration of the decorative possibilities of the basic design, as with Celtic copies of Greek coins. These characteristics are common to early Arab-Byzantine coinage, and a "hoard" recently published by Milstien⁵ contains imitations within this category die linked with coins with Arabic inscriptions on the reverse (all of which are mintless). It is therefore possible that some of the coins in this category represent a final transitional stage before the emergence of the true Arab-Byzantine coinage. If this is the case, they take on an extra interest as illustrations of a very early stage indeed in the development of Islamic art.

It is worth noting that all the above categories contain a significantly greater than chance proportion of coins with die axes at 180°, although the proportion is rather less than for regular Constans issues.

"MINT MARKS" AND OTHER LEGENDS

There is little doubt that the majority of inscriptions on these coins are either blundered copies of those on the prototypes or the result of illiterate die cutters using the few letters they had learned in a random manner. However, the recent discovery of important folles from Jerusalem and Ludd (Cat. 18) should serve as a warning against dismissing all the inscriptions as nonsense. Both these coins⁶ are exactly the same as normal imitatives both in fabric and style, and lack most of the characteristics of mainstream Arab-Byzantine coins.

The most common place for the occurrence of anything resembling a meaningful inscription is below the exergual line as a "mint mark" and Table I lists 18 noted from the author's collection, MIB or the article by Kirkbride mentioned earlier.

TABLE I. "MINT MARKS"











CON	COI	CION	CAO	CAT	CTIN	CHK	KYZ	KHX
KEP	OHO	OIY	TON	TAO	IAI	PAΓ	4P4	9KP

Many of these are standard Byzantine mint marks or obvious corruptions; even so it is slightly odd that they were used on the imitations when mint marks never appear on the prototypes (note also the anomalous use of NIKO on both the Ludd coin mentioned above and some imitations of late Heraclian folles). The number of marks with a central A may be the result of the common occurrence of A indicating year 1 on some of Constans' folles. It should be noted that OHO occurs quite frequently and on a number of different types. The more promising marks such as KEP or PAΓ occur only rarely and I am unable to find any plausible explanation.

So far as other parts of the inscription are concerned there is little worthy of comment except to note the rather frequent appearance of a symbol like an elongated "B" (Cat.21), often on its side and to draw attention to some of the coins in categories A or B, such as Cat. 9, with quite well formed letters which could just possibly be meaningful, as they are very different from those on the prototypes.

COUNTERMARKS (Cat. 20, 22, 23, 24)

A small proportion of imitative coins bear countermarks, which comprise short Arabic words, geometric shapes or occasionally Byzantine style monograms and representations of animals. Those known to me are listed below (with the exceptions of the animal countermarks which it is hoped will form the subject of a separate note in the ONS Newsletter by M. Phillips).

				
1. (Ref. 5)	2. (Ref. 6)	3. (Ref. 7)	4. (Cat. 22)	5. (Cat. 22)
				
6.	6. (Cat. 20)	8. (Ref. 11)	9. (Cat. 23)	10. (Cat. 24)

What is the significance of these countermarks and when were they applied? There is some helpful evidence on dating contained in the publication of a small hoard of post-reform fulus by Qedar,⁷ which illustrates two coins overstruck on already countermarked imitative folles. As the post reform fulus appear to be very early types, we can deduce that the countermarks were applied either during or shortly before the period of Arab-Byzantine coinage.

So far as purpose is concerned we are reduced to speculation, but the following are the most likely possibilities:

1. The validation of coins for circulation within a particular town or area, either at a time when many forgeries were circulating or when another type of coin was the normal legal tender.
2. The validation of coins as suitable for payment of poll tax. This explanation was put forward by Lowick in his analysis of the countermarks in the Mardin hoard⁸ and could apply to the much earlier period under consideration here.

There are of course other possibilities, but any theory must be capable of explaining the apparently small percentage of coins countermarked. We can therefore rule out the wholesale countermarking of coins to circulate within a province, as with the common 7th c. Sicilian or Cypriot examples. If we are to accept the first explanation above, the area must have been small; if we accept the second, we must assume that the authorities withdrew these coins from circulation once the poll tax was paid and that all that remain are a few strays.

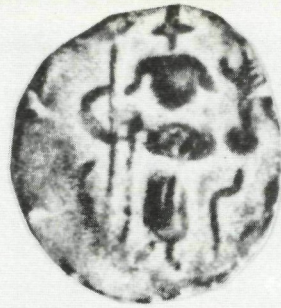
Two further observations may be relevant; firstly most of the countermarked coins known to me show light to moderate wear with the countermarks slightly less worn; secondly they do not all appear to have been applied only to particularly bad imitations, although the only examples known to me of 6 and 10 are on rather poor specimens. Apart from no. 7 I do not know of any of the above countermarks occurring on regular coins.



13



14



15



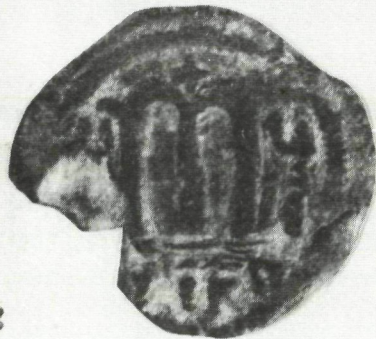
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18



19



20



21



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DATING

Constans II came to the throne in 641, which gives an earliest start date for the imitations of the early 640s. In the author's collection is one example of an early Arab-Byzantine coin of Hims overstruck on a Constans II imitative (Cat. 25), and I have seen one or two others, so it appears that minting had ceased by the mid 680s. This gives a possible 40 year period in which minting took place; can we narrow it down any further? I believe that we cannot do so at present with any certainty, in the almost complete absence of provenanced hoards or relevant excavation reports. However, the fact that most of the coins imitate early Constans types and that the imitations are not noticeably more worn than regular coins (see below) suggests an early start date. On the other hand the die matches reported by Milstien⁵ between category D coins and those with Arabic legends suggests a late finish date. It therefore seems probably that the imitations were produced over a lengthy period, perhaps as much as 30 years. It is also worth noting that a longer rather than shorter period of minting is consistent with Qedar's proposition⁶ of more or less continuous mint activity in Syria throughout the 7th century.

MINTING AUTHORITY

Before discussing who minted the imitations it is worth making a couple of observations about the lots which appear on the market:

1. Only lots originating from Syria, Lebanon and Israel contain a significant proportion of imitations. Those originating from Turkey usually contain very few or none at all (a small part of modern Turkey was of course under Arab rule throughout the period under consideration). Furthermore published hoard evidence from Cyprus suggests that they do not occur frequently there.^{9, 10}

2. Lots often contain more or less equal proportions of regular and irregular Constans issues, often with similar patinas and giving every appearance of having been found in the same place. (This is backed up by the recording of 10 regular and 8 irregular Constans II coins in the Antioch excavation report.¹⁴) Wear is often only moderate and it does not appear that the regular coins are generally more worn than the irregulars, or vice versa. Regular folles of all years of Constans occur, although perhaps those of year 16 are rather less common. In contrast the irregular coins predominantly imitate prototypes of the earliest years of the reign and particularly the beardless standing emperor types. I have never come across any folles of Constantine IV, although this could conceivably be because dealers pick out these much larger coins before offering the lots for sale. There are very occasional examples of imitations which exhibit some of the characteristics of Constantine IV, such as the diagonal spear behind the bust, but the two examples which I have seen both exhibit the characteristics of category D above and may therefore reasonably be regarded as relatively late examples. There is also an interesting and quite distinctive series of imitations of Constantine IV folles of Sicily¹³ with suspected Pehlevi legends which were the subject of a presentation by Helen Brown at the ONS study day.

The history of Syria during this 40 year period also needs to be taken into account before attempting to draw some tentative conclusions. The Arab conquest of the whole area as far north as the Taurus mountains was completed in 640, shortly before the start of Constans' reign, and the whole area remained peaceful under Muawiya's governorship for the next 20 years. We can therefore reject the possibility that the imitations are the produce of Byzantine military mints or of Byzantine enclaves still loyal to the emperor. (Note that either of these explanations are possibilities for imitations of Heraclius). Syria was also essentially peaceful during the struggle between Ali and Muawiya and the subsequent reign of Muawiya as caliph. We can therefore reject any association between the imitations and Arab military activity.

We must next consider the possibility that some or all the imitations are the products of illegal mints, i.e. outright forgeries. Whilst this is not impossible in the case of the poorly produced coins in category B, it seems very unlikely in the case of categories C and D. These are often well produced, are sometimes of larger module than the prototypes, but most decisively often appear to be intentionally different from them. It therefore seems likely that the bulk of the coins were produced to supplement an inadequate supply of official Byzantine coins by mints which were sanctioned by the Arab authorities. These mints were presumably situated in the towns and, at least initially, staffed by Byzantine personnel. We know that those towns which surrendered to the Arabs without a fight were treated leniently and therefore the local administration and economy may both have remained largely intact. A crucial test of this theory would be whether or not particular types occur mainly in distinct localities. We also need to seek a mechanism for the large quantities of regular Byzantine folles entering Syria during the 640s. It seems unlikely that such a large and apparently regular supply could have been acquired as spoils of war, so a trade arrangement or perhaps some form of tribute is the most probable explanation.

FUTURE WORK

The conclusions and opinions in this paper have necessarily been somewhat speculative and there is much that could be done to increase our knowledge of this series and possibly also shed some light on an important period of history. The following are suggested as priorities:

1. The greatest need is for provenanced hoards or excavation material and these may already exist in middle eastern museums. It would certainly be worth searching.

2. Local accumulations from metal detector or field finds could be very useful in establishing whether particular types are associated with particular geographic areas.

3. A comprehensive die study of the already available material would be a lengthy task but could yield useful results. On a more limited scale every effort should be made to identify reverse die matches between coins with different obverse prototypes; this could easily establish whether or not the Heraclius imitations are contemporary with those considered in this paper.

4. A watch should be kept for possibly meaningful inscriptions.

5. A comprehensive list of countermarks and the types of coins on which they are struck needs to be built up.

The author would be very pleased to hear from anyone with information in any of the above areas, or with any observations on the contents of this paper.

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CATALOGUE

Obverse

1. Standing imperial figure with long cross and globus cruciger. Around ENT θ TONIKA (slightly blundered)
2. As 1 but no legend.
3. Imperial beardless bust holding globus cruciger. A few blundered letters around.
4. As 1, but cross and globus reversed. Flowing robe, blundered legend around (obverse only shown).
5. As 2 (obverse only shown).
6. Imperial bust holding globus cruciger. Long beard. No legend visible.
7. As 1, but crude figure with "ram's horns". A to l.
8. As 1, but legend ENT θ T(ONIKA).
9. As 1. I θ A to l. CO Δ to r.
10. As 3. Blundered legend.
11. Imperial bust holding globus. Beardless. (E)NTC-TON.
12. As 1, but legend blundered.
13. As 1.
14. Bearded imperial bust holding globus. Large S to r.
15. As 1, crude figure.
16. As 1.
17. Standing imperial figure with beard and flowing hair. No legend. Star to r. of head.
18. As 1. Δ IOCTIOAIC around.
19. Stylised imperial figure. (Reverse only shown).
20. As 1. Crude figure.
21. As 1. Blundered legend.
22. Imperial bust. Countermark
23. Two small imperial figures. Two countermarks, only one clear. (Obverse only shown).
24. Crude figure, details not clear. (Reverse only shown).
25. As 1. To l. *الله اعلى*

Reverse

- Majuscule M, cross above, YO to l., HO to r. Officina A. ON? in ex. (3.5g. 23mm).
- Uncial M. Star above. ONX to l. NN to r. (2.4g. 23mm)
- As 1. Die match. (2.7g. 24mm).
- Uncial M reversed, cross above X θ to l. NN to r. (2.7g. 23mm).
- Uncial M. Cross above. NO either side. NO? in ex. (3.6g. 25mm).
- Majuscule M. + above. Officina ϵ . ON-XXN (2.3g. 27mm)
- Uncial M. OI to l. XA to r. (1.7g. 21mm).
- As 5. ζ + to r. Officina Γ , CON in ex. (5.9g. 24mm).
- As 2. XNC to l. AEO to r. (3.2g. 20mm).
- As 1. ANO to l. ψ III to r. Officina B ?KIA in ex. Reverse die match with 12. (4.7g. 24mm). Hahn X31, same dies.
- As 1. AN \cdot to l. ρ II to r. Officina Δ , KYZ in ex. (3.8g. 22mm).
- Same die as 10. (4.4g. 23mm).
- As 1. μ IC to l. ? to r. A officina, \sim in ex. (2.8g. 23mm).
- Majuscule M, cross above AN-AN. (3.5g. 22mm).
- Φ AII to l. KAN to r. (2.7g. 18mm).
- As 15. ANA to l. ψ H ψ to r. $\circ\psi\circ$ in ex. (5.0g. 20mm).
- As 1. ψ to l. OH to r. +A+ in ex. (3.5g. 18mm).
- As 1. ψ II to r. NIKO in ex. (3.3g. 23mm).
- As 1. AXO to l. ?NA to r. TAO in ex. (2.3g. 21mm).
- As 1. ANO to r. Countermark - Byzantine monogram. (2.6g. 22mm).
- Uncial M. ∞ above. ϵ to r. Other blundered letters or symbols around, ... in ex. (2.4g. 28mm).
- Uncial M. ... in ex. Countermark ρ (3.0g. 24mm).
- Majuscule M. Blundered letters around. (2.4g. 21mm).
- Uncial M. Blundered letters around. (2.8g. 26mm). Countermark ψ
- Majuscule M above (EMH) to r. CIC to l. (ψ) in ex. Mint of Emesa (Walker type 27-). Overstruck on Constans II imitative. (3.1g. 24mm).

Note on sizes: Coins are illustrated approximately 2x actual size. The diameter is given in brackets after the description and is measured on the major axis for elliptical coins and the diagonal for rectangular coins.