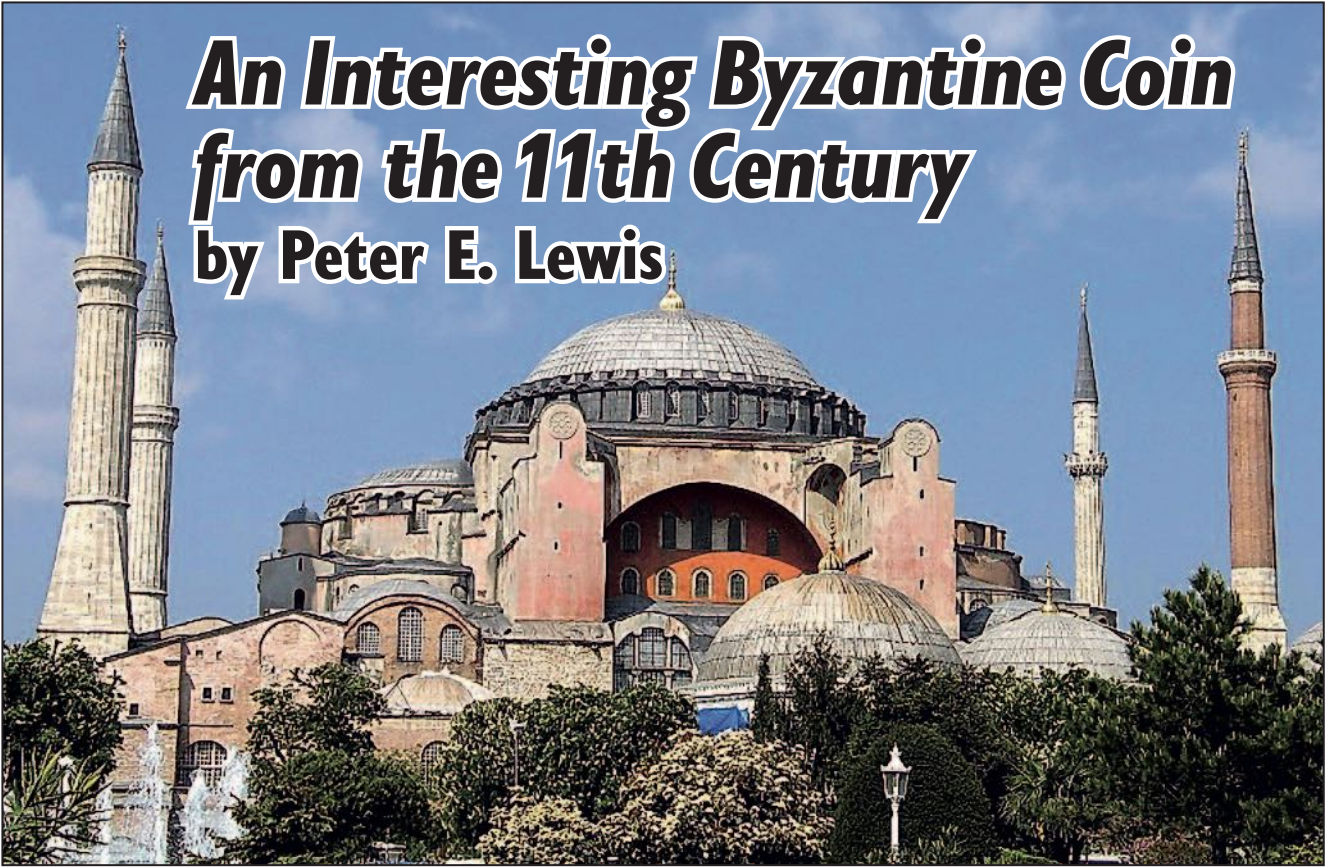


# An Interesting Byzantine Coin from the 11th Century

by Peter E. Lewis



Hagia Sophia, Istanbul. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Osvaldo Gago)

**A**T a meeting of the Gold Coast Coin Club one of the members generously gave me a Byzantine coin as a gift. He was not interested in Byzantine coins but he knew that I was. I was delighted with the gift because in my mind it transported me to a fascinating period in Byzantine history. I now have a tangible connection with people who lived at that time and handled this coin.

The coin is mostly copper, 26 mms in diameter and common. (Figure 1) It is listed in Sear's *Byzantine Coins and their Values* as number 1825. On the obverse there is a three-quarter length figure of Christ standing and facing the viewer. He has a halo and

blesses with his right hand. With his left hand he holds a book, which presumably contains the Gospels. The dots on the book are the jewels that decorated its cover. Before the invention of printing in the 15<sup>th</sup> century Bibles were very valuable and their covers were often richly decorated.

The legend surrounding Christ is not obvious, but with a little effort it can be discerned. Some of the letters are clearer on another specimen. (Figure 2) The legend is + EMMA NOVHA, which is Greek for 'Emmanuel'. This word occurs once in the New Testament (Matthew 1:13) and twice in the Old Testament (Isaiah 7:14 and 8:8). It means "God with us", and in Matthew's

Gospel it refers to Jesus as the fulfilment of a prophecy by Isaiah. Matthew's Gospel was originally written in Greek, and there the word begins with 'E'. In the book of Isaiah, which was written in Hebrew, the word begins with 'T'. So 'Emmanuel' on the coin is derived from Matthew's Gospel.



Figure 1 – A copper coin with a three-quarter length figure of Christ on the obverse and a legend meaning "Emmanuel". On the reverse there is a jewelled cross with IC XC NI KA in the angles of the cross. Sear 1825.



Figure 2 – Another example of the coin in Figure 1. (Forvm Ancient Coins, Web Shop)



Also on the obverse, in the left field, are the letters IC with a bar above, and in the right field are the letters XC with a bar above. In ancient Greek manuscripts a bar above letters indicates

that there is an abbreviation. Therefore the complete Greek words are IHSOYC XPISTOC, meaning 'Jesus Christ'. These abbreviated words usually appear with the figure of Christ on Byzantine coins

to distinguish him from the many saints who were venerated by the people.

On the coin there is no emperor's name and no indication of when and where it was minted. Such Byzantine coins are called 'anonymous folles'. The word 'anonymous' means 'no name'; and 'follis', which was originally the Latin word for a leather bag, was the name given to the large (usually silver-washed) bronze coin that was introduced by the Roman emperor, Diocletian, in 295 AD. In about 500 AD the Roman Empire was succeeded by the Byzantine Empire with Constantinople (modern Istanbul) as its capital, but the follis denomination was retained.

Up to and including the reign of Nicephorus II (963-69) folles usually had an image of the emperor on the obverse and an inscription referring to him on the reverse. (**Figure 3**) But this type of folles was not issued by his successor, John I, who became emperor on 11<sup>th</sup> December 969. In fact, there are no folles bearing John's image or name, and therefore the production of anonymous folles must be dated from 970. They continued to be produced until Alexius I reformed the coinage in 1092. John might have put Christ's image and title on the folles instead of his own because of remorse for the brutal assassination of Nicephorus, for which he was responsible. More likely it was part of the penance that Polyeuctes, the patriarch of Constantinople, demanded before he allowed John to enter a church and proceed to his coronation.

Because many of the anonymous folles show evidence of having been struck



Figure 3 – Folles of Nicephorus II (963-9). 26 mms diameter. Obverse: bust of Nicephorus. Greek legend:  $\eta\iota\kappa\iota\phi\rho\beta\alpha\varsigma\iota\lambda\epsilon\upsilon\varsigma\ \rho\omega\mu$  (Nicephorus King of the Romans). Reverse: inscription in four lines meaning, "Nicephorus, in God, King of the Romans." Sear 1782. (Gitbud & Naumann, Auction 19, Lot 767)



Figure 4 – Gold histamenon nomisma of Michael IV (1034-41). 26 mms diameter. Obverse: bust of Christ. Latin legend:  $+ IHS\ XIS\ REX\ REGNANT\ IN\ M$  (Jesus Christ, King of those ruling). Reverse: bust of Michael IV. The Greek legend means, "Michael, King of the Romans." The Hand of God is above the crown. Sear 1824. (Heritage Auctions, Auction 3035, Lot 29644)



Figure 5 – Map of the Byzantine Empire in 1025 AD. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)





Figure 6 – Copper pattern of Zoe (1041). A pattern was a design to be considered for a coin intended for general circulation. 26 mms diameter. Obverse: three-quarter length figure of Christ. Letters in left field: IC (with bar above)/O/AN/T/I. Letters in right field: XC (with bar above)/Φ/W/NH/T. The letters mean, “Jesus Christ, Antiphonetes.” Reverse: bust of Zoe with legend meaning, “Zoe Augusta.” Sear 1825A (extremely rare). (Photocopy of coin 910 in ‘Byzantine Coins’ by Philip Grierson)

on other anonymous folles, it has been possible to outline a chronology for the series. Margaret Thompson, who was the Curator of Greek Coins for the American Numismatic Society, distinguished 14 classes, from A to N, and put them in order from the earliest to the latest. Her chronology was based on the coins excavated from the agora

(market place) at Athens, the catalogue of which was published in 1954. Anonymous folles with the three-quarter length standing figure of Christ were put in Class C, which she attributed to Michael IV (1034-41). A gold coin of Michael IV is shown in **Figure 4**. At this time the Byzantine Empire was still quite extensive (**Figure 5** – map), but

the only mint was at Constantinople.

The three-quarter length standing figure of Christ on anonymous folles of Class C was an image that was well known to the people of Constantinople because it was copied from a popular icon called ‘Christ Antiphonetes’. We know that the Christ on the coin is ‘Christ Antiphonetes’ because there is a pattern coin (**Figure 6**) of the Empress Zoe that has the three-quarter length figure of Christ with the inscription ‘Antiphonet’ in Greek letters. The word means ‘guarantee’ and it refers to a legend about the use of the icon as surety for a loan by a merchant during the reign of Heraclius (610-641). The icon was famous for the miracles associated with it and it was on display in the church of St Mary in the Chalcostrateia (copper market). The remains of the church are near Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom), which was originally built as a cathedral in Constantinople by Justinian I (527-565) but is now a museum. According to Michael Psellus, a state secretary when Zoe was empress, she was particularly devoted to this icon. She had a copy made and used it for



Figure 7 – Mosaic of Christ, Constantine IX and Zoe, on the east wall of the south gallery of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. The Greek words above Zoe mean, “Zoe, Blessed Augusta (Empress).” (Wikimedia Commons)



divination, i.e. to predict the future. So my coin is a link between me and Zoe, who was an important figure in Byzantine history. Anyone who visits Hagia Sophia today can see a wonderful mosaic image of Zoe and her third husband, Constantine IX, on either side of Christ enthroned. (Figure 7)

Zoe was the daughter of Constantine VIII (1025-8) who was an old man when he became emperor. (Figure 8) He had three daughters but no son. His eldest daughter had become a nun because her

face was disfigured by smallpox, and the next in line was Zoe, who was fifty when he died. Just before he died he arranged for Zoe to marry a city official, Romanus III (1028-34). (Figure 9) Romanus soon neglected his new wife and a rift developed between them. Zoe then fell in love with a young man called Michael, and only a few hours after the suspicious death of Romanus she married him. He ruled as Michael IV. According to George Ostrogorsky, the author of *History of the Byzantine State*, "Michael also

lost interest in her as soon as he had secured the throne. Even her freedom of movement was limited." Therefore it is unlikely that he would have issued a follis with Zoe's favourite icon on it. To secure the succession Michael adopted his nephew, also called Michael.

When Michael IV died in 1041 Zoe ruled alone for a few days until her nephew-in-law was crowned as Michael V (1041-2). It might have been during this brief period, or soon after, that Zoe's pattern coin (Figure 6) was struck. Zoe



Figure 8 – Gold histamenon nomisma of Constantine VIII (1025-8). 26 mms diameter. Obverse: bust of Christ with legend meaning, "Jesus Christ, King of those ruling." Reverse: bust of Constantine VIII. Sear 1815. (Numismatic Lanz München, Auction 149, Lot 575)



Figure 9 – Silver miliaresion of Romanus III (1028-34). 26 mms diameter. Obverse: Mary stands holding the infant Jesus. This image is known as the Virgin Hodegetria (She who points the way). The legend extends over both sides and means, "He who places his hope on thee, O Virgin all glorious, will prosper in all he does." Reverse: Romanus standing. Sear 1822. (Stacks, the Golden Horn Collection, Lot 3251)



Figure 10 – Gold histamenon nomisma of Zoe and Theodora (1042). 27 mms diameter. Obverse: Mary orans (praying with uplifted arms). Christ is in a medallion on her chest. This image is known as the Virgin Episkepsis. The legend means, "Theotokos (God bearer), help the Queens." Reverse: busts of Zoe (left) and Theodora (right). Sear 1827. (Heritage Auctions, Auction 3035, Lot 29646)

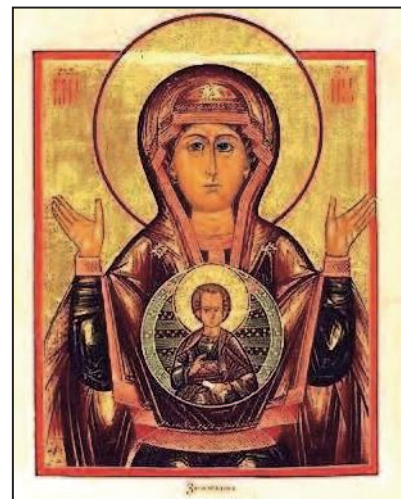


Figure 11 – The icon known as the Virgin Episkepsis (on the chest). Russian, 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is also known as the Virgin of the Sign. On coins it appears on the gold histamenon nomisma of Zoe and Theodora. (Collection of St John's Cathedral, Brisbane)



Figure 12 – Gold histamenon nomisma of Constantine IX (1042-55). 27 mms diameter. Obverse: bust of Christ with legend meaning, "Jesus Christ, King of those ruling." Reverse: bust of Constantine IX between stars that refer to a supernova that appeared in the sky in 1054 and was recorded by Chinese astrologers. Sear 1831. (Roma Numismatics Ltd, Auction 7, Lot 1387)



probably expected to be co-ruler with Michael V, but after his coronation he banished her to a nunnery, and her Antiphonetes coin remained a pattern, never to be made into the large gold coin (a histamenon nomisma) that she imagined. However, after only four months the people of Constantinople rejected Michael V as emperor and he was deposed and blinded. Zoe and her sister, Theodora, now ruled jointly, and they issued a beautiful histamenon nomisma with the image of the Virgin Episkepsis

on the reverse. (Figures 10 and 11) The problem was that these elderly sisters hated each other. They quarrelled frequently and their joint rule became impracticable. As Theodora had previously become a nun, the only solution was for Zoe, now 64, to find yet another husband. She chose an eminent senator to become Constantine IX (1042-55). (Figure 12) In 1050 Zoe died, aged 72. When Constantine IX died, Theodora (Figure 13) ruled in her own right until she died in 1056.

As my anonymous follis bears the image of Christ that was so dear to Zoe, it was probably minted at some time during the period when she was an empress, i.e. from 1028 to 1050. However, since Class C folles are often overstruck on Class B folles, it might be possible to narrow the period further. In 1973 Philip Grierson, who wrote the Dumbarton Oaks catalogue of Byzantine coins for this period, attributed Class B folles to Michael IV (1034-41). If he is correct (and Michael IV did not honour his wife by putting her favourite icon on the follis) the period for minting Class C folles can be reduced even further to 1042-50, i.e. during the reign of Constantine IX. On my coin there is evidence that it was struck on another coin, e.g. the line that extends from Christ's right side might be one of the lines in Christ's halo on a Class B follis. (Figure 14). In any case, it is most likely that my coin was struck sometime during those eight years, from 1042 to 1050.

On the reverse of my coin there is a jewelled cross with the letters IC XC NI KA in the angles of the cross. The letters mean "Jesus Christ conquers" (or "May Jesus Christ conquer"). This sentence first appears on the silver coin, called a miliaresion, which was introduced by Leo III (717-41). (Figure 15) Thereafter it appears frequently on coins until the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It appears on Class C folles but not on the other classes where the reverse inscription is "Jesus Christ, King of kings." The name, "King of kings", is given to Christ in the New Testament in *The Revelation to John* (Rev. 19:16). The idea of Christ conquering also comes from the same source but there "his name is called The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses." (Rev. 19:14, NRSV)

A lot more could be said about my coin, but I hope enough has been said to whet the appetite of coin collectors for the fascinating subject of Byzantine coins. To appreciate them one needs to know something about Byzantine history, but there are several good books on the subject, e.g. the three paperback volumes by John Julius Norwich. They are easy to read and very entertaining. Hopefully you will not disregard Byzantine coins or just give them away.

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**REMEMBER:**  
**THERE IS NO SEPARATE**  
**JANUARY ISSUE OF CAB.**  
**This Year Book issue covers**  
**December 2018**  
**and January 2019**



Figure 13 – Gold tetarteron nomisma of Theodora (1055-6). 20 mms diameter. Obverse: bust of Christ. Reverse: bust of Theodora with legend meaning, "Theodora Augusta (Empress)." The post-smallpox scarring of her face is, of course, not shown. Sear 1838. (Jean Elsen & ses fils S.A., Auction 116, Lot 726)



Figure 14 – Copper follis of Class B. 29 mms diameter. Obverse: bust of Christ. Reverse: cross on three steps with Greek words meaning, "Jesus Christ, King of kings." Most anonymous folles are crudely struck and worn. (Forvm Ancient Coins, Web Shop)



Figure 15 – Silver miliaresion of Leo III (717-41). 22 mms diameter. Obverse: cross with legend, IHSUS XRI TUS NIKA (Jesus Christ conquers). Reverse: inscription in five lines meaning "Leo and Constantine, Kings in God." Leo's son, Constantine V, was co-emperor. Sear 1512. (Gorny & Mosch, Auction 220, Lot 1858)