

# The Middle Ages

## An Exhibition of Coins and Other Objects

by Peter E. Lewis



Münzenberg Castle in Germany. (Wikimedia Commons)

ONE of the exhibitions that the Centre for Coins, Culture and Religious History (<https://cccrh.org>) makes available to schools and other organizations is about the Middle Ages. It is entitled *The Middle Ages: An Exhibition of Coins and Other Objects*. Because the subject is vast any such exhibition has to be selective and deal only with significant aspects. Accordingly this exhibition provides only a brief overview, but hope-

fully the thirty items displayed will be enough to stimulate interest in this important period in European history.

The Middle Ages are usually said to be from about 500 to 1500 AD, but the first coin in the exhibition (**Figure 1**) is of Theodosius I (379 – 395) who was the last ruler of the whole Roman Empire that extended from Britain to Syria. What happened after his reign provided the foundation for the medieval period.

Theodosius had two sons, and when he died in 395 the empire was divided between them. Arcadius (**Figure 2**) received the eastern half with Constantinople as the capital, while Honorius (**Figure 3**) received the western half with Rome as the capital. (**Figure 4 – map**) The eastern half continued as the Byzantine Empire and did not come to an end until 1453 when Constantinople was captured by the Turks. But even during the reign



Figure 1 – Bronze maiorina of Theodosius I (379-395) minted at Antioch. Diameter 22 mms.

On the reverse Theodosius holds a standard and a globe representing the world. The legend means "The glory of the Romans." Sear V 20492.

of Honorius the western half began to disintegrate because of barbarian invasions from the north.

The Goths were Germanic people from northern Europe and one branch, the Visigoths (West Goths), invaded Italy and sacked Rome in 410. The Visigoths were



Figure 2 – Bronze maiorina of Arcadius (383-408) minted at Antioch. Diameter 21 mms. On the reverse Arcadius holds a standard and a globe and has his boot on a captive. The legend means “The bravery of the army.” Sear V 20802.



Figure 3 – Gold solidus of Honorius (393-423) minted at Constantinople. Diameter 21 mms. On the reverse Constantinopolis holds Victory on her left hand. The legend means “Harmony of the Augusti.” Sear V 20902.

Christians having been converted in the 4<sup>th</sup> century by Ulfilas, one of the greatest Christian missionaries. When they plundered Rome the churches were untouched and the people who took refuge in them were spared. In the Gothic army, however, there were a number of Huns and they could not be controlled. They killed hundreds of rich Romans as they rampaged through the city seeking silver and gold. The civilized world was shocked.

Eventually the Visigoths settled in Spain, and one of the objects in the exhibition is a Visigothic appliqué that was found in Spain and dates from the 6<sup>th</sup> century (Figure 5). It had probably been a decoration on horse-riding equipment. It is a mini-masterpiece and typical of Visigothic art. The bird design might be a Christian symbol.

After the sack of Rome in 410 Roman soldiers were withdrawn from Britain, and in the following centuries Angles and Saxons crossed the North Sea to settle in England which became Anglo-Saxon. At the same time the Lombards settled in northern Italy and the Franks moved south into France.

The towering figure of the early Middle Ages was Charlemagne (Figure 6). His name in English is Charles the Great. He was great because he founded the Frankish Empire (Figure 7 – map). Because he was a devout Christian the pope crowned him the Holy Roman Emperor in Rome in 800. In the exhibition there is a denier of Charlemagne that was minted at Melle in western France. (Figure 8) On the obverse CAROLVS is the Latin name for Charles, and on the reverse MEDOLVS is the Latin name for Melle. The silver for the coin came from mines at Melle which still exist.

When Charlemagne died in 814 his son Louis succeeded him. Because he was very devout he became known as Louis the Pious, and it is appropriate that his

coins show a cross in a building which probably represents the royal chapel at Aachen, the Frankish capital. The inscription around the building means “The Christian Religion”. (Figure 9) His sons opposed him. They were ambitious and quarrelled among themselves. As a result the Frankish Empire broke into large sections which subsequently became the bases of modern European nations.

An important aspect of life in the Middle Ages was feudalism which developed when law and order broke down after the collapse of the Roman Empire. To protect themselves local lords built castles and the local people provided the



Figure 5 – Visigothic bronze appliqué found in Spain. Width 30 mms.



Figure 6 – French silver coin worth 100 francs minted in 1990 in honour of Charlemagne. Diameter 30 mms. Colour has been added.

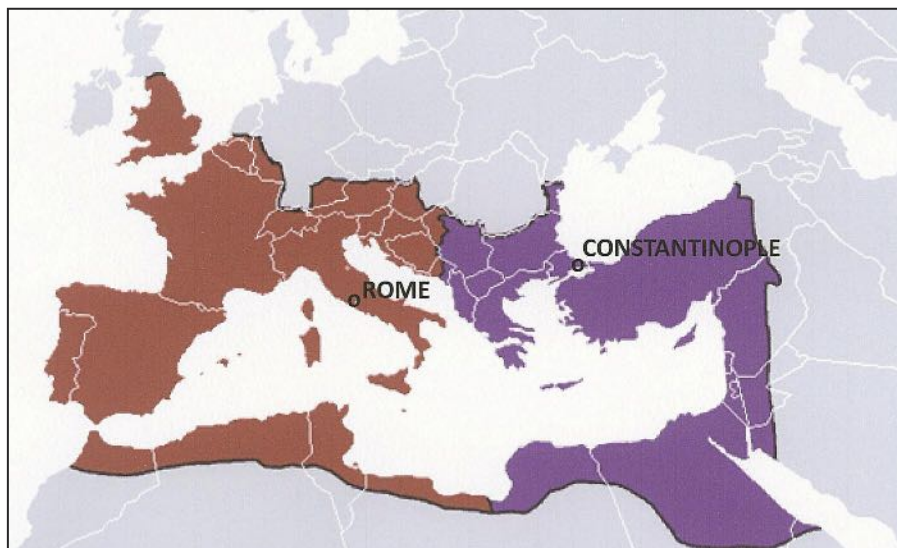


Figure 4 – Map of the Roman Empire in 395 AD. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 7 – Map of the Frankish Empire. (Wikimedia Commons)

knights (mounted warriors) to defend their territory. Feudalism was the system in which land (a fief or feud) was given to knights in exchange for military service to the lord. To illustrate the feudal aspect of society and to add to the medieval atmosphere of the exhibition there are three figurines of knights. (Figure 10)

In Anglo-Saxon England the towering figure was Alfred the Great, the king of Wessex. He too was a devout Christian.

In 878 he defeated Guthrum, the leader of the Danish Vikings who were invading England, and he immediately baptized him so that all his people became Christians. It is not surprising that a large cross appears on the obverse of Alfred's coin. (Figure 11)

The next major figure in English history was William the Conqueror (Figure 12). He was the duke of Normandy in France and a descendant of Vikings. They were people who invaded from the

north, and the word 'Norman' derives from 'northman'. In 1066 William invaded England and defeated Harold, the last Anglo-Saxon king of England, at the Battle of Hastings. To subdue his English subjects William built Norman castles all over England.

William's great grandson was Henry II (Figure 13). In 1170 when Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, quarrelled with Henry, four of Henry's knights murdered Thomas in the cathedral. The Christian world was shocked. Thomas was made a saint and Canterbury became a popular destination for pilgrims. Actually pilgrims visited sacred sites all over Europe and the Holy Land, and they often bought ampullas containing water from the wells. In the exhibition there are ampullas from Bromholm Abbey (Figure 14) and Walsingham Abbey (Figure 15) both in Norfolk. Bromholm was popular because they



Figure 8 – Denier of Charlemagne minted at Melle from 771 to 793 AD. Diameter 16 mms. Roberts 95.



Figure 9 – Denier of Louis the Pious (814-840). Diameter 20 mms. Like Roberts 1201.



Figure 10 – Modern statuette of a knight in armour. Height 28 cms.



Figure 11 – Silver penny of Alfred the Great (871-899). Diameter 20 mms. The moneyer's name, Dydig mon(eyer), is on the reverse. SCBC 1066.



Figure 12 – Silver penny of William the Conqueror (1066-1087) minted at Winchester. Diameter 20 mms. SCBC 1257.

claimed to have a piece of the cross on which Jesus was crucified. Walsingham (Figure 16) is still visited by thousands of pilgrims every year. It is believed to be one of the 'thin places' in England.

Also in the Middle Ages there was great interest in relics, which were objects believed to have spiritual power. Body

parts of saints were particularly venerated. Some relics were plainly ridiculous such as a hair from the beard of Jesus, but in the medieval mind the desire to see or touch such objects was intense. Elaborate containers (reliquaries) were made to hold the relics, and they were usually displayed in cathedrals and

monasteries. In the exhibition there is a small bronze reliquary in the form of a crucifix. (Figure 17) It dates from the 12th century and was found in Britain. It might have been brought back by a returning crusader. It has corroded shut and might still contain the relic.

During these difficult times the Church

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Figure 13 – Silver penny of Henry II (1154-1189). Diameter 20 mms. SCBC 1345.



Figure 14 – Lead ampulla from Bromholm Abbey found at Thetford in Norfolk. 15<sup>th</sup> century. Height 42 mms. Like 409 in Mitchiner, 'Medieval Pilgrim & Secular Badges'.



Figure 15 – Lead ampulla from Walsingham Abbey. 15<sup>th</sup> century. Height 45 mms. Like 403 in Mitchiner.



Figure 16 – Ruins at Walsingham. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Phil Champion)

provided a basis for stability and hope. Monasteries developed all over Europe and some became centres of learning where an important activity was copying ancient manuscripts. The monks also made liturgical books and personal prayer books (Books of Hours) which were usually richly decorated. To illustrate this aspect of medieval life there is in the exhibition a page from a Book of Hours made in France. (Figure 18) The picture of the presentation of the baby Jesus in the Temple is a miniature medieval masterpiece.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> century Islam appeared and changed world history. It is the religion founded by Muhammad in Arabia. Its followers called themselves Muslims and their armies advanced into Persia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, North Africa and Spain. In the exhibition the silver dirham issued by the caliph Hisham in 122 AH (740 AD) is typical of Islamic coinage. (Figure 19) There are no images, only Arabic words in the Kufic script. On the



Figure 17 – Pilgrim's reliquary cross pendant. 12<sup>th</sup> century. Height 7 cms. Christ wears a long robe on the obverse. Mary orans (praying with uplifted arms) is on the reverse.



Figure 18 – Page from a Book of Hours with a picture of the presentation of the baby Jesus in the Temple in Jerusalem. Probably from a French scriptorium about 1475.

obverse the words in the centre mean “No god except Allah alone. No partner to Him.”

The Crusades were a reaction to the Muslim conquest of Palestine. In 1095 at Clermont in France Pope Urban II launched the First Crusade when he called for Christian knights to regain Palestine. At first they were successful and several Crusader states were formed. One was the principality of Antioch, and on the coin in the exhibition the prince of Antioch, Bohemond III (1163 – 1201), appears as a knight wearing chain-mail and a helmet with a metal nose-guard and a cross on it. (Figure 20)

In England King John had become unpopular because of his ruthlessness. In 1215 the Archbishop of Canterbury and the barons wrote a great document (the Magna Carta) for John to sign. It set limits on his power and was the first document to ensure that the ruler was not above the law. It had far-reaching effects and changed the way people were governed in the future. Unfortunately the Centre for Coins, Culture and Religious History does not have a copy of the Magna Carta, but in the exhibition there is a coin issued in the UK on the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing. It shows King John enthroned between the archbishop and a baron. (Figure 21)

From about 1300 major changes occurred in the way people thought about things. This period lasted for about two hundred years and is called the Renaissance. ‘Renaissance’ means rebirth and



Figure 19 – Dirham of the Umayyad caliph Hisham (724-743) minted at Wasit in Mesopotamia. Diameter 27 mms. Album 137.

it referred to a renewed interest in the learning of ancient Greece and Rome. At the same time European society was changing. Instead of feudal landlords and serfs, a middle class was forming in cities. The Middle Ages were coming to an end.

☆☆☆



Figure 20 – Billon denier of Bohemond III (1163-1201) minted at Antioch. Diameter 18 mms. CCS 65.



Figure 21 – Bimetallic UK coin worth 2 pounds issued in 2015. Diameter 28 mms. King John holds a quill and a scroll. Elizabeth II is on the obverse.

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