BEFORE Constantine the Great in the 4th century became the first Christian to rule the Roman Empire Christians were persecuted and needed to maintain a low profile. In the following centuries they were free to make pictures of Jesus Christ and other characters in the Christian story including Mary, the mother of Jesus. These icons became very popular especially during the Byzantine Period from about 500 AD to the fall of Constantinople in 1453. But during the reign of the Byzantine emperor Leo III (717-741) there was a reaction against them. It was felt that by making icons they were disobeying the Second of the Ten Commandments which forbid the making of images of anything in heaven or on earth. During this Iconoclastic Period icons

Figure 1 – St Catherine’s Monastery in the Sinai Desert. (Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Joonas Plaan)

Figure 2 – Icon of Christ in St Catherine’s Monastery. Painted wooden panel, 6th century. (Wikimedia Commons)
were destroyed everywhere except in remote parts of the empire such as the monastery of St Catherine in the Sinai Desert. (Figure 1) The destruction of icons lasted on and off until 842 when Theophilus, the last iconoclastic emperor, died. The result of all this is that there are very few icons in existence today that were made before 842.

The oldest of these early icons dates from the 6th century. It was found in St Catherine’s monastery and shows Jesus holding a book of gospels with his left hand and blessing with his right hand. (Figure 2) The image is similar to that on the obverse of a gold coin issued during the first reign (685-695) of the Byzantine emperor Justinian II. (Figure 3) As the icon was made before the coin the image on the icon must have influenced the image on the coin. In other cases it is more likely that the image on the coins influenced the image on the icons.

A good example of a coin influencing an icon is the bronze coin of Theodora, the step-mother of Constantine the Great.
(Figure 4) It was issued by Constantine’s three sons during the period 337-340. It shows a bust of Theodora on the obverse, and on the reverse a woman stands holding a child. The legend on the reverse is PIETAS ROMANA (Roman Piety). The image on the reverse is similar to the icon known as the Virgin Hodegetria. ‘Hodegetria’ means ‘she who points the way’. This icon was very popular in the Byzantine Empire. It was said that the original was painted by St Luke in the Holy Land and brought to Constantinople by Eudocia, the wife of the emperor Theodosius II (418-450). Unfortunately it has not survived but an ivory plaque from the period 940-960 and a metal plaque from the 12th century show a full-length figure of Mary, which was probably how she appeared on the original painted icon. (Figures 5 and 6) The full-length figure appears on a silver milliareis of the Byzantine emperor Romanus III (1028-1034). (Figure 7) Later copies of the Virgin Hodegetria show only a half-length figure of Mary. (Figure 8)

When the image on the reverse of Theodora’s coin is compared with the other images there are some striking similarities. The woman holds her right forearm almost horizontally and seems to be gesturing towards the child on her left arm. It could well be that Theodora’s coin was the prototype of the icon of the Virgin Hodegetria.
Medallions could also influence icons. There is a beautiful gold medallion or double-solidus issued by Constantine the Great that has the bust of Fausta, his second wife, on the obverse. On the reverse Fausta sits on a throne and holds an infant in her arms. Felicitas stands on her right holding a caduceus, and Pietas stands on her left. Below them two small figures hold wreaths. (Figure 9) The medallion was probably minted in about 321 on the occasion of the birth of Fausta’s youngest son, Constans. When the medallion is compared with a 6th century icon of Mary holding the infant Jesus, which is in St Catherine’s Monastery, the similarities are obvious. (Figure 10) Fausta and Mary both have halos and both are holding the infant in the same way. The figures on either side of Mary are Christian saints and the two small figures have become angels moved up above the saints. The legend on the reverse of the medallion is PIETAS AVGUSTAE (The piety of the Augusta, i.e. Fausta). Although PIETAS is usually translated as piety, the word had a slightly different meaning at the time. It was a word with a range of meanings, but in general it meant a sense of duty. As this involved all aspects of Roman life, the word was virtually equivalent to Roman religion. Because of this legend and the Christian triumphalism that pervaded the Roman world at the time, Christians who later saw one of these medallions would have thought that the woman and child were Mary and the infant Jesus. On the obverse Fausta is named in full: FLAVIA MAXIMA FAVSTA AVGUSTA, and she was, of course, married to the Christian emperor.

There is also an ivory diptych that was made in Constantinople in the mid-sixth century. (Figure 11) It must have been influenced by Fausta’s medallion (Figure 9) and by the image that pre-dated the gold coin of Justinian II (Figure 3) because in the left panel Christ appears as on the coin, and in the right panel Mary and the infant Jesus appear as on the medallion. The diptych is in the Bode Museum in Berlin.

The Egyptian goddess Isis was very popular throughout the Roman Empire. In Egypt she was worshipped together with her husband Osiris (god of the Underworld) and her son Harpocrates, also known as Horus. Isis nursing Harpocrates was common in Egyptian statuary and they appear on coins of Hadrian (Figure 12) and Antoninus Pius (Figure 13). On coins Isis was often paired with the Ptolemaic god Sarapis (Serapis) as on a coin minted at Colossae in Phrygia in about 200 AD. (Figure 14) Although St Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in Colossae in the 1st century Isis was apparently still being worshipped there in the 3rd century.

The image of Isis nursing Harpocrates was influential in Palestine because dur-

Figure 10 – Icon known as ‘The Theotokos and Child with Saints and Angels’ in St Catherine’s Monastery. Painted wooden panel, 6th century. (Wikimedia Commons)
ing the reign of the Roman emperor Gordian (238-244) it appears on a coin of Nysa-Scythopolis, an important city in the region, but on this coin the seated woman is Nysa and she is nursing the infant Dionysus, the god particularly worshiped in Nysa-Scythopolis. (Figure 15) After the Jewish Revolt and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD Rome became the centre of Christianity in the Roman Empire, and every year on 5th March there was a festival of Isis in Rome. The goddess arrived by ship from Alexandria, and we see her sailing towards Rome on a coin of Constantine the Great. (Figure 16) She was carried in procession with much celebration, and some scholars consider that this event was appropriated by Christians in the religious processions that still occur in Spain and Portugal. Special Festival of Isis coins (or tokens) were minted even into the reign of the Christian emperor Valentinian II (375-392). From the time of Constantine the Great (307-337) the portrait of the emperor appeared on the obverse of these coins. Also there were festival coins with Isis on the obverse and Isis suckling Harpocrates on the reverse. (Figure 17) There is a detailed account of Festival of Isis coinage in Coinage and History of the Roman Empire by David L. Vagi, beginning on page 566 of Volume Two. The numismatists of the Classical Numis-

Figure 11 – Ivory diptych in the Bode Museum in Berlin. (Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 12 – Bronze diobol of Hadrian (117-138) minted in Egypt. It shows Isis nursing Harpocrates on the reverse. The amphora in the background looks like a cross. Hadrian visited Egypt in 130 AD. (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 199, Lot 382)

Figure 13 – Bronze drachm of Antoninus Pius (138-161) minted in Egypt. It shows Isis nursing Harpocrates on the reverse. For Christians the bird on the top of the throne could have represented the Holy Spirit. (Classical Numismatic Group, Auction 94, Lot 933)

Figure 14 – Bronze coin of Colossae showing Sarapis on the obverse and Isis on the reverse. Isis holds a sistrum and a bucket called a situla. (Author’s Collection)
matic Group commented that following Alexander’s conquest of Egypt, the cult of Isis spread across the Mediterranean, with its popularity reaching its zenith in the Roman period when the “goddess of a thousand names” became one of the Mediterranean’s principle deities. They went on to say that it is generally assumed that the iconography of Isis nursing Harpocrates influenced Christian representations of the Madonna and Child, particularly the Virgo Lactans type popular in Medieval Europe.

The Virgo Lactans icon is known in Greek as the Virgin Galaktotrophousa, and the name refers to Mary actually breast-feeding Jesus. (Figure 18) This image of Mary, however, did not become popular in Byzantine art, probably because exposing her breast seemed out of place in that religiously charged environment. But the image of Mary holding the infant Jesus close to herself became very popular especially in Orthodox Christianity. (Figure 19) The image of Mary with the infant Jesus does not relate to any particular passage in the gospels and it is reasonable to conclude that its source was the Egyptian Isis cult. All things considered it is likely that Christian icons were influenced by coins and medallions.

Figure 15 – Bronze coin of Nysa-Scythopolis showing Nysa, the nurse of Dionysus, breast-feeding him. She wears a turreted crown representing the city. (Author’s Collection)

Figure 16 – Bronze coin of Constantine the Great (307-337). Diameter 14 mms. Isis stands holding a sail. The reverse legend is VO TA PVBLICA. (Numismatik Lanz München, Auction 100, Lot 541)

Figure 17 – Bronze Festival of Isis coin minted in Rome in the mid-fourth century. Diameter 18 mms. On the obverse Isis holds a sistrum, and the legend ISIS FABIA refers to the lighthouse at Alexandria called the Pharos. (Classical Numismatic Group, Triton VII, Lot 1063)

Figure 18 – Icon known as ‘Madonna of the Milk’ made in 1283 by Gentile da Rocca. It is in the Church of Santa Maria ad Cryptas at Fossa in Italy. (Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 19 – Icon of the Madonna and Child in the Byzantine style by Rico de Candia, 16th century, in the Church of All Saints, Trani, Italy. (Wikimedia Commons)