



Coins of the Early Popes

by Peter E. Lewis

Miniature of Pope Gregory I in a 12th century manuscript. (Wikimedia Commons)

If people want to collect or study coins from a particular time and place they should first obtain the books which deal with that area of numismatics. Without this information they are like a ship sailing in the dark without a compass. As a Christian, I have long wanted to know about the coins of the early popes. Although I had some important books such as *Papal Coins* and *Papal Numismatic History* by Allen Berman, and *Medieval European Coinage*, Volume 1, by Philip Grierson and Mark Blackburn, I was lacking an article that I considered essential. It described a hoard

of 31 silver coins and three copper coins known as the Tiber Hoard. The silver coins are very small and thought to be equivalent to one eighth of a siliqua. The hoard was apparently found near the Ponte Rotto (broken bridge) at Ostia, the port of Rome. The article is entitled *A Find of Byzantine Silver from the Mint of Rome for the Period A.D. 641 – 752* and it is by Michael Dennis O'Hara with the collaboration of Italo Vecchi. It was originally a paper published in *Swiss Numismatic Review*, Volume 64, 1985, pages 105-140. I had given up all hope of ever finding a copy when luckily



Figure 3 – Reverse of a silver eighth siliqua attributed to Constantine IV and Pope Adeodatus (672-676) by O'Hara. 9 mms, 0.234 gram. Tiber Hoard coin 17. Berman 7. (Photocopy of image 17 on Plate 18 in the 1985 article by O'Hara)



Figure 1 – Silver eighth siliqua attributed to the Byzantine emperor Constans II (641-668) by O'Hara. On the reverse there is a cross with R at the top and 'm' at the bottom. 9 mms, 0.15 gram. Sear, *Byzantine Coins*, 1125A. Tiber Hoard coins 3-7. (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 375, Lot 731, cngcoins.com)



Figure 4 – Silver eighth siliqua attributed to Constantine IV and Pope Agatho (678-681) by the Classical Numismatic Group. It is a unique coin not in the Tiber Hoard. 8 mms, 0.40 gram. (Classical Numismatic Group, MBS 73, Lot 1048)



Figure 2 – Silver eighth siliqua attributed to Constantine IV (668-685) and Pope Vitalian (657-672) by O'Hara. 9 mms, 0.26 gram. Sear, *Byzantine Coins*, 1233A. Tiber Hoard coins 14-16. Berman 8. (Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 61, Lot 2182)

I saw a reprint for sale from an antiquarian bookseller in Switzerland. I quickly bought it, but I have since discovered that there is open access to this journal on the Internet and you can zoom in on the photos of the coins in the hoard. Also I have O'Hara's descriptions of 3 additional silver coins from the hoard published in 1992 as well as copies of correspondence between O'Hara and Berman, and O'Hara and Grierson. A major problem exists because Professor Grierson disagreed with O'Hara's attribution of most of the ten papal coins in the hoard. These coins are more accurately called Byzantine-papal coins because they have the bust of the Byzantine emperor on the obverse, and on the reverse some indication of the pope at the time, such as a monogram of his name or the first letter in his name.

In the Tiber Hoard there are also a number of coins with reverses showing a monogram of Rome or the letters RM but no indication of the pope. (Figure 1) Although the image of the emperor on the obverse might be expected to date the coin, the emperors all look much the same and it is usually impossible to know who it is for sure. O'Hara dates most of these coins to the Byzantine emperor Constans II (641-668) and one to Heraclonas who ruled only in 641, and he considers it to be the earliest coin in the hoard. The pope at the time

was John IV (640-642) but it is unknown whether he was responsible for minting the coin.

In an email to O'Hara on 16th March 1985 Grierson said, "I cannot go along with you over most of the monogram decipherments, and I have unfortunately too many other things on hand to take the time off for the proper kind of study that I would like. But you have stated our rival standpoints very fairly, and it can be left for other scholars to make up their minds." Although O'Hara believes that the first Byzantine-papal coin was minted by Pope Vitalian (657-672) Grierson argues that none were minted be-

fore Pope Gregory II (715-731). In this article I shall use O'Hara's attributions and chronology but indicate where Grierson and other scholars disagree.

Although St Peter is considered to be the first pope there were probably various Christian groups in Rome in the first few centuries with no overall leader. Christians were persecuted on and off and kept a low profile until the 4th century when Constantine and Licinius issued an edict of toleration. Even then, issuing coins was an activity of govern-



Figure 6 – Reverse of a silver eighth siliqua attributed to Justinian II (2nd reign, 705-711) and Pope Sisinnius (708) by O'Hara. 7 mms, 0.225 gram. Tiber Hoard coin 25. Sear, *Byzantine Coins*, 1444A. Berman 9. (Photocopy of image 25 on Plate 19 in the 1985 article by O'Hara)



Figure 8 – Reverse of a silver eighth siliqua attributed to Emperor Leo III (717-741) and Pope Gregory II (715-731) by O'Hara. 8 mms, 0.167 gram. Tiber Hoard coin 28. Sear, *Byzantine Coins*, 1534B. Berman 1. (Photocopy of image 28 on Plate 19 in the 1985 article by O'Hara)



Figure 5 – Silver eighth siliqua attributed to Justinian II (1st reign, 685-695) and Pope Sergius I (687-701) by O'Hara. 8 mms, 0.26 gram. Tiber Hoard coin 21. Berman 6. (Classical Numismatic Group, MBS 61, Lot 2183)

Figure 9 – Silver eighth siliqua attributed to Emperor Leo III (717-741) and Pope Gregory III (731-741) by O'Hara initially, but in 1992 to Pope Gregory II. 9 mms, 0.32 gram. Tiber Hoard coin 29. Sear, *Byzantine Coins*, 1534C. Berman 2. (Classical Numismatic Group, Triton Sale XXIII, Lot 1141)



Figure 7 – Silver eighth siliqua attributed to Justinian II (2nd reign, 705-711) and Pope Constantine I (708-715). 0.25 gram. None of these coins are in the Tiber Hoard. Sear, *Byzantine Coins*, 1444B. (The New York Sale, Auction 37, Lot 739)

ment, not something that religious groups did. It was not until the government in Italy became weak after invasion by the barbarian Lombards (long beards) that some of the popes minted coins in Rome.

The Roman Empire was divided into eastern and western halves at the death of Theodosius I in 395, and the eastern half continued as the Byzantine Empire with Constantinople as its capital while

the western half was invaded by the Goths and the centre of imperial government moved from Rome to Ravenna. Although the Byzantine emperor was formally acknowledged by the Ostrogothic rulers as their overlord and usually appeared on their coins they ruled Italy independently. Subsequently the Lombardic kings also ruled independently.

At the beginning of the 7th century the pope was Gregory I (590 – 604), considered one of the greatest popes. He had been prefect (governor) of Rome before becoming a monk. As pope he continued his ascetic lifestyle, but because the Lombards had caused the collapse of public administration in Italy he had to take control of the city of Rome. Although he organized the food supply and paid the troops, he did not mint coins, but his reign shows how popes could become involved in temporal as well as spiritual matters.

Vitalian (657-672) was a vigorous pope. In 668 when the Byzantine emperor Constans II was murdered in Sicily and Mezezius claimed the throne, Vitalian mobilized the Byzantine army in Italy to defeat the usurper. In this situation it would not be surprising to find a monogram of Vitalian (Latin: Vitalianus) on a coin minted at Rome, and in the Tiber Hoard there are three small silver coins (O'Hara numbers 13, 14 and 15) with a bust of the Byzantine emperor on the obverse and a monogram on the reverse which O'Hara believes is of Vitalian. (Figure 2) O'Hara thinks that the V in the bottom right of the monogram is the first letter in his name, and the S at the top is the last letter. Grierson considers that it is a coin of Pope Stephen III (Latin; Stephanus) with the S at the top being the first letter in his name. Stephen III (768-772) is also known as Stephen IV because his predecessor, also called Stephen, was elected but died two days later before being consecrated. In support of his attribution O'Hara argued that the emperor on the obverse looks like Constantine IV (668-685) and he dates these coins to the period 668-672. However, it is unlikely that Vitalian would put the last letter in his name so prominently at the top of his monogram, and Grierson's attribution is probably the correct one.

Pope Adeodatus II (672-676) had engaged in building projects in Rome and O'Hara thought that his monogram was on a unique coin in the Tiber Hoard, O'Hara number 17. (Figure 3) Grierson disagreed and conjectured that it was a coin of Pope Paul I (757-767). The P at the top of the monogram favours Paul but it is then difficult to account for what looks like O or d in the lower right. Perhaps Paul used the Greek form of



Figure 10 – Silver eighth siliqua attributed to Emperor Constantine V (741-775) and Pope Zacharias (741-752) by O'Hara. 8 mms, 0.13 gram. Tiber Hoard coins 30 and 31. Sear, *Byzantine Coins*, 1579. Berman 4. (Classical Numismatic Group, MBS 60, Lot 2011)



Figure 11 – Silver denario of Pope Hadrian I (772-795). 18 mms, 1.27 grams. Berman 10. (Classical Numismatic Group, MBS 61, Lot 2185)



Figure 12 – Coronation of Charlemagne in an old chronicle. (Wikimedia Commons)

his name which ends in OS. Neither the attribution to Paul nor to Adeodatus is convincing.

Pope Agatho (678-681) was a scholarly monk who devoted himself to theological questions, especially whether there was only one divine will in Christ (monotheism). He also took an interest in financial matters and occupied the office of papal treasurer. None of his coins are in the Tiber Hoard but a unique coin that was Lot 1048 in Classical Numismatic Group's Mail Bid Sale 73 on 13th September 2006 was attributed to him by the CNG numismatists. (Figure 4) On the reverse there is a cross with A sus-

pending from the left bar of the cross (partially visible) and R in the right field. The CNG numismatists said the R probably indicates Roma, and the A Agatho.

Pope Sergius I (687-701) refused to ratify the decrees of the church council convened in Constantinople in 691. The emperor Justinian II sent an official to arrest Sergius but the army in Italy supported the pope. O'Hara attributed hoard coin 21 to him. On the reverse it has a monogram of Rome with the letter S in the left upper field. (Figure 5) Grierson disagreed and attributed the coin to Stephen II (III) (752-757) who appealed to the Frankish king Pepin to oppose

the Lombards. Pepin drove them out of much of Italy and donated the conquered cities to the papacy.

Pope Sisinnius was pope for only twenty days in 708, but O'Hara believes that his monogram is on the reverse of hoard coin 25. (Figure 6) Grierson thinks it is the monogram of Pope Stephen III (IV). Pope Constantine I (708-715) visited Constantinople in 710, but none of his coins are in the Tiber Hoard. There are at least nine recorded examples of the coin that O'Hara attributes to him. On the reverse there is a cross with the lower part in the form of K for Konstantine. (Figure 7) Grierson conjectured that the coin was of Pope Constantine II (767-772).

Pope Gregory II (715-731) had a long reign and O'Hara attributes the unique hoard coin 28 to him. On the reverse there is a monogram of Rome with a peculiar letter in the upper left field which O'Hara thinks is a form of G. (Figure 8) However, when it is compared with the reverse of the coin in Figure 10 it is obvious that the peculiar letter is part of Z for Pope Zacharias. Therefore, hoard coin 28 should be attributed to Zacharias, as should Berman 1 and Sear, Byzantine Coins, 1534B. Also Grierson's attribution of the coin to Gregory III on page 137 of O'Hara's 1985 article should be deleted.



Figure 13 – Silver denario of Pope Leo III (795-816). 20 mms, 1.22 grams. Berman 14. (Classical Numismatic Group, Triton Sale XX, Lot 1275)



Figure 14 – A contemporary lead imitation of the silver denaro of Pope Leo III (795-816). 20 mms, 5.42 grams. Berman 13. (Classical Numismatic Group, MBS 61, Lot 2186)



Figure 15 – According to the numismatists at Auction House H.D. Rauch this coin is an imitation of the coin in Figure 13 made by Luigi Cigoi, a 19th century forger. They say the letters were not struck into the die but were engraved into it. (Auction House H.D. Rauch GmbH, Auction 90, Lot 1218)

For the hoard coin 29 the attribution is easy because the monogram on the reverse is obviously of Gregory, but it could be either Gregory II or Gregory III. (Figure 9) In 1985 O'Hara attributed this coin to Gregory III but in his 1992 article in the May issue of the *Spink Numismatic Circular* he attributes these coins to Gregory II.

Pope Zacharias (741-752) was loyal to the Byzantine emperor while Ravenna was conquered by the Lombards. Both O'Hara and Grierson attribute hoard coins 30 and 31 to him because on the reverse there is a monogram of Rome with Z in the left upper field. (Figure 10) According to O'Hara these coins of Zacharias mark the chronological end of the Tiber Hoard, but according to Grierson the end would be coins of Stephen III (IV) and the hoard would have been deposited sometime after 772.

The next pope after 772 to issue coins was Hadrian I (772-795) also known as Adrian I. He allied himself with the Frankish king Charlemagne and issued a silver coin (denaro) with his own name and bust on the obverse and a cross on the reverse between R and M for Rome. (Figure 11) In the exergue CONOB appears as on Byzantine gold coins even though Hadrian's coin is silver. The legend VICTORIA DNN means 'the victory of our lords' and presumably refers to

Charlemagne's defeat of the Lombards with Christ's help.

The next pope, Leo III (795-816), crowned Charlemagne as the Holy Roman Emperor in Rome on Christmas Day 800. (Figure 12) His denari have a monogram of LEO PA in the centre of the obverse with the legend SCS (Sanctus = Saint) PETRVS. On the reverse there is a monogram of IMP (imperator = emperor) with the legend CARLVS (Carolus = Charles). (Figure 13) Leo also issued denari with only an inscription (DN LEONI PAPE) on the obverse. On the reverse there is the bust and name of St Peter. (Figure 14)

The coins of the early popes are all very rare and expensive to buy, and unfortunately there are fakes to trick the unwary. (Figure 15) Although the attributions are disputed in many cases it remains a fascinating area of numismatic study.

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