

Anonymous Byzantine Bronzes: Their Iconography, History, and Collectibility

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Christ Pantocrator, Hagia Sophia

The “Anonymous” series of bronze coins struck from John I to Alexius I, (969-1118 AD), were coins issued without reference to the current emperor. They all depicted Christ on the obverse, either Christ Pantocrater or Rex Regnantium. The depiction on the Christ Pantocrater is like that of the cover, (from the Hagia Sophia), or like this one from the church of Chora.



Christ Pantocrater, Church of Chora, Istanbul

The Pantocrater was the ruler of the Universe. He was also the judge, or Jehovah, of all mankind. This is a more Eastern view of Christ, and similar to the pambasileus Zeus cult that dominated the region before the advent of Christianity. This form of Christ is very different from the Western view of Christ as the “Redeemer”. After the Iconoclasy controversy ended, the Pantocrator was the most popular form of Christ to be placed at the top of church domes, the height giving added effect to the stern visage.

Opposite of the Pantocrater view of Christ was the Rex Regnantum view of Christ.



Rex Regnantum, Hagia Sophia, (seen on Class D)

This is the more typical view of Rex Regnantum, with a throne in the western style with a back. This view of Christ was that of “King of Kings”. This view was that Christ ruled everyone on earth not directly, as the Pantocrator does, but rather he rules through the emperor which he chooses. This view of Christ gives stronger affirmation of Imperial power, in that it specifically authorizes the emperor’s power as

Below is a more unusual Eastern style throne that Rex Regnatum is sitting on.



These depictions were usually copied from famous churches of the day. The incoming emperor would choose the depiction he wished to reflect. While most of the series depicts Christ Pantocrator, there are some style differences amongst them leading us to believe they are different famous church depictions being copied. Since most of these churches have been destroyed, studying these miniature depictions allows us to see the wide range of Christian art that once existed. The one standing versions of Christ Pantocrator, on the Class C issue of Michael IV, we know was particularly venerated by his wife Zoe.

THE COINS

The series of anonymous coins have been known to numismatists for centuries. Many attempts were made over the years to classify and assign them. The groundbreaking work of early female numismatist Margaret Thompson at the Athenian Agora, studying overstrikes, finally solved the riddle of the sequence in which these were issued. She wasn't able to specifically identify which emperor issued them, but was able to put them into order using the letters A-K. Later on numismatists identified different classifications of the "A" series, so therefore the series starts with A1-A3, then B to K.

Occasionally you will still find coins identified as Class L, M, and N. Grierson in "Byzantine Coins" states it been proven Class L and M were contemporary local issues for Trebizond, and Class N is not anonymous at all, but identifies the ruler. The confusion was that it's a rare coin and early examples lacked the legend, but later finds showed the legend and emperor. Therefore, this paper is ignoring Classes L-N as not true anonymous bronzes at all. This is to our advantage anyway, since these three coins are all very rare.

The anonymous bronzes were all folles, as during this period no other copper coins were struck. They also were never demonetized, many times being in circulation for a hundred years or longer. As should be expected with a very long lived denomination, and having few alternatives for usage, the vast majority of anonymous bronzes survive very worn. VG and F examples appear very frequently in dealer trays and junk boxes, frequently for \$20-30. They are popular coins, being large bronze coins with a depiction of Christ, so there is a lot of non-traditional demand for them either by people who just want a few cheap ancient/medieval coins, as well as those wanting "ancient" depictions of Christ.

Well preserved examples, though, are a classic condition rarity with XF examples of even the most common issues bringing well into the hundreds of dollars. Of course, with many being found in the middle east with acidic soil conditions, corrosion is also a major detriment to condition on many of these. The last major issue with finding these in collectible condition was the vast number of overstrikes. Since they circulated for such a long period, they were frequently overstruck over previous coinage or over other anonymous bronzes. Certain issues were more plagued by this than others, and unfortunately it seems the rarer types are more likely to have been overstruck on previous issues, namely the Class F, G, H, and J.

On all of the series, a clear face of Christ seems to truly be the delineating factor between a nice coin and a spectacular one. Since the face was shallowly engraved, and the highest point on the obverse, it is almost always the first to wear away. Those wishing to only collect the best example should besides all of the other concerns on the coin concentrate on facial features.

Class A1 – John I 969-976AD



As you can see, the obverse has a classic picture of Christ Pantocrator and the reverse has an inscription, "Ihsus Xpistus Basileus Basil", or Jesus Christ King of Kings. This particular example shows strong evidence of overstrike on the obverse from 4-6 o'clock. This is an example of the overstrike problem with these coins, even when you find a coin that looks ok there might be overstriking that takes away from the design. In this case the gospels are obliterated by the overstruck lettering.

The A1 is an average size coin for the series, being around 24mm and 7 grams. The key to identifying it is the reverse, which does not have any decoration above or below the lettering. They are fairly common.

Class A2 – Basil II and Constantine VIII 976-1025AD



The A2 is one of the most popular in this series due to the size. Not since the early empire had the Byzantines struck such a substantial copper coin. They are on average around 33mm and much heavier than the previous issue, around 18 grams. Being on a larger flan, the entire design has a better chance of being fully struck. Most people, if they want just one spectacular specimen, choose to have one of these. So, even though they are even more common than Class A1s, well preserved specimens are even more expensive. However, in average condition these are very available, just popular.

They have the exact same design as the A1, with the key to identification being the larger size and the decorations above and below the lettering on the reverse.

Class A3 - Basil II and Constantine VIII 1023-1028AD



Same rulers as the A2, and same design but struck late in their reign. This coin is only 29mm and 10 grams, so you can see the reduction in size that led to being a different classification. The key to identification is the cross above and below the reverse legend, as opposed to the decorative scroll work on the A2. About as common as the A1, with both being slightly less common than the A2, but again with the A2 being a large coin it is more popular.

Class B – Romanus III 1028-1034AD



Again we see a traditional Pantocrator obverse. The main differentiation for this issue is the reverse legend, with it being shortened to "IS XS Bas ile Bas ile". It still means Jesus Christ King of Kings, but is truncated to fit in a cross with three steps. Again, another coin with overstriking on the reverse, lowering the quality of what otherwise would be an exceptional specimen.

This issue is fairly available, being about as common as the A class coins. It is around 30mm and 10 grams.

Class C – Michael IV 1034-1041AD



Here is the first new type of obverse portrait of Christ. This is a standing portrait, which was of particular importance to the Empress Zoe. It is either a painting or an icon of Christ, but still in this pose is representational of the Pantocrator view of Christ as Jehovah. The reverse legend is also changed, now having a pretty cross with pellets at the points, with the legend “IC XC NI KA” meaning Christ will Conquer. This may have been in response to further Turkish encroachment into Byzantine territory in this period.

As a type a little scarcer than preceding coins, but not by very much. Still widely available. It is 30mm but only 8 grams.

Class D – Constantine IX 1042-1059AD



Here we have the first Rex Regnantium issue. It's the classic western view of a throne, with a large back attached. The legend goes back to “IS XI Basile Basile”, or Jesus Christ King of Kings. This is most likely to reinforce the imagery on the obverse, which we discussed earlier reinforced the divine right of the emperor to rule, being given this power directly by Christ.

This type, 30mm and 10 grams, is again getting a little scarcer like the Class C. They are available, and possibly in junk boxes in lower grade, but not as common as the early issues of A and B.

Class E – Constantine X 1059-1067AD



Here we go back to the traditional Christ Pantocrator portrait, but we keep the exact same reverse as the Class D, “IS XI Basile Basile”, or Jesus Christ King of Kings. For identification purposes, just remember this is the abbreviated reverse legend without a cross, to differentiate it from the Class B.

Again, available like the Class C and D. There is not quite as much demand for the E versus those two, though, since it looks so much like the A and B Class coins. They run about 26mm and 7 grams.

Class F – Constantine X 1059-1067AD



Here is another Class attributed to Constantine X. It is also the first of our scarce coins in this series. Considering the relative occurrences of this coin versus the Class E this must have been struck very late in his reign. Another factor is previous to this the emperors only struck the anonymous folles, but starting around this time they start to also resume striking bronze coins in their own name. Maybe this explains the increasing rarity of this entire series from here on out. In any event, finding a clean copy of this Class is not easy. They frequently come corroded, (like this coin), offcenter, or overstruck. Sometimes all three!

The obverse is Rex Regnantum, of the Eastern style with no back to the throne like the previous picture from the church of Chora. The reverse legend is the same as previous. This coin runs 29mm and 9 grams.

Class G – Romanus IV 1068-1071



Here we see the familiar Pantocrator depiction of Christ, but with a wholly new reverse. Now it depicts the Virgin Mary as the Virgin Orans. Its an attractive coin, and very distinctive, but due to the emperor's utter destruction at the battle of Manzikert its production was short lived. It is about as scarce as the Class F, meaning you will never find these in junk boxes, even in lower grade. This one is a spectacular specimen, about as fine as they come.

The coin runs 26mm but the weight is down to 6 grams.



Class H – Michael VII 1071-1078



Arguably the scarcest of the series. A Pantocrator obverse, but again a distinctive reverse. This reverse is a cross with double arms, with pellets at the extremities. The reason for the scarcity of this coin most likely is the large issues of copper struck in the name of the emperor, leaving much less room for production of the anonymous bronzes. Because it does have a common looking obverse and is a smaller coin it might be possible for a sharp eyed collector to find this overlooked in a dealer's tray, but I have not been that lucky.

This class runs 27mm and 5.5 grams.

Class I – Nicephorus III 1078-1081



Same obverse as the previous, the main differentiation is the cross on the reverse. This is a classic cross with a single arm. I have always found the Class I to be a puzzle. Its by far the most common late anonymous bronze, yet is ascribed to only a three year emperor. The coins are so numerous that some collectors collect this coin based upon the floral decorations on the reverse, with there being huge numbers of different patterns. This, along with numbers of surviving copies, tells us it was a massive issue, yet why would such a massive issue be needed in this short timeframe? I have always wondered if this type might have been produced longer than numismatists say.

In any event, as common as Class A and B, and if you search can be found in very nice grade. It runs around 26mm and 5.5 grams.

Class J – Alexius I 1081-1085AD



This is another scarce coin. In fact, a case could be made all from F to K are scarce save for the Class I. This is a poor picture, but the obverse is the classic Pantocrator, with the reverse being a cross with a crescent underneath, with seven dots in the field around. This type was struck early in the reign of Alexius, who later in his reign reformed the coinage, ending the Anonymous series.

24mm, 5 grams.

Class K – Alexius 1085-1092AD



The series ends with a more unusual type. This one has distinctive large round dots around the design, with a Pantocrator obverse and a Virgin Orans standing with arms upheld on the reverse. Scarcer than the Class I by far, but a little more available than the F, G, H, and J classes.

20mm and 3.5 grams.

After this coin Alexius ceased all anonymous coinage, and reformed the bronzed coinage away from the follis standards and introducing flat tetarteron and half tetarteron coins, as well as curved trachy. Even the dubious L and M Classes were attributed to this emperor, so regardless of your position on these coins, there is little doubt that he is the emperor who ended the series.

Collecting aspects of the coinage

Like I mentioned earlier, these coins were the workhorses of commerce in this era. In fact, some of the earlier emperors only have gold and an anonymous bronze coin attributed to them at all. As such, most are found worn to very worn. I would say VG is the most commonly found grade. This is common to lots of bronze coins, though.

Anonymous bronze coins also have typically two other major issues when searching for collectible examples. First is corrosion and bronze disease. This area of the world is not very hospitable to bronze in many instances. The soil can very acidic, attacking buried bronzes over time. Also, for some reason, bronzes from this area of the world are very susceptible to what we call bronze disease, a chemical reaction that if left unchecked will literally destroy a coin. Verdicare is a product that be used to treat it. Bronze disease will appear as light green, dusty deposits on a bronze coin. This must be treated quickly, since as with real diseases, it can spread to other copper coin. A good example of both corrosion and what appears to be bronze disease is the Class F example above.

The other area of concern that limits collector choices on these coins are strike issues. These coins are simply notorious for double strikes, overstrikes, flip over double strikes, etc. A large amount of these coins simply have strike issues which lowers the desirability of the coin. I mentioned earlier the Class AI having a minor issue in this regard, but look at this coin:



So what is this coin? Upon close inspection, it's a Class K overstruck over a Class J. This coin demonstrates the level of strike issues that will be found on these coins.

Forming a Collection

Due to issues of grade, surfaces, strike issues, and good old grade, a myriad of collections can be formed. I would suggest a basic collector strive to find strike issue free, good surface coins, and worry about grade not as much. Generally I find a pleasant surface, non-overstruck coin in F to be a more attractive specimen than an overstruck or corroded VF. Still, its up to the collector. Such a pleasant collection in F is very achievable for a patient collector at fairly reasonable cost. The Class H in the condition pictured might run \$100 if you find one, with other scarcer later types costing a little less. Class A1-E and I might run \$40-50 in the same condition, possibly less. Ramp it up to problem free, good surface coins in VF, like the Class A2 and B pictured above, and you are paying a couple of hundred dollars a coin for common examples, and will have a difficult time finding the scarce Classes at all. Wish to find problem free, XF examples of the set? It possibly could be done, but there would have to be lots of patience and a virtually limitless budget to do so. I would not grade any pictured XF, with the closest being the Class G above. That is undoubtedly a \$500 coin or more. I do see higher grade Class A and B examples occasionally, with gVF coins with full faces bringing well into the hundreds.

Alternately, a collector could form a really interesting collection of ONLY striking errors. This series truly would be an error collector's dream.

Conclusion

Overall I find the Anonymous Bronze series an interesting look into the middle period of Byzantine history. Its one of those series that are easy to start, and achievable for those of limited budgets, but is difficult enough for those choosing to try to acquire the best specimen to be a worthwhile challenge.

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All coin pictures courtesy of Numiswiki, with the exception of the Class K over J, courtesy of Doug Smith