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An imitative hexagram of the 7th century

Alain GENNARI – István A. VIDA

Introduction

In a Hungarian online numismatic forum (a closed Facebook group) in August 2016 a very particular silver coin appeared as a local find, probably near to Gyula, on the Great Hungarian Plain¹. On the obverse the coin (Fig. 1 left) shows the busts of Constans II and Constantine IV with a general design very similar, for example, to the *hexagram* MIB 151-2-3. Constans II is draped and facing, wearing a plumed helmet with star, and Constantine IV is draped and facing, but wearing a crown; between their heads, there is a cross.



Fig. 1 Left: the imitative coin, 1.3 g 14 mm. Right: CNG coins, Constans II hexagram, MIB 152, 6.32 g.

The reverse of the coin seems to show a facing or partial facing bearded bust (Constans II?), wearing a crown with cross, holding in the right hand, with fingers visible, a cross without the usual globus. Above the cross there is an ornamental symbol, probably a letter for a pseudo-legend. The mirror image of this pattern is repeated in the right field. Although at first glance the reverse seems to be, it is not a double strike, but a deliberate choice of the engraver of the die.

Because of stylistic reasons, we are referring to this coin as a *hexagram*, but the coin is only 1.3 g. and someone may call it *siliqua*.² Anyway in the 7th century the *miliarensis* was only a ceremonial coin of about 3.50–4.70 g, showing always a potent cross between two palms on the reverse, while the *hexagram*, introduced in 615 by Heraclius I, was a silver coin whose theoretical weight - never reached by the real coins - was 6.82 g³, a sort of “revival of the ancient *didrachm*”.⁴

The imitative coinage

Hahn⁵ wrote a note about these silver imitations from the Balkan area and the Northern part of the Byzantine empire, citing Bíróné Sey,⁶ and said that silver coinage was very

1 Hereby we would like to thank the owner for the photos and the dimensions of the coin, and his consent to publication.
2 While *hexagram* is a contemporary ancient name for a specific coin, *siliqua* in numismatics is a modern conventional name. The *siliqua*, in ancient times, was a measure of weight, the carat.
3 It was supposed to weigh 6 *grammata*, or 6 *scripula* (scruples), and so 36 carats of 0.1895 g.
4 DOC II, part 1, 17.
5 MIB III, 133, note 22.
6 BÍRÓNÉ SEY 1977–1978. The author shows three imitative ceremonial silver coins, now in the Hungarian National Museum, that she attributes to the Avars.

popular in this area, even without a strictly monetary use.⁷

Some other imitative silver coins appeared on auctions in the last few years, and some of them are very interesting, like the coins in *Fig. 2*. Here we can see an imitative ceremonial *miliarense*, linked by obverse die-link to an imitative *hexagram*. The conceptual difference



Fig. 2 Left: NAC, 2.82 g, imitative ceremonial *miliarense* in the name of Costans II, MIB III 139 as a prototype. Right: Pecunem, 3.04 g, from the same obverse die, imitative *hexagram* in the name of Costans II.

between the two denominations is totally ignored.

A similar imitative *hexagram*, with a bust on the reverse and a weight of 1.74 g, was sold by the auctioneer H. D. Rauch. (*Fig. 3*) In this case it is puzzling to see a typical Costans II and



Fig. 3. (Photo: H. D. Rauch, 1.74 g.)

Constantine IV obverse, matching a reverse imitating the obverse of the coinage of Constantine IV as a sole emperor, holding a spear on his shoulder. (MIB 60/61 just for example).

We do not see this mixing on the coin object of this article, because the figure on the reverse, even if partially only, shows the typical Costans II beard and mustache.

Conclusions

It is always very hard to talk about the imitative coinage, as the lack of information, and the lack of a structured monetary standard leave the numismatist without any fixed points. These coins were probably struck by the Avars, or by the people who lived on or near to the Avar lands, thus in every cataloging we must indicate “Avars (?)”, because we have no real certainties. Even the period of this coinage is a mystery, because even if we can imagine that it was struck at least in the final part of Costans II’s reign (641–668), his coinage could also have been copied many years after his death.

⁷ See the Zemianske Vrbovka hoard (1937), where various silver objects were found together with a great number of Byzantine silver ceremonial coins <http://fpv.uniza.sk/orgpoz/platidla/Platidla%20slovanov.html> (22nd April 2016)

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