

Christian Cup Coins: A Medieval Mystery



Order code: 2CHRISTCUPBOX



Coin type and grade may vary
somewhat from image

The story:

For eleven centuries, the Byzantine Empire was a center of learning, culture, trade, and Christian faith—arguably the brightest light in the Dark Ages. But not everything was illuminated. The Byzantines acquired a well-deserved reputation for secrecy and intrigue. To this day, much about them remains unknown. One enduring mystery involves the origins of the unusual scyphate—the cup-shaped coins known as aspron trachea—produced by its medieval mints.

The Byzantines inherited what remained of the eastern territory of the once-unified Roman Empire, and always referred to themselves as Romans. Initially, their money reflected the classic coin design of Constantine the Great, who established Constantinople—“New Rome”—as the imperial capital in 330 CE. During the reign of Anastasius I (491-518), large numbers of bronze coins began being issued featuring prominent crosses, presumably intending to increase the public’s confidence in coinage that was devoid of precious metals. Later Byzantine coins went further, featuring full-facing portraits of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. It was hoped that faith in these icons would transmit to faith in the currency.

Then, in the 11th century, Emperor Constantine IX began producing this radical new design, the scyphate—a strange new shape that persisted for most of the next 200 years. In 27 centuries of coin issues, nothing remotely like this design has appeared either before or since. The coins typically show religious portraits and imperial figures. No original written document on the subject of the scyphate’s origins has survived. For centuries, numismatists and historians have vigorously debated the shape’s intended purpose. Was it meant to symbolize abundance? To suggest that the emperor was lower than God? Or was there some practical purpose? The answer is lost to history.

Whatever the reason for the design, the new Byzantine currency was copied by the neighboring Kingdom of Hungary. The 12th century Magyar King Béla III, who was educated in Constantinople and was the brother-in-law of Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Comnenos, was heavily influenced by his time there, and his money reflected that. In both its scyphate shape and its iconography of the Virgin, Béla’s copper folles were clearly inspired by the Byzantine design used by Manuel and his successors.

The Data:

Aspron trachea, Byzantine Empire (1123-1328 CE)

Billon, 15.5-18.5mm, 2.6-3.5g

Religious portraits and imperial figures

AE follis, Kingdom of Hungary (1172-1196 CE)

Copper, 26-27mm, 2.4-3.2g

Obverse: Virgin Mary, seated, holding scepter. Inscription: SANCTA MARIA.

Reverse: Béla III and Stephan IV, seated, facing, holding orb and scepter. Inscription: REX BELA REX STS.

Box measures: 3.87” x 3.87” x 1.25”

*All coins in each set are protected in an archival capsule and beautifully displayed in a mahogany-like box.
The box set is accompanied with a story card, certificate of authenticity, and a black gift box.*