The Byzantine Empire succeeded the Roman Empire in about 500 AD and its capital was Constantinople (modern Istanbul). Constantine the Great founded Constantinople in 330 AD, but the Greek city previously on the site was Byzantium (Greek: Byzantion) and the empire was named after it. The Byzantine Empire lasted for almost a thousand years and a great number of Byzantine coins were minted. Because Christianity was the religion of the empire the coins have Christian symbols on them, and from 685 AD Christ often appears on the obverse, and from 886 AD the Virgin Mary makes occasional appearances. Collectors of Byzantine coins need to have the book, Byzantine Coins and
of the Byzantine emperor Romanus III being crowned by the Virgin Mary on a gold coin called a histamenon nomisma. (Figure 1 – map) Following the rise of Islam in the 7th century Muslim armies conquered the Middle East, Egypt and North Africa, but it was not till 1453 that Constantinople was taken and the Byzantine Empire came to an end.

Figure 2 – Silver miliaresion of Romanus III Argyrus (1028-1034 AD). It was minted at Constantinople in 1030. Romanus is on the reverse and the Virgin Hodegetria on the obverse. There are traces of gilding. Sear 1822, (Collection of St John’s Cathedral, Brisbane)

Recently St John’s Cathedral in Brisbane was able to acquire a very rare coin of the Byzantine emperor Romanus III Argyrus. (Figure 2) His surname was Argyrus which means ‘white’. We see him being crowned by the Virgin Mary on a gold coin called a histamenon nomisma. (Figure 3) ‘Nomisma’ just means a coin, but it was used especially for gold coins.

In the tenth century gold coins were divided into two denominations: the histamenon, which meant ‘standard’ and the smaller tetarteron, which meant ‘quarter’ because it was lighter than the standard by a quarter.

Romanus succeeded Constantine VIII in 1028 AD. Constantine had three daughters but no sons, and just before he died he forced Romanus, the mayor of Constantinople, to divorce his wife and marry his middle daughter, Zoe. So Romanus became the emperor, and according to Psellus, who was a state official at the time, imperial power went to his head. He wanted to be the equal of the great emperors of the past and in 1030 he decided, against the advice of his generals, to extend the empire in the east by invading the territory of the Emir of Aleppo. (See map) He set out with a large army but to his surprise he was defeated by the Emir’s forces, so he returned to Constantinople. Subsequently, however, one of his generals, George Maniakes, fought successfully in the region and in 1032 he was able to recover the city of Edessa. (See map) Edessa had not been part of the Byzantine Empire since the reign of Heraclius in the 7th century.

Back in Constantinople Romanus and Zoe had come to hate each other. According to John Norw ich, the author of Byzantium: the Apogee, “She was furious with her husband. Her anger was due principally to the fact that, from the moment he had given up hope of posterity, he had refused to share her bed and had taken a mistress; indeed, he had conceived so intense a dislike of her that he could hardly bear to be in the same room.” It was at this time that John the Orphanotrophus (so-called because he was director of the orphanage) saw an opportunity to promote his family. He was a eunuch who was influential in the bureaucracy, and he introduced his brother, Michael, to the imperial court. Michael was young and handsome, and for Zoe it was love at first sight.

Romanus was particularly devoted to the Virgin Mary and he embarked on an ambitious building project to erect an enormous church dedicated to the Virgin Peribleptos (All-Seeing). It is very likely that the icon known as the Virgin Hodegetria was housed in the church because the icon was also known as Peribleptos. It showed the Virgin Mary holding the Christ child on her left arm and gesturing towards him with her right hand. The name ‘Hodegetria’ means ‘she who points the way’, but the name probably derives from the Hodegon Monastery in Constantinople where the icon had previously been housed and where monks led blind pilgrims to a miraculous spring which was said to be able to restore sight. The Church of the Virgin Peribleptos no longer exists, nor does the icon, but many copies were made of it, usually with only the half-figure of Mary. (Figure 4) The original probably showed the full-figure of Mary, as on an ivory plaque from the 11th century (Figure 5), a metal plaque from the 12th century (Figure 6) and on the coin in Figure 2. According to one account, the Empress Eudocia, who had retired to Jerusalem in 443 AD, sent the icon of the Virgin Hodegetria to the Empress Pulcheria in Constantinople. It was a large icon requiring two men to carry it, and the tradition was that Saint Luke painted it on the wooden table in the house of the Holy Family in Nazareth. But the real story of its origin is probably very different because the image of the mother and child is similar to that on the reverse of a small bronze coin issued during the period 337-340 by the sons of Constantine the Great to honour his step-mother, Theodora. On the coin Pietas stands holding a child on her left arm and she seems to be gesturing towards him with her right hand. (Figure 7) There

Figure 3 – Gold histamenon nomisma of Romanus III minted at Constantinople. Christ is enthroned on the obverse, and on the reverse the Virgin crowns Romanus. The Greek legend on the reverse means, “May the Virgin help Romanus.” At the top ΜΘ (with bars above to signify abbreviation) means Μητηρ Θεου (Mother of God). Sear 1820. (ACR Auctions, Auction 15, Lot 840)

their Values, by David Sear. Serious collectors need Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection. It is in five volumes, but some volumes are in large books.

At its greatest extent, when the emperor was Justinian I (527-565 AD), the Byzantine Empire included Italy, North Africa and Egypt, but by the 11th century it had shrunk to only the boot of Italy, the Balkans, Greece and Anatolia. (Figure 3) ‘Nomisma’ just means a coin, which means ‘white’. We see him being crowned by the Virgin Mary on a gold coin called a histamenon nomisma. (Figure 1 – map) Following the rise of Islam in the 7th century Muslim armies conquered the Middle East, Egypt and North Africa, but it was not till 1453 that Constantinople was taken and the Byzantine Empire came to an end.

Recently St John’s Cathedral in Brisbane was able to acquire a very rare coin of the Byzantine emperor Romanus III Argyrus. (Figure 2) His surname was Argyrus which means ‘white’. We see him being crowned by the Virgin Mary on a gold coin called a histamenon nomisma. (Figure 3) ‘Nomisma’ just means a coin, but it was used especially for gold coins.

In the tenth century gold coins were divided into two denominations: the histamenon, which meant ‘standard’ and the smaller tetarteron, which meant ‘quarter’ because it was lighter than the standard by a quarter.

Romanus succeeded Constantine VIII in 1028 AD. Constantine had three daughters but no sons, and just before he died he forced Romanus, the mayor of Constantinople, to divorce his wife and marry his middle daughter, Zoe. So Romanus became the emperor, and according to Psellus, who was a state official at the time, imperial power went to his head. He wanted to be the equal of the great emperors of the past and in 1030 he decided, against the advice of his generals, to extend the empire in the east by invading the territory of the Emir of Aleppo. (See map) He set out with a large army but to his surprise he was defeated by the Emir’s forces, so he returned to Constantinople. Subsequently, however, one of his generals, George Maniakes, fought successfully in the region and in 1032 he was able to recover the city of Edessa. (See map) Edessa had not been part of the Byzantine Empire since the reign of Heraclius in the 7th century.

Back in Constantinople Romanus and Zoe had come to hate each other. According to John Norw ich, the author of Byzantium: the Apogee, “She was furious with her husband. Her anger was due principally to the fact that, from the moment he had given up hope of posterity, he had refused to share her bed and had taken a mistress; indeed, he had conceived so intense a dislike of her that he could hardly bear to be in the same room.” It was at this time that John the Orphanotrophus (so-called because he was director of the orphanage) saw an opportunity to promote his family. He was a eunuch who was influential in the bureaucracy, and he introduced his brother, Michael, to the imperial court. Michael was young and handsome, and for Zoe it was love at first sight.

Romanus was particularly devoted to the Virgin Mary and he embarked on an ambitious building project to erect an enormous church dedicated to the Virgin Peribleptos (All-Seeing). It is very likely that the icon known as the Virgin Hodegetria was housed in the church because the icon was also known as Peribleptos. It showed the Virgin Mary holding the Christ child on her left arm and gesturing towards him with her right hand. The name ‘Hodegetria’ means ‘she who points the way’, but the name probably derives from the Hodegon Monastery in Constantinople where the icon had previously been housed and where monks led blind pilgrims to a miraculous spring which was said to be able to restore sight. The Church of the Virgin Peribleptos no longer exists, nor does the icon, but many copies were made of it, usually with only the half-figure of Mary. (Figure 4) The original probably showed the full-figure of Mary, as on an ivory plaque from the 11th century (Figure 5), a metal plaque from the 12th century (Figure 6) and on the coin in Figure 2. According to one account, the Empress Eudocia, who had retired to Jerusalem in 443 AD, sent the icon of the Virgin Hodegetria to the Empress Pulcheria in Constantinople. It was a large icon requiring two men to carry it, and the tradition was that Saint Luke painted it on the wooden table in the house of the Holy Family in Nazareth. But the real story of its origin is probably very different because the image of the mother and child is similar to that on the reverse of a small bronze coin issued during the period 337-340 by the sons of Constantine the Great to honour his step-mother, Theodora. On the coin Pietas stands holding a child on her left arm and she seems to be gesturing towards him with her right hand. (Figure 7) There

Figure 2 – Silver miliaresion of Romanus III Argyrus (1028-1034 AD). It was minted at Constantinople in 1030. Romanus is on the reverse and the Virgin Hodegetria on the obverse. There are traces of gilding. Sear 1822, (Collection of St John’s Cathedral, Brisbane)

Figure 3 – Gold histamenon nomisma of Romanus III minted at Constantinople. Christ is enthroned on the obverse, and on the reverse the Virgin crowns Romanus. The Greek legend on the reverse means, “May the Virgin help Romanus.” At the top ΜΘ (with bars above to signify abbreviation) means Μητηρ Θεου (Mother of God). Sear 1820. (ACR Auctions, Auction 15, Lot 840)
must be some connection between this coin and the icon of the Virgin Hodegetria.

Mary and the Hodegetria icon were believed to protect the empire and the emperor, and according to Philip Grierson, writing in Volume 3 of the Dumbarton Oaks catalogue, “It was the custom, as early as the ninth century, for a general leaving on a campaign to visit the icon on the eve of his departure and pray for success. When Romanus set out on his unlucky Syrian campaign of 1030 he must have performed such a ceremony, and in view of his peculiar temperament and combination of interests it is highly likely that he would have issued coins to mark the occasion.” On the silver coin that he issued the Greek legend (clearly seen on the EF example in Figure 8) continues from one side of the coin to the other. It means, “O Virgin all-glorious, he who places his hope on thee will prosper in all he does.”

A major problem in the past has been that the emperor on the miliarense is not named, but it is now known that he is Romanus III. According to Philip Grierson writing in Byzantine Coins, “Some coins of the period are strikingly beautiful, notably that having on the obverse the Virgin Hodegetria, with the infant Jesus in her arms, and on the reverse the standing figure of the emperor. These coins, which are anonymous, were formerly attributed to Romanus IV (1068-71), but since they were copied by Danish silver pennies struck in the 1040s they are better attributed to Romanus III (1028-34), who is known to have had an intense devotion to the Virgin.” Unfortunately his intense devotion to the Virgin.

Figure 4 – Icon of the Virgin Hodegetria painted in Crete between 1570 and 1589. It is in the Benaki Museum in Athens. (Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 5 – Ivory plaque of the Virgin Hodegetria in the Catharijneconvent Museum. It is 25.6 cms tall and dates from the mid-10th to the 11th century. (Permission to use this image was kindly granted by the Director of the Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht, The Netherlands.)
could not save him from the scheming mind of Zoe. Her passion for Michael knew no bounds and only a few hours after Romanus died in a bath (Figure 9) she ordered the patriarch of Constantinople to consecrate her marriage to Michael. Psellus suspected that she had poisoned Romanus. Others thought she had him strangled.

The Virgin Hodegetria was the most popular of all the icons, but on coins the image appears only on the miliaresion of Romanus III. The one acquired by St John’s Cathedral is the only known example of this coin to have been gilded and to have a suspension loop attached, but it is also unusual because it is worn and bent.

**Why was it gilded?** Obviously the owner must have been wealthy to have a miliaresion in the first place, and to have it coated with gold meant that it was of particular significance to him. As the icon of the Virgin Hodegetria was particularly associated with the military it was probably owned by a soldier, and obviously a high-ranking one, perhaps a general.

**Why does it have a suspension loop?** The loop, which was also gilded, made the coin into a pendant to hang around someone’s neck. People in those times were very superstitious and it is known that Byzantine soldiers wore pendants as amulets to protect them in battle. A popular saint to have on an amulet was St Theodore Stratelates (the general). He was a Roman soldier martyred for his Christian faith in the 4th century. An example of such an amulet is shown in Figure 10. Some examples of the miliaresion have holes drilled in them

---

Figure 7 – Billon reduced centenionalis issued by the three sons of Constantine I to honour Theodora, the second wife of their grandfather, Constantius I. It is only 17 mms in diameter and was minted at Trier (237-40 A.D). Obverse: bust of Theodora. Reverse: woman with child and the legend PIETAS ROMANA (Roman devotion). Sear 17502. On Byzantine coins people faced the viewer, not as on this coin. (Monnaies d’Antan, Mail Bid Sale 14, Lot183)

Figure 8 – Miliaresion of Romanus III. Romanus is wearing the loros, which was a long jewelled piece of cloth that was wound around the body so that one end hung down in front and the other end was draped over the left arm. It represented Christ’s shroud. This coin sold for US$15,000. (Stacks, The Golden Horn Collection, 12th Jan. 2009, Lot 3251)

Figure 9 – Miniature picture from the 12th century manuscript of the ‘Synopsis of Histories’ by John Skylitzes, who was an 11th century historian. It shows two attendants lifting the dead body of Romanus out of the bath. (Wiki media Commons)

---

Figure 10 – A popular saint to have on an amulet was St Theodore Stratelates. He was a Roman soldier martyred for his Christian faith in the 4th century. A popular amulet to have on a pendant was a saint. An example of such an amulet is shown in Figure 10. Some examples of the miliaresion have holes drilled in them.
so that they can be suspended from the neck or attached to clothing (Figure 11), and on these coins the hole is placed so that the Virgin Hodegetria stands upright. On the gilded coin the Virgin would be upside down! This indicates that the focus was on Romanus himself. On the coin he is shown wrapped in the loros which indicated that he was Christ’s representative on earth. He probably gave it to someone as a special gift.

**Why is it bent?** When coins are bent it is not from natural causes. Even if a coin is buried in the ground for centuries it does not bend. Therefore a force of some sort must have been applied to the coin, and if it belonged to a soldier it could have been bent as a result of violence during a battle. Sadly it seems that this soldier’s amulet did not save him.

If this coin could talk it would tell a fascinating story about people in the top level of Byzantine society. It would say that the emperor himself gave it as a special gift to one of his generals before he set out on a military campaign. This general was killed in battle and the precious pendant was ripped from his dead body. Whatever the true story this odd coin certainly fires the imagination.

---

**FINLAND TO STRIKE DANISH COINS**

STARTING in 2017 The Mint of Finland will begin striking Denmark’s coins.

In 2014 Danmarks Nationalbank decided to outsource production of all the country’s banknotes and coins. The reasons given were production costs and an anticipated decrease in the demand for coins and banknotes. The tender for coins was put out in mid-December 2015.

The Mint of Finland won the contract on the grounds of being most economical as well as offering the highest quality and greatest security. The contract is for four years.

For Den Kongelige Mønt [The Royal Mint of Denmark] this is a historic change. The institution dates back to the early 16th century. For well over 500 years it has been the only company allowed to mint Danish coinage.

Since 1975 the mint has been under the control of Danmarks Nationalbank. The tender for banknotes is yet to be let.

---

**CLUB SECRETARIES:**

Are your details on CAB’s “Club Meetings” page correct and current? Out-of-date details can frustrate readers who might otherwise have visited one of your meetings and perhaps joined your club.