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ANOTHER CONVERTED ROMAN COIN?*

Brooks Emmons Levy

The Princeton University Library recently acquired an oddly mutilated bronze coin (fig. 1). All traces of the obverse have been obliterated, but the reverse legend COL CAES ANTIOCH – SR shows the piece to be from the Roman colony at Pisidian Antioch. The reverse type is that of the local deity Mēn, who had an important cult centre there. Mēn is shown standing frontally, dressed in a long tunic, pallium, and Phrygian cap, with the points of a crescent moon visible behind his shoulders. He holds a staff in his right hand and turns his head to contemplate a small Victory on globe held in his left; the Victory in turn holds a miniature trophy of armor. A bull's head (indistinct in this example) is below Mēn's left foot, and by his right is a rooster[1].



Such large-sized pieces (30 mm) with the reverse type of Mēn were struck at Antioch in the Severan period, with obverse portraits of Septimius Severus, Julia Domna, Caracalla and Geta[2]. It is impossible to know which of the four appeared on the obverse of this coin, for portrait and legend were at some point thoroughly erased, reducing the piece to about half its original weight and thickness[3]. Two long cuts and the trace of a third were then made at right angles to each other across the smooth obverse surface. The edge was slashed all around; the rim on the obverse side was bevelled. This created the effect, particularly on the reverse, of a neat scalloped border. Our coin's adapter has treated the obverse with care, but it was clearly the reverse type that he valued.

A coin with comparable defacement was reported in SM 19, 73 (1969) p. 14. On that piece, a follis of Magnentius from Aquileia[4], the obverse portrait was not erased, but

* Professor Kurt Weitzmann and the late Professor Andreas Alföldi have seen casts of this piece; they are not responsible for the hypothesis presented here, but thanks are owed to both for kind and helpful comments.

[1] Though Mēn appears with great frequency on Anatolian coins, the rooster accompanies him chiefly on those of Antioch. Eugene Lane, Corpus Monumentorum Religionis Dei Menis (CMRDM) vol. 2 (1975) pp. 1–163, lists the cities whose coins use Mēn as a type. On Mēn see also RE 15.1 (1931) cols. 689–697, and Roscher, Lexikon der ... Mythologie 2.2 (1894–1897) cols. 2687–2770.

[2] CMRDM 2 p. 94 no. 34, p. 97 no. 42, p. 98 no. 45, p. 100 no. 49; A. Krzyzanowska, Monnaies coloniales d'Antioche de Pisidie (1970) pp. 160–165, Table XVIII, pls. XIX–XXIII.

[3] Weight: 12.55 g. The pieces catalogued by Krzyzanowska weigh from 21.33 to 31.38 g.

[4] P. Bastien, Le monnayage de Magnence (1964) 238.

defaced with three intersecting cuts, while the coin's edge received six deep equidistant notches. W. Kellner speculated that the coin had been converted to a Christian amulet: the three cuts on the obverse would have constituted a rudimentary Christogram, while the reverse type – the emperor on horseback, spearing a fallen barbarian – must have been taken as St. George and the dragon. As a date for the conversion Kellner tentatively proposed the twelfth century, noting that St. George appears then on the coins of (Syrian) Antioch.

A similar explanation, less precisely dated, would suit the Pisidian piece. The careful reworking and cruciform cuts suggest that it too may have been adapted as a Christian amulet, souvenir, or game counter. A provincial coin of this kind will not have travelled far. We can probably place its conversion in the ambiance of mediaeval Anatolia; as we know from *Acts* XIII, Antioch itself had a Christian community very early[5]. Other examples can be cited of local Anatolian issues reused as ornaments (pierced, in this case, for use as pendants) with their reverses probably given Christian meaning, their obverses ignored and worn facing inward: a coin from Phrygian Eriza, whose reverse type of Ephesian Artemis might have been interpreted as an *orans;* a coin of Diadumenian from Synnada, on whose reverse Amaltheia and the infant Zeus could be taken as a Virgin and child[6].

It is not so easy to find a Christian equivalent for Mēn, with his distinctive clutter of pagan attributes. W.M. Ramsay long ago suggested that the worship of Mēn continued in Anatolia as that of St. Mennas, who was revered at an early date in Phrygian Laodicea[7]. But Ramsay cited no specific evidence for this continuity, and the oldest surviving representations of Mennas come not from Anatolia but from his Egyptian cult centre, Abu Mena[8]. They, however, show the saint with camels – not bulls, roosters, crescents, or Victories. There ist no good reason to suppose that our coin shows a Mēn transmuted to Mennas. It is more likely, I would suggest, that he was seen by the adapter as an angel. Antiochene Mēn has a good deal that reminds us of St. Michael, as the latter appears in the well-known British Museum diptych panel from sixth-century Constantinople: frontal stance, long tunic and pallium, staff and globe[9]. Even the points of the crescent behind the god's shoulders may be seen as closed wings.

There are interesting similarities between Mēn and the «pagan angels» of late antiquity[10]. In some places his role was that of a protector or savior; sometimes he appeared in person to his worshippers; he was a guardian of tombs, and had associations with the underworld[11]. In these ways he is reminiscent too of early Christian angels, whose connections with pagan angels are admitted to exist though hardly agreed upon. But it cannot be deduced from one altered coin that there was continuity between the

[5] W.M. Ramsay, The Cities of St. Paul (1907) pp. 247–314.

[6] Eriza: BMC Phrygia p. 202 no. 4, pl. XXVI no. 6; Synnada: ibid. p. 402 no. 53, pl. XLVII no. 3. On Christian amulets see Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie (DACL) vol. 1.2 (1907) cols. 1784–1860; on game counters, A. Alföldi, «Heiden und Christen am Spieltisch», Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum 18 (1975) pp. 19–21. Coins reworked as ornaments are discussed by G.B. De Rossi in Bullettino di archeologia cristiana 7.3 (1869) p. 60; he observes, no doubt rightly, that the majority were reused without particular attention to the type.

[7] «The Utilisation of Old Epigraphical Copies», Journal of Hellenic Studies 38 (1918) p. 124; cf. RE 15.1 col. 697.

[8] Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie vol. 8 (1976) col. 4; Bibliotheca Sanctorum (BS) vol. 9 (1967) cols. 324–343, esp. cols. 342–343; DACL vol. 11 (1933) col. 336.

[9] London, The Trustees of the British Museum, EC 295; see The Age of Spirituality, ed. K. Weitzmann (1979), p. 536 no. 481.

[10] CMRDM 3 (1976) pp. 25–26.

[11] Ibid. pp. 40, 52–53, 78.

worship of Mēn and that of a Christian angel[12]. Nor can an iconographic link be assumed, for early representations of angels have multiple debts to pagan prototypes[13], and the superficial resemblance between Anatolian god and Christian angel may be explained by a common dependence on the repertory of ancient art. I would only propose here that it was this resemblance, accidental or not, that motivated the adapter of the Antioch coin.

There is some support for the conjecture: the cult of angels was especially popular in the region from which the piece comes. At Pisidian Antioch itself a silver votive tablet has been discovered, apparently Christian or syncretist, referring to angels[14]. Its excavator dated it to the third century – that is, within a hundred years of the issuing of the coin. Angel-worship seemed excessive enough in 363 A.D. to be proscribed by the Council of Laodicea; it was remembered by the fifth-century writer Theodoretus as a long-lived aberration in Phrygia and Pisidia[15]. And the cult of St. Michael flourished in the area long after the angel-worship deplored by the church had been formally eradicated. Though his famous shrine at Chonae near Phrygian Colossae may be as old as the fourth century, Ramsay (following Gelzer) dated the peak of its popularity to the ninth or tenth[15]. By that time, of course, Michael's appeal was far wider: he appears as a type on Byzantine coins from the time of Justin the First.

There are iconographic elements in the Antioch piece for which it is hard to imagine a Christian explanation, but perhaps the simple milieu in which such amulets were produced did not require an analogue for each pagan detail. In any case a good deal remains mysterious about the cult of angels. Michael, as the Christianized Mercury, is shown on a Gnostic gem with a rooster[17]; oxen and roosters may have been offered to the angels at Mamre in Palestine[18]. With all its uncertainties, the angel hypothesis still seems the best to account for our coin's reworking. If it is correct, the conversion is most likely to have occurred early in the Middle Ages, or even in late antiquity. All that can be certain, however, is a Severan *terminus post quem*[19].

[12] See RE 15.1 col. 697 for the view of J. Javakhishvili, rejected by A. Lesky, that the cult of Mēn continued in Georgia as that of St. George.

[13] BS 9 col. 416; DACL 1.2 (1907) col. 2111 f.; 11 col. 905.

[14] D.M. Robinson, «A Magical Inscription from Pisidian Antioch», Hesperia 22 (1953) pp. 172–174.

[15] DACL 1.2 cols. 2085, 2088, 2146.

[16] BS 9 col. 416; W.M. Ramsay, Cities and Bishoprics of Phrygia vol. 1.1 (1895) p. 214.

[17] BS 9 col. 433; DACL 1.2 col. 2134, fig. 659.

[18] M.E. Frazer, «A Syncretistic Pilgrim's Mould from Mamre (?)», Gesta 18 (1979) p. 138 and n. 17.

[19] O. von Vacano has recently reported another altered coin of Magnentius (Bastien 64) in Düsseldorf: «Zur Zahnung von Münzrändern», Numismatisches Nachrichtenblatt 29 (1980) pp. 160–162. He suggests that the Magnentius pieces were altered in late antiquity, probably in the fourth century. This would fit well with the hypothesis proposed here for the Antioch piece, though no direct connection between the two cases can be supposed: von Vacano convincingly argues that the coin now in Düsseldorf must have been reworked in the region of Trier, where it was minted. His argument that the reworking is too crude to qualify such pieces as amulets seems to me less convincing, and he offers no alternative explanation.