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# THE FACE OF CHRIST ON THE SOLIDI OF JUSTINIAN II

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This year marks the end of two thousand years of the present era, which was calculated to start at the time of the birth of Christ. Although modern scholars have since determined that Christ was probably born about five years before the previously estimated time, this year marks a significant point in world chronology. It is therefore appropriate at this time for numismatists to consider the history of the influence of Christianity on coinage. Many will be surprised to know that the face of Christ did not appear on coins until the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. during the reign of the Byzantine emperor Justinian II<sup>1</sup>. They will also be surprised to know that only a few years after issuing this coin Justinian issued another coin bearing a completely different face of Christ on the obverse. The question immediately arises: which, if any, of these faces represents the true likeness of Christ? Although J.D. Breckenridge considered the matter in his thorough and scholarly monograph, "The Numismatic Iconography of Justinian II"<sup>2</sup>, the question has still not been satisfactorily answered. In this essay some of the issues involved will be discussed and an attempt made to draw some conclusions.

## THE COINS

Justinian II had two reigns. The first was from 685 to 695 A.D. and the second was from 705 to 711 A.D. During the first reign he issued a solidus with a bust of Christ on the obverse. On the reverse there is a standing, facing figure of Justinian wearing the

loros<sup>3</sup> and holding a cross potent in his right hand and the akakia<sup>4</sup> in his left hand (Figure 1). The inscription on the reverse is D. IUSTINIANUS SERU CHRISTI (Lord Justinian Servant of Christ). This title, *SERVUS CHRISTI*, was completely unprecedented on coinage. Beneath the figure of Justinian is the mint-mark CONOP. On the obverse the bust of Christ has an oval or round face with a full beard and long, wavy hair parted in the middle. Two small strands of hair arise at the part. There is a cross behind his head. He wears a tunic with a cloak, and raises his right hand in benediction. A book of Gospels is held in his left hand, which is not shown. The inscription on the obverse is IHS. CHRISTOS REX REGNANTIUM (Jesus Christ King of Those Ruling). In keeping with Breckenridge's classification the face of Christ on this coin will be referred to as Type A (Figure 2).

During his second reign Justinian issued another solidus with an entirely different bust of Christ on the obverse. The reverse of this coin takes two forms. One has half-length figures of Justinian and his son, Tiberius, facing and holding a cross potent between them (Figure 3). The inscription on this reverse is D.N. IUSTINIANUS ET TIBERIUS PP (Our Lords Justinian and Tiberius Forever). Some specimens have A or AU (Augusti) after PP. This reverse indicates that the coin belongs to Justinian's second reign because his son was born after his first reign. The other reverse, issued early in his second reign, has a bust of Justinian, facing. He has a short beard and wears the

loros. He holds a cross potent in his right hand and a globe surmounted by a patriarchal cross, in his left hand (Figure 4). Inscribed on the globe is PAX (Peace). The inscription on this reverse is D.N. IUSTINIANUS MULTUS AN (Our Lord Justinian for many years). The obverse of these coins has a bust of Christ, facing, with a cross behind his head. He has a small, triangular face with a very short beard. He has a wide forehead with short, curly hair arranged in two rows. He wears a tunic and a cloak, and raises his right hand in benediction. He holds the book of Gospels in his left hand, which is not shown. The inscription on this obverse is DN IHS CHS REX REGNANTIUM (Our Lord Jesus Christ King of Those Ruling). The face of Christ on this coin will be referred to as Type B (Figure 5).

## HISTORY OF THE PERIOD

Justinian II was the last of the dynasty begun by the emperor Heraclius (610-641 A.D.), the great Christian general who had recovered Jerusalem from the Persians and brought the Holy Cross back from Ctesiphon. Justinian ascended the throne at the age of sixteen and was said to be very devout. He took an active interest in religious matters and called the Quinisext Church Council, which met in Constantinople in 692 A.D. One of the laws passed by this Council was that Jesus should be represented in human form as a man, and not symbolically as a lamb. It was felt that symbols diminished the significance of the Incarnation. In keeping with this edict Justinian issued a coin showing the Type-A face of Christ on the obverse. This was the first time that the face of Christ had appeared on

coins and the first time a reigning emperor had chosen to have his portrait on the reverse. Previous rulers such as Augustus and Alexander the Great had relegated their gods to the reverse.

In Rome, however, where the metaphor of the Lamb was popular, the pope refused to recognize these laws and reacted by deliberately adding the Agnus Dei (Lamb of God) to the Mass. The pope's displeasure may also explain why none of the solidi of Justinian's first reign seem to have been minted in Italy<sup>5</sup>. Another reaction occurred in the Muslim world, which had gradually been gaining power during the seventh century. Although the Qur'an forbade the use of human imagery the caliphs and governors had struck coins resembling Byzantine and Persian types already in circulation. According to Mark Whittow<sup>6</sup> the appearance of Justinian's icon<sup>7</sup> of Christ forced the Islamic world to a decision. After various attempts to establish an Islamic imperial imagery on an equal basis with the Byzantines, the caliph Abd al-Malik abandoned figural designs completely. From the mid-690s the Islamic world was to be associated with aniconic imagery, and henceforth only Qur'anic inscriptions would appear on Islamic coins. The Muslim reaction extended to Jerusalem where the caliph Abd al-Malik was decorating the Dome of the Rock. Under his orders only Qur'anic inscriptions and non-figurative mosaics would be used. By the early eighth century the Muslim world had rejected the use of figural images.

In his first reign Justinian became very unpopular with his subjects, largely because of the heavy taxation needed to pay for his ambitious building projects. In 695 A.D. a revolution occurred and Justinian was led in chains around the Hippodrome in Con-

stantinople. He had his tongue and nose slit<sup>8</sup>, and was banished to Cherson, a city in Crimea. Because of his slit nose he was given the nickname, Rhinotmetus (Cut-nose). In his later years, he is said to have worn an artificial nose of gold to cover his disfigurement. As his nose does not look disfigured on his second-reign coins we must assume that he is wearing his gold one.

In Cherson he soon gathered a band of followers and escaped. He took refuge with the ruler of the Khazar tribes, who gave him his sister in marriage. Justinian renamed her, Theodora, and she later bore him a son called Tiberius. After a series of adventures Justinian regained his throne in 705 A.D. He was ferocious in taking revenge on many of his subjects and so persistent was his cruelty that it was thought that he had become mentally deranged. The patriarch, Kallinikos, who had crowned the usurpers, was blinded and exiled to Rome, no doubt to encourage the pope to ratify the Quinisext canons. In 706 A.D. Justinian appointed a new patriarch, Kyros, but Kyros was probably not responsible for the Type-B Christ on the new coinage because Breckenridge<sup>9</sup> has shown that the solidus with the Type-B Christ on the obverse and Justinian alone on the reverse, was issued in the first year of Justinian's second reign, i.e. 705 A.D. So it seems that Justinian himself introduced the Type-B Christ as soon as he regained power. In Rome a new pope, Constantine, was elected in 708 A.D. and at Justinian's invitation he visited Constantinople in 711 A.D. to discuss their differences. The details are not known but apparently concessions were made on both sides and they parted amicably.

As a result of Justinian's extensive purges, the army had become depleted of senior of-

ficers and began to suffer defeats both in the east and the west. Tired of Justinian's cruelty the people welcomed a new ruler and in November 711 A.D. Justinian and his six-year old son were executed. Subsequent rulers reacted to Justinian's policy of displaying pictures of Christ. This reaction was largely due to the perception that Justinian's empire was linked to icons and defeat, while the victorious Muslim empire had pleased God by rejecting all such images. This led to the period of iconoclasm, during which all figurative art of the previous centuries was destroyed. Today there are very few icons which can be dated before 842 A.D., when the last iconoclastic emperor, Theophilus, died. It was only in remote places like the monastery of Saint Catherine in the Sinai desert that icons survived (Figure 6). Mosaics, of course, are naturally resistant to destruction but even many of these were badly disfigured during this period. Christ does not reappear on coins until the reign of Michael III (842-867 A.D.) and it is the type-A Christ who is shown. This Christ dominates all future Christian imagery<sup>10</sup>.

## COMPLICATING FACTORS

The way Christ was depicted in early Christian art was complicated by a number of factors. These factors tended to cloud and confuse the face of Christ as it was presented in various situations.

One complicating factor was the Second Commandment, which prohibits the making of images. It is important to understand that because of this Commandment pictures of human beings were not allowed in Judaism or early Christianity, which was an offshoot of Judaism. Thus we find symbols

such as the fish<sup>11</sup>, the Chi-Rho monogram<sup>12</sup>, and later the cross<sup>13</sup> being used by the early Christians. It is very unlikely that any artist ever drew a portrait of the historical Jesus. Christians who had not seen him were dependent on the description given to them by those who had. The situation is further complicated by the fact that many claimed to have seen Jesus after his resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:3-8) and it seems that this resurrected Christ had a different appearance, as some who had known him before his crucifixion had difficulty recognizing him, e.g. John 20:14. In one incident, "their eyes were kept from recognizing him" (Luke 24:16).

A second complicating factor is the obvious one that Jesus' appearance could have changed from time to time, depending on whether he had a beard or how he dressed his hair. Also his appearance would have changed as he grew from a beardless youth to a mature man in his thirties. The sixth and seventh century Christian mosaics at Ravenna in Italy show both a mature, bearded Christ and a youthful, beardless one. Among the scenes in which this youthful Christ appears is one showing the separation of the sheep from the goats. Presumably he here represents the "eternally youthful" Christ as some imagined him after the Resurrection.

A third complicating factor to consider is how we would expect a Jewish rabbi to look in the first century A.D. According to Leviticus 19:27 it was a law that all Jewish men should have full beards: "Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard". But Jesus was far from a conventional Jew, as indicated by his

various statements and actions (e.g. Mark 7:14,15; Matthew 12:1,2). In fact some modern scholars<sup>14</sup> are saying that Jesus was influenced by Hellenistic (Greek) culture to a considerable extent. They point out that the Hellenistic city of Sepphoris was only a few kilometres from Nazareth and that Jesus and his father, Joseph, could have been involved in building work there. Under the influence of this sophisticated urban culture, Jesus might well have shaved off his beard, or trimmed it so that it was very short. Similarly, he might have changed his hairstyle. Among Greeks and Romans at this time, it was the custom to shave the beard and have fairly short hairstyles. Coins of the Roman emperors from Augustus to Nero show them all to have fairly short, even curly hair, despite the fact that Caligula was actually bald. Herod Phillip, the brother of Herod Antipas and the only son of Herod the Great to put his portrait on coins, has a similar appearance. Beards became fashionable only after Hadrian (117-138 A.D.), who grew one to hide his acne.

In Greco-Roman society, appearances were assimilated to what was considered respectable. A full beard was the sign of a barbarian. Zeus (Jupiter), of course, had a large, curly beard, but this was meant to denote age and wisdom, befitting the father-figure that he was. Apollo, the son of Zeus, represented the physical ideal, with his beardless face and fairly short, curly hair. These pagan influences became evident as Christianity took root in Rome and other centres of Greco-Roman culture. In the scenes carved in relief on the fourth-century sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, a Christian senator and prefect of Rome, we see

Christ taking on the features of Apollo (Figure 7). Similarly, the pagan theme of the shepherd was popular in the Roman world, where the shepherd was a familiar image in painting. Thus it was easy for the early Christians to assimilate Christ to this theme of the Good Shepherd. Christ is frequently represented as the Good Shepherd on the walls of the Roman catacombs, where he looks very much like Orpheus (son of Apollo), a god especially associated with animals. Orpheus was portrayed as a clean-shaven young man in Greek dress. His cult stressed rewards in the afterlife.

Another complicating factor is that from the time of Constantine the Great (307-337 A.D.), the emperor considered himself to be Christ's representative on earth. This belief could well have influenced the way Christ was pictured in Byzantine art. A good example of this is the Barberini Ivory (Figure 8). This is an early sixth-century, ivory plaque, where the emperor (Anastasius I?), riding a horse, looks remarkably like the Christ in the panel above. Similarly, except for the hair, Justinian II looks like the Type-B Christ on his coins. He has the same small, triangular face and short beard. The Christ in the Barberini Ivory incidently has the same double-layered hairstyle as Justinian's Type-B Christ.

So it can be seen that a number of factors influenced the way Christ was portrayed in the centuries prior to the time of Justinian II. Nevertheless, in spite of all these complicating factors, the two faces of Christ which appear on the obverse of the coins of Justinian II are quite distinctive and very different from each other. Therefore the arguments for each of these images being the actual face of the historical Jesus will now be considered.

## THE ARGUMENT FOR TYPE A

According to Breckenridge<sup>15</sup> there is no clear precedent for the Type-A Christ, although he does concede that some parallels can be found<sup>16</sup>. He suggests that the picture of Christ on the solidus of Justinian's first reign is only part of a larger picture because the Bible on the coin is unsupported by Christ's left hand; and he argues that this larger picture is the enthroned-Christ mosaic which stood above the imperial throne in the Great Palace built by Justin II (565-578 A.D.) in Constantinople. This mosaic was destroyed during the period of iconoclasm. Breckenridge feels that the prototype of this image was the face of Zeus on the famous statue by Phidias, which had been transported from Olympia to Constantinople where it was destroyed by fire in 462 A.D.

Ian Wilson<sup>17</sup> has put forward the plausible argument that the prototype of the Type-A Christ was the face on the Shroud of Turin. This cloth, which had been kept in Turin cathedral, is believed by many to be the actual sheet on which the body of Christ was laid. It was folded down over the front of the body so that it pressed upon the face, and somehow an image of Christ's face was made in the cloth (Figure 9). There is no doubt that the face on the Shroud of Turin looks very much like the Type-A Christ on Justinian's coin. It even seems to have the two strands of hair arising from the part.

These strands of hair are prominent on the type of icon known as "The Holy Face Not-Made-by-Human-Hands" (acheiropoietos). Copies of these icons survived the period of iconoclasm because they did not transgress the Second Commandment. The image was believed to have been

miraculously created as on the Shroud of Turin or on the cloth used by Saint Veronica to wipe the face of Christ as he carried the cross. The surviving examples are Type A. Although a cloth kept in the Vatican is claimed to be that of Saint Veronica this idea is too fanciful to be taken seriously. The Shroud of Turin, however, could well have been the acheiropoietos which was used as the prototype of the Type-A Christ on Justinian's coin. According to tradition the Shroud of Turin was taken to Edessa in the first century, and in that city it became known as the Cloth of Edessa. This cloth was subsequently taken to Constantinople in 943 A.D.<sup>18</sup>

The problem with the Shroud of Turin is that carbon-dating performed in 1988 dated it to the period 1260-1390 A.D., and during this period the bishop of Poitiers, Henri, in whose diocese the shroud was exhibited, claimed that it was a forgery. Although the case against the Shroud of Turin being the shroud of Christ is strong, Wilson believes that it is genuine. He maintains that the carbon-dating was misleading because the small fragment taken from the edge for testing was contaminated by a "bioplastic coating", a sort of build-up of bacterial residue. To support his thesis that the Type-A Christ on Justinian's coin is derived from the Shroud of Turin Wilson points out that the reverse shows the emperor wrapped in Christ's shroud (loros).

The argument for Type A being the authentic image of Christ is strengthened by the fact that the oldest known icon of Christ is Type A. This icon was found in Saint Catherine's monastery and is dated to the sixth century A.D.(Figure 6). As each generation of icon painters was expected to imitate the work of the previous generation,

we can be sure that this type of icon had existed for some considerable time. It shows a mature Christ with a handsome face. He has a high forehead, small mouth, and a magisterial expression. His dark eyes look intensely at the viewer. Unfortunately for the Type-A case it has been pointed out that all the features of Christ on this icon could simply be idealized features; for example the high forehead indicates spirituality and the small mouth indicates lack of sensuality. This Christ was the ideal one to stare down from the dome of Byzantine churches where he is known as the Pantocrator (All-Mighty), or to sit enthroned above the throne of the emperor himself (hence the inscription, King of Those Ruling).

## THE ARGUMENT FOR TYPE B

The fact that the Type-A Christ was replaced by the Type-B one on Justinian's coinage is reason enough to regard the latter as the more authentic. This reasoning, however, can be countered by pointing out that after the period of iconoclasm, the Type-A Christ was re-instated permanently.

It has been suggested<sup>19</sup> that Justinian changed to Type B as a concession to the pope. We know that the pope refused to ratify the canons of the Quinisext Council and that the Type-A coins were not minted in Italy. We also know that after his victorious return to Constantinople in 705 A.D. Justinian was eager to consolidate the whole of his empire, including his troublesome possessions in Italy. If this suggestion is correct it is reasonable to assume that the pope believed that the historical Jesus was Type B. Perhaps the popes had previously encouraged the use of symbols to avoid the unattractive, but authentic, Type-B image of

Christ<sup>20</sup>. If the pope supported the Type-B Christ, its origins could well have reached back to descriptions by the first pope, Peter, himself.

In his first letter to the Christians in Asia Minor, Peter compares Christ's role to that of the Suffering Servant in the book of the prophet Isaiah (1 Peter 2:21-24). One of the features of the Suffering Servant described by Isaiah is that he was not good-looking: "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2b, NIV). If we accept this analogy in its entirety it means that Christ was plain-looking. Actually the Type-B Christ on Justinian's coins is more than plain, he is "peculiar". With his high forehead and mound of double-layered curls we might even say that he looks "weird".

Artists would have avoided this image purely on aesthetic grounds, or they might have tried to make it as Apollo-like as possible<sup>21</sup>. Nevertheless Breckenridge claims to see a remarkable similarity to this Type-B Christ in the miniature illustrations in some Syrian manuscripts dated to the seventh century A.D.<sup>22</sup> In England in 1963 a fourth-century Roman mosaic was discovered near the village of Hinton St Mary in Dorset and here the face of Christ is Type B. Also Breckenridge mentions a certain Anthony of Placentia (modern Piacenza, near Milan) who made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the sixth century A.D. In the church of S. Sophia at Jerusalem he saw a picture of Christ said to have originated in Christ's lifetime. It seems that this image was Type B as Anthony describes it as having curly hair. Breckenridge feels that acheiropoietic images like this, especially the Image of

Camuliana<sup>23</sup>, were the precursors of Justinian's type-B Christ.

More important for the Type-B case is the evidence recorded by Theodoros Anagnostes<sup>24</sup> in his Ecclesiastical History written in the sixth century. He relates a legend concerning Archbishop Gennadios, who was patriarch of Constantinople from 458 to 471 A.D., in which a certain painter made an icon of Christ in the likeness of Zeus and as a result his arm withered, but Gennadios was able to heal him miraculously. At the end of this story Theodoros goes on to say, "But one of the historians says that the other type of the Saviour, the woolly and short-haired (or scant-haired), is taken for granted as the more truthful". Theodoros does not tell us who this historian was, but presumably his work was one of the sources which Theodoros was using. It seems beyond doubt that the image to which Theodoros was referring was our Type-B Christ, while the image in the form of Zeus was our Type-A. So, for at least one early historian, it was taken for granted that the historical Jesus was Type B.

Why was the Type-A Christ re-instated on coinage in the mid-ninth century? The reason may have been that by this time Rome had been lost to the Byzantine empire and there was not the same need to placate the pope. So the advantages of the Type-A Christ could now be used to strengthen the empire. These advantages were several: a handsome Christ would draw all people to him; the mosaic showing a majestic, judgemental Christ, the Christ of the Second Coming, could be restored above the imperial throne; a spiritual Christ as in the icon of Saint Catherine's monastery could represent the



mystical Christ of the East; and perhaps most important of all, the emperor's subjects would see that Christ was of the same physical type as most of them. With such political advantages at stake our peculiar-looking Type-B Christ had no chance.

To find the real reasons behind the changes in the face of Christ on these coins we need to look into the Byzantine psyche and to understand that ancient and medieval people did not think the way we do today. Whittow<sup>25</sup> describes the Byzantine worldview and points out that our ideas of cause and effect are quite different. "The basic Byzantine tenet" is that "set-backs at all levels were caused, or at least allowed, by God as a punishment for sin, and that repentance and the turning to a more Godly life would allow them to be spared". Justinian was the proud descendant of the revered Heraclius and a very religious man; yet in 695 A.D. he had been humiliated in the extreme. He would have reasoned that this was because he had done something to offend God, and this could well have been his showing a face of Christ which he believed was not the true one. Hence the urgent need to mint coins showing the Type-B Christ when he returned to power in 705 A.D.

Christians today have become so used to the Type-A Christ that it is unthinkable that any other Christ should be displayed in the glorious stained-glass windows of churches or shown in pictures and other forms of religious art. But herein lies the strength of the Type-B case; for it is a maxim of Biblical studies that the unexpected, and the seemingly incompatible, is more likely to be true. Nothing could be more unexpected than the peculiar, even weird, little face that

peers at us from the obverse of the solidi of Justinian's second reign.

## CONCLUSION

Ian Wilson puts forward a good argument that the Shroud of Turin is genuine and that it is the origin of the Type-A images of Christ, including that on the solidi of Justinian's first reign. But the threads connecting the Shroud of Turin to the actual shroud of Jesus are very tenuous, although a venerated relic like the Shroud of Turin could well have influenced the way Christ was depicted in the centuries before Justinian II, and hence his Type-A Christ.

When we consider the case for Type B, a number of strong points have been made, and some scholars<sup>26</sup> consider that this is the face of the historical Jesus; but again the evidence actually connecting the image to the historical Jesus is not strong. We can conclude that neither case has been proven; and so we do not know what Jesus looked like. Christians will understand that this is as it should be<sup>27</sup>. Numismatists can only agree with Breckenridge when he says, "Few, if any, numismatic issues can have had at any time so important a part to play in the history of human thought".



**Figure 1:** Reverse of solidus of Justinian II showing Justinian wearing the loros. Cf. Sear, Byz. Coins, 1248.



**Figure 4:** Reverse of solidus of Justinian II showing Justinian holding a globus cruciger with PAX inscribed on it. Cf. Sear, Byz. Coins, 1413.



**Figure 2:** Obverse of solidus of Justinian II showing Type-A Christ. Cf. Sear, Byz. Coins, 1248.



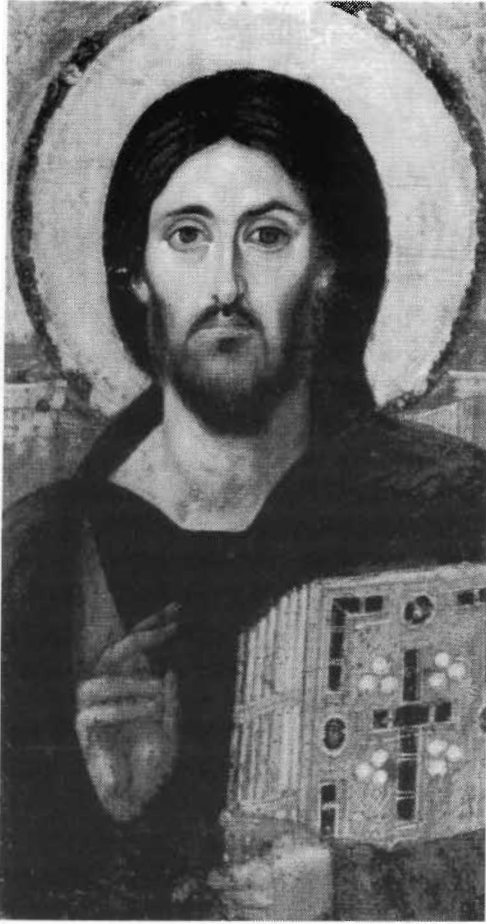
**Figure 5:** Obverse of solidus of Justinian II showing Type-B Christ. Cf. Sear, Byz. Coins, 1413, 1414, 1415.



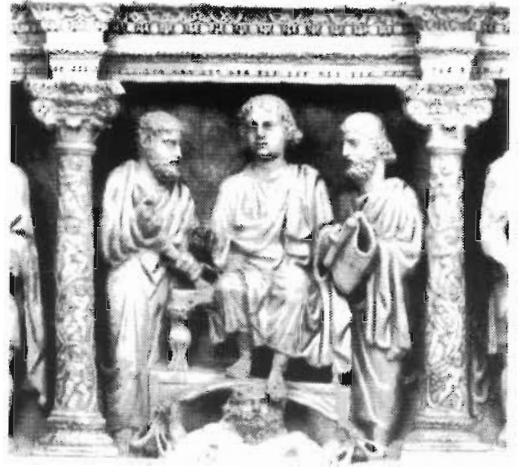
**Figure 3:** Reverse of solidus of Justinian II showing Justinian and his son, Tiberius. Cf. Sear, Byz. Coins, 1414, 1415.



**Figure 9:** Drawing of the face on the Shroud of Turin. On the Shroud the eyes are closed.



**Figure 6:** (above) The icon of Christ from the monastery of Saint Catherine. This is the oldest surviving icon of Christ and it dates from the sixth century. Copyright: Photostock / Studio Kontos, Athens.



**Figure 7:** (above) A panel from the marble sarcophagus of Junius Bassus showing Christ enthroned above the heavens. Copyright: Hirmer Verlag Munchen.



**Figure 8:** (right) The Barberini Ivory. It is named after the family which once owned it, but it is now in the musec du Louvre. The artist is unknown. Copyright Agence Photographique de la Reunion des musces nationaux

## ADDENDUM

If one accepts the argument for Type B, it means that the historical Jesus had a very unusual appearance. In fact, according to the Athos Painter's Manual<sup>28</sup>, which dates from the 17<sup>th</sup> century but was based on early sources, Christ is described as having a black beard and frizzy hair "tending to blond". He certainly did not look like a typical Jew. The possible explanations for this unusual appearance fall into three categories:

1. Because the Church teaches that Mary was a virgin and what was "conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20c), Jesus would naturally not look like a typical Jew. A variation of this explanation, and one favoured by believers in UFOs, is that Mary was impregnated by an alien, a being from another world.
2. Mary was not a virgin and the biological father was Joseph, but Jesus' appearance was within the range of physical types which existed in Galilee at that time. This explanation is supported by the fact that many foreign people were forced to migrate to Israel by the Assyrians in the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. A variation of this explanation is that Mary had intercourse with a Jewish man, who was not Joseph, or with a non-Jew who lived in the area, perhaps at Sepphoris; but this is very unlikely in view of the strict moral code which prevailed.
3. Mary was not a virgin and the biological father was not a Jew or someone who lived in the area. Although Jesus' hair is sometimes described as frizzy, it is unlikely that the biological father was a Negro because the Type-B face has no other negroid features, such as large lips or a flat nose. Another explanation in this category is that the

biological father was a European with fair, curly hair. Such men existed in the Middle East at that time because many men from Gaul served in the Roman legions stationed in Syria. Although no Roman soldiers were stationed in Judaea during the time of Jesus' conception, Josephus (Wars 2:68) tells us that when Herod the Great died in 4 B.C. the Roman general, Varus, marched into Judaea to restore order. He describes how a part of Varus' army, under an officer called Caius, was sent to Galilee, where they captured the city of Sepphoris, burnt it, and made slaves of its inhabitants. Nazareth was only a few kilometres from Sepphoris and in the pandemonium accompanying the sack of Sepphoris it is possible that a young woman called Mary was raped by one of the Roman soldiers. This is a shocking possibility, but it would explain the subsequent events as recorded in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. It explains why Mary's parents arranged for her to leave Nazareth with her future husband. According to Luke, Joseph went with Mary to Bethlehem because the Roman emperor ordered a census requiring people to register in their own towns, but no evidence for such a census has ever been found and the idea seems very improbable. According to Matthew, Joseph and Mary went to Egypt from Bethlehem because Herod had decreed that all the male infants in that town should be killed (cf. Pharaoh ordering the killing of the male infants when Moses was born), but no evidence for this decree has been found<sup>29</sup>. A likely scenario is that when Mary realized that she was pregnant, her parents, who lived in Sepphoris<sup>30</sup>, arranged for her to go to Bethlehem to have the baby and then to go on to Egypt for a year or two before settling in Nazareth. The situation at Bethlehem was

not that there was no room at the inn, but that an isolated farmhouse was needed. Luke and Matthew both admit that Jesus was illegitimate, but give only a miraculous explanation.

When the possible explanations are considered it is understandable that each would have its supporters. However, the most shocking explanation, that Mary was raped, could be seen as part of the Divine Plan; for this would be in keeping with Paul's statement in his letter to the Christians in Corinth: "God chose what is low and despised in the world, the things that are not, to reduce to nothing the things that are." (1 Corinthians 1:28) If this is true, then Jesus was conceived by rape and born in a manger. He associated with sinners and outcasts, and was executed as a criminal on a cross.

## END NOTES

1. A small standing figure of Christ appears on the reverse of a solidus of the emperor Marcian (450-457 A.D.). Here Christ is standing between the emperor and empress, and he seems to have a beard.
2. Breckenridge, J.D., "The Numismatic Iconography of Justinian II", Numismatic Notes and Monographs, No 144, The American Numismatic Society, 1959.
3. The loros was the long, wide strip of cloth worn by the emperor and other dignitaries on ceremonial occasions. It was wound around the body like a winding sheet, yet it was studded with jewels and embroidered with gold. According to the Book of Ceremonies written by the emperor Constantine VII (913-959 A.D.) the loros represented the death and resurrection of Christ. It had its origin in the costume of the consuls of ancient Rome.
4. The akakia was a bag of purple silk tied in the middle by a white handkerchief. It contained dust to symbolize mortality. In Justinian II's reign it replaced the mappa, which was a linen handkerchief dropped by a consul to start the games.
5. We know that the pope could influence coinage because, when Philippicus usurped the throne from Justinian in 711 A.D., Pope Constantine issued a decree forbidding the minting of coins bearing the new emperor's portrait. Such a coin, however, was minted in Rome (Sear, Byz. Coins, 1461), which suggests that Pope Constantine relented or was over-ruled. During the papacy of Constantine coins were minted in Rome with the bust of Justinian II on the obverse and the monogram of Constantine on the reverse (Sear, Byz. Coins, 1444b).
6. Whittow, M., "The Making of Orthodox Byzantium, 600-1025", MacMillan Press, London, 1996.
7. "Icons, the images of Christ, the Virgin Mary or the saints, made of mosaic or fresco and covering the walls of churches, or more accessibly painted on wooden panels where they were frequently found in private lay hands, were seen as doors into the spiritual world" (Whittow, op.cit., page 139). Icons also included images on metal, and hence coins can be considered a form of icon. Consistent with this spiritual quality of Byzantine coins, the holy people shown on them (including the emperor, who was Christ's representative on earth) stare directly at the viewer, confronting the viewer with questions of mortality. Similarly, mere mortals cannot avoid the gaze of the Pantocrator in Byzantine churches.
8. This was commonly done to deposed Byzantine rulers. The reasoning behind it was that a deformed individual could not

be Christ's representative on earth.

9. When Justinian regained power in 705 A.D. he was not aware that a son had been born to him because his wife was with her brother in Khazaria.

10. The Christ on the obverse of some coins of Manuel I (1143-1180) is Type B. See Sear, *Byz. Coins*, 1956 and 1967.

11. The fish was the earliest symbol for Christ and was drawn on the walls of the Roman catacombs. The Greek word for fish, *ichthus*, was an acronym which stood for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour. This symbol does not appear on coins. Another reason for the use of symbols, even after the centre of Christianity had moved to Rome, was the need for secrecy to avoid persecution, which was a recurrent threat up to the time of Constantine I, the first Christian emperor.

12. The Chi-Rho symbol was a monogram of the first two Greek letters in the word, Christ. On coins it first appears about 319 A.D. on the helmet of Constantine the Great and on his standard (*labarum*).

13. The symbol of the cross appears relatively late in the history of Christianity. On coins it does not appear until late in the fourth century A.D.

14. For example, Richard A. Batey in "Jesus and the Forgotten City". The forgotten city is Sepphoris.

15. Breckenridge, *op. cit.*, page 46.

16. Breckenridge sees parallels to the Type-A Christ in a fresco from the Ponziana Catacomb dating from the sixth or seventh century A.D., and in another from Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome, where he says the head is longer and thinner. There is also a Type-A Christ, not mentioned by Breckenridge, in the catacomb of St Priscilla in Rome. It has been dated to the second or third century A.D. (See Plate II in "The March of the

Cross" by L.W.Cowie, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1962).

17. Wilson, I., "The Blood and the Shroud", Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1998.

18. A. Blanchet (in Breckenridge, *op. cit.*) pointed out in 1949 that the solidus of Constantine VII issued in 945 A.D. probably represents this image. See Sear, *Byz. Coins*, 1747.

19. Breckenridge considers that Justinian's concessions were a retreat from the "imperial" Christ-image associated with the controversial Quinisext Council.

20. It is more likely that the early church avoided the Type-B image, not because it was unattractive, but because its non-Jewishness raised awkward questions about the circumstances of Jesus' conception. In this regard it is interesting to note that the surviving examples of the *acheiropoietai* are Type A, which raises the suspicion that there may have been an ulterior motive for the introduction of these Jewish-looking images.

21. For example, the Christ on the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (Figure 7). Here Jesus has some Type-B characteristics (no beard and fairly short, curly hair) but he is quite good-looking and wears classical dress.

22. For example Codex 3, 1300 Aug., in the Wolfenbuttel Library.

23. The image of Camuliana was present in Constantinople during the reigns of Justinian II, but no copy of it has survived. It was found in Cappadocia and brought to Constantinople in 574 A.D. According to a Syriac chronicle of 567 A.D. a woman wanted to see the face of Christ and the image appeared in a water basin in her garden.

24. Mentioned in Breckenridge, *op. cit.* The text of this passage can be found in Migne, J. P., "Patrologia Graeca" (161 volumes), Volume LXXXVI<sup>1</sup>, column 173.

25. Whittow, *op. cit.*, page 136.
26. For example Grabar, A., "L'iconoclasme byzantin, dossier archeologique", Paris, 1957.
27. The early Christians must have known what Jesus looked like, but they came to realize that it did not matter. For them the significance of the Christ-Event (the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth) was not diminished by not knowing what Jesus looked like. Although the Type-A Christ subsequently became dominant in Christian art, there was the tacit understanding that Jesus' true appearance was unknown. Consequently Jesus could be received into any culture and speak to any individual whatever his appearance.
28. Cited in Breckenridge, *op. cit.*, page 60.
29. It should be noted that the early Christian writers who mention the date of Jesus' birth, all give a date after the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C. (See Finegan, J., "Handbook of Biblical Chronology", Princeton University Press, 1986). Irenaeus of Lyons, writing about 180 A.D., gives the year of Jesus' birth as the 41<sup>st</sup> year of Augustus (i.e. from 43 B.C., the year following the death of Julius Caesar), which is 3 B.C. Tertullian, writing about 198 A.D., gives the year as 28 years after the death of Cleopatra (who died in 30 B.C.), which is also 3 B.C.
30. Anthony of Placentia, in the account of his travels in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, records a tradition that Mary's home was in Sepphoris, where she lived with her parents before marrying Joseph and moving to Nazareth.

**NOTE:** Dr Lewis will be pleased to answer questions about this article via E-mail. His E-mail address is [lewis@retnet.net.au](mailto:lewis@retnet.net.au)