

Devotional Coins in Christianity

Devotional tokens have long been rooted in Christianity with the purpose of reminding the holder of his or her faith in God, to offer a way of communication with God, and in general to strengthen one's beliefs. In this paper I will use the *Pilgrim Medallion with Christ, Angels, Apostles and Saints* produced in Venice during the 13th century to give emphasis to the role of devotional coins throughout the era of its production, and also the importance such coins played during a holy pilgrimage.

The practice of wearing amulets, pieces of metal or other material that were thought to ward off evil or diseases had originated as a Pagan practice and beginning between 300-700, the Holy Roman Empire sanctioned the allowance of devotional coins, which were stamped to commemorate people, such as Christ or the Virgin Mary, or Saints and even places such as shrines or churches and past historical events.¹ These devotional coins were typically made of medal in the form of a coin and were not used as money.

The Christian church began mandating in the 6th century that all persons above poverty were to go on a pilgrimage to a holy site at some point in their life in order to repent. A pilgrimage is a word used to describe a "holy wandering to sites of worship." These sites are considered holy places because at a specific time, there was a divine revelation that occurred.²

¹ "Devotional Medal." New World Encyclopedia

² Iona Josan pp160-162

As time went on, pilgrimages became more widespread, the journeys became easier and safer and more people were going on pilgrimages out of curiosity and not just because of religious obligation. As a result, beginning in the 12th century, the practice of pilgrimaging was so common that pilgrim tour guides started appearing in cities such as Rome and Venice. Also around that time the practice stamping lead or other medal devotional coins began being distributed at important pilgrimage sites.³ These pilgrim “souvenirs” were used not only as a stimulus to devotion but also to attest that a person had in fact reached their pilgrimage destination.



Figure1: Martyrdom of St. Lawrence
Presumed to be dated from the 4th century
Oldest known medal devotional coin



Figure2: Virgin Mary with Christ
9th-11th century, Byzantine
Originally for private devotion/protection

Those on a pilgrimage would often bring with them pieces of clothing for sick family members in hopes of making contact with a holy relic in order to help aid in healing. Coming

³ “Devotional Medal.” New World Encyclopedia

into contact with a relic was also to solicit forgiveness of sins. A relic is a “material remains of a saint after his death, as well as an object that has been in contact with his body.”⁴ The acquisition of relics was very important to the church as a means of attracting those on a pilgrimage. In fact, it was essential for a city and its churches to hold as many important relics as possible because relics were said to help heal the sick and also to solicit forgiveness for sins.

Venice is said to have been an “assiduous collector of relics: and their naval fleets would often come with bodies of saints and other pieces of their property.”⁵ In 828, the body of Saint Mark the Evangelist was smuggled out of Alexandria by the Venetians⁶, and was named the patron saint of Venice, replacing Saint Theodore. At this time, the basilica of San Marco (St. Mark) was erected and would hold the body of Saint Mark and be an extremely important relic for attracting persons on a holy pilgrimage.

The *Pilgrim Medallion with Christ, Angels, Apostles and Saints* consists of a hierarchical configuration. Christ is located in the very middle with St. Bartholomew (1 of the 12 apostles) and St. Mark (patron saint of Venice whose body was housed in San Marco) to his left and right on the middle row. Below them are St. James (the brother of Christ), St. Francis (patron saint of Italy) and St. Peter (1 of 12 apostles). At the top of the coin are two angels. This specific medallion or coin would have been presented to a pilgrim while visiting San Marco. Of particular importance for the purpose of this paper is to note that this medallion is made of glass, while all other referenced devotional coins have been made of medal.

⁴ Bonser, “The Cult of Relics in the Middle Ages,” pp. 234

⁵ Bosner, “The Cult of Relics in the Middle Ages,” pp.

⁶ Devitini, “The Beginnings of a Legend from Byzantine Art to Romanesque” 12.



*Figure 3: Pilgrim Medallion with Christ, Angels, Apostles and Saints,
13th Century, glass, Venice*

The reason to note the use of glass is because by the 13th century, Venice had established itself as a producer of high quality, unique glass throughout Italy and far beyond. Their glass production had become so significant that at this time it was decided to move all manufacturing onto the nearby island of Murano. The reason for this move was because of the potential threat of fires from the high heat of melting glass and also because it allowed for larger facilities to manufacture their growing glass industry.⁷

On the island of Murano is precisely the location that the “Pilgrim Medallion with Christ, Angels, Apostles and Saints” would have been produced. The mold used to create this medallion would have been made out of metal and then molten glass would have been poured in to mass-produce and give as souvenirs for the visiting pilgrims. Upon returning from a pilgrimage, a person would have their proof of their pilgrimage with their coin but more

⁷ Mentasti and Carboni, “Venice and the Islamic World,” 253.

significantly this person would have a glass medallion, which would easily be identified as originating in Venice.

As supporting evidence for identifying the *Pilgrim Medallion with Christ, Angels, Apostles and Saints*, refer to Figure 4: the pilgrim token from the Shrine of St. Symeon. This token is made from the pressed soil located around the shrine. The significance of this is that the mold used is unique and also that the material is soil with clay compounds. The use of this material helps to identify this coins origination in a similar way the glass used in the *Pilgrim Medallion with Christ, Angels, Apostles and Saints*.



Figure 4: Pilgrim token from Shrine of St. Symeon (present day Syria) 6-7th century

The soil located around the Shrine of St Symeon was used to press

As stated in this paper, the *Pilgrim Medallion with Christ, Angels, Apostles and Saints* was an important coin for distributing and promoting devotion, as well as the religious attractions and artistic abilities of Venice during the 13th century.

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