



## ***From Constantinople to Chang'an: Byzantine Gold Coins in the World of Late Antiquity.***

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### **Our Daily “Bread”**

The infusion of cold, hard cash is certain to upset any status quo, producing a “sugar high” that may lead to a crash when the wealth is interrupted. Mexican silver strengthened the Spanish Empire, but also triggered runaway inflation that blighted the lives of ordinary Spaniards. The disruptive power of Mexican silver was felt not only west-to-east, but also east-to-west, when for centuries the yearly voyages of treasure galleons carried countless tons of the precious metal from Acapulco across the Pacific to Manila, then northward to Taiwan and southern China, where business was transacted; then, following the currents, the fleet made the homeward voyage, past the shores of Japan, Siberia, Alaska, Canada and California, arriving at the home port. The round-trip voyage took about three years. The upstart Qing Dynasty grew to depend on this annual windfall, delivered regularly for centuries; when the galleons stopped coming, “cold turkey,” a consequence of Mexican independence, a downward spiral of currency devaluations and economic turmoil began which eventually sealed the fate of the Chinese Empire.

Little physical evidence remains of this contact. To this day, the Chinese word for “bank” (yinhang 銀行) is literally a “silver exchange.” The Spanish left words behind; *pan* is still the Taiwanese and Japanese word for western-style bread. They took with them the Taiwanese word for the world’s most popular beverage, which is why we say “tea,” while the Russians, who dealt with the northern Chinese, say “chai.” Without going into details, the uniquely Mexican obscenity that corresponds to “the f-word” could only have come from Chinese, presumably from a Spanish-Chinese pidgin of lonely Mexican sailors. Tangible remains of the long-term Pacific trade in silver, however, are few and far between.

Northern China, however, is a different matter, not only because not only silver, but gold and copper as well, were the medium of exchange, but because of the nature of the commerce: first, because it involved non-Chinese middlemen, and second, because the trade in luxury goods went both ways. Instead of bars of bullion, the caravans brought Russian furs and Baltic amber, which are not amenable to barter. Chinese silk for Baltic amber? How would one have made change? A reliable means of exchange was necessary. Thus, a gold coin was valuable not only for its

weight, but because it was standardized and useful for sustained trade. Thus, the coins were not melted down, like bullion, but kept intact, and thus there is an extensive inventory of hard evidence to learn from.

*From Constantinople to Chang'an: Byzantine Gold Coins in the World of Late Antiquity* is an excellent treatment of this subject. In form it is a “proceedings,” an anthology of papers presented at a conference, in this case the International Conference in Changchun, China in 2017. The papers themselves are excellent; they would be daunting were it not for the choice of the book’s lead-off article, which is an introduction to the subject. Pagona Papadopoulou’s “The Gold of the Emperor: Imitations of Byzantine Gold Coins in the Mediterranean” explains the complicated terminology used by those specialists who are deep in their subject, and explains it in terms that the rest of us can understand. This chapter alone is worth the price of the book. Papadopoulou also provides an instructive introduction to the propaganda wars between Christendom and Islam, where the coins were stamped with outspoken messages.

The following articles detail how the demand for standardized coinage outstripped the supply, and how local mints compensated for the shortage. Jonathan Jarrett provides a detailed and well-organized treatment of local Mediterranean government’s efforts to address the untheatrical, but very important lack of low-denomination coins, what we might call “small change.” In addition to the central Mediterranean, he touches on the European periphery, that is, Scandinavian and Muslim kingdoms.

The chapters that follow amount to a series of stops on the Silk Road, and each stop is instructive. Sven Günther discusses imitations of Byzantine coinage in areas close to Iran, and includes instructive illustrations. A broader view of the Silk Road is presented by Wan Xiang and Lin Ying, who discuss the politics of bimetallism: gold/copper, gold/silver, silver/copper, all in the service of governmental power—and small change. Rebecca Darley discusses Roman coins and their imitations in India, and touches on the question of how one mints small change: die-struck, or cast? One side, or two? Darley’s article covers not only a long period of time, but also a large area, the Indian Subcontinent. She discusses the question of a coin’s value being “beyond bullion,” that is, its value as a medium of exchange, a facilitator of commerce, more than its value as a precious metal that could be melted down. The chapter by Stefanos Kordozis is dense: it contains an enormous amount of data and opinion, much of it from Chinese histories and written in Chinese. For me, at least, this paper will require repeated readings to follow the ideas that Kordozis presents. Li Qiang surveys numismatic archaeology in China, more recent discoveries that shed light on Byzantine coins and their imitations in China. More exactly, Li presents a Who’s Who of Chinese specialists and institutions dedicated to the subject, which, although not as interesting as the coins themselves, are useful to know. The classification of the coins themselves are discussed by Guo Yunyan, an authority praised by Li for her ground-breaking work. L. Khagvasuren Erdenbold discusses coins in the context of a Mongolian tomb. Guo Yunyan analyzes how the tomb coins illuminate the big picture.

All in all, *From Constantinople to Chang'an: Byzantine Gold Coins in the World of Late Antiquity* is quite a feast. It tells the story of a west-to-east transfer of wealth that is not as theatrical as that of Mexican silver, but one that is illuminating and indispensable to understanding the background of events in Chinese history, as a subset of the silk road.



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