ARMENIAN NUMISMATIC JOURNAL

COMMEMORATIVE VOLUME

DEDICATED TO THE

MEMORY OF

FR. CLEMENT SIBILIAN

on the Centennial of His Death

1824-1878

EDITORS

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ARMENIAN NUMISMATIC SOCIETY

Los Angeles

1980
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THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE "CORONATION" TRAMS OF KING LEVON I

[See Plates V-VI]

The "coronation" trams of the first king of Cilician Armenia, Levon I (1198/9-1219), were considered to be relatively rare until the recent publication of a hoard of some 880 pieces by Paul Bedoukian. Based on the type of the reverse field, there are really two basic varieties of these coins, but many sub-varieties.3

The obverse of all coins is generally the same (Figs. 1-4). In the central field is King Levon, crowned and kneeling with hands breast-high, raised toward a standing figure to the left. The king's face is shown nearly frontally, while his body is seen in profile. On most coins the king's left arm and hand, those closest to the viewer, are visible; on a few issues, the right hand appears visible, suggesting that the intent of the engravers of all coins was to show a pose with both hands extended in a gesture of supplication. The standing figure on the left has a halo and appears nearly frontal in body and face; only on some issues is there the hint of an inclination toward the king. The upright figure is dressed in full-length robes with hands open and extended about waist high, a variant of the pose of prayer or pleading known as orant. Between the two personages at the top of the circular field, but still within it, is a curve representing the sphere of heaven from which emanates a ray, a ball or orb, and/or a halo-like object, and/or a bird, depending on the variant of the coin. Other marks, dots or the Armenian letters H (ח) and A (א) (Fig. 1) or just H (ח) are found on different issues.4 The circular obverse legend reads, "Levon is King of Armenians" לֶבֶן אָמְרוֹנִים, and is found in various states of completion or abbreviation.5

1 Levon began his rule as prince in 1187. His official or church coronation as king took place in either 1198 or 1199. The extensive literature on the exact date is reviewed by Paul Bedoukian, who favors 1198, in the work cited in the following footnote.
2 P. Bedoukian, "A large Hoard of Coronation Trams of Levon I," Handes Amsorya, Vol. XC (1976), cols. 409-440. The hoard was reported to have had some 3,500 pieces, ibid., n. 38.
3 In addition to the article already cited, Bedoukian's Coinage of Cilician Armenia, American Numismatic Society, Numismatic Notes and Monographs, No. 147 (New York, 1962 and revised edition, Danbury, 1979), also describes 133 coronation trams listed under numerous variants.
4 On some variants, e.g. Nadia Kapamadji Collection, Paris, the Armenian letter S (ס) is (inadvertently?) written for A (א).
5 As is well known Bedoukian classified his corpus of Cilician Armenian coinage in part on the basis of the completeness of the legends. The present article disregards this formula and considers variations solely on design changes.
The two distinct reverse varieties are (1) addorsed lions flanking a long cross of various shapes, like the ordinary trams of Levon, or (2) a very rare type, similar to Levon's double trams, with a single crowned lion, rampant right with a mustachioed human face, left paw in the air, and a double barred cross in back. The rarity of this second reverse type is attested to by its total lack in the large coronation hoard. The circular reverse legend reads, “With the Strength of God” Ὕπαιπτον Κυρίῳ Ὑπαιπτον, and like the obverse inscription is abbreviated in various ways.

The obverse image, described above, has been universally accepted as a representation of Christ and the crowned King Levon, presumably struck at the time of Levon's consecration in the Cathedral of Tarsus on January 6, Epiphany, 1198 or 1199. The following pages raise several questions about this issue, especially its iconography.

From a glance at any of the variants of the obverse (only from the newly discovered hoard Bedoukian identified 41 types), it is quite clear that the king is not being crowned by the standing figure (Figs. 1-4) for though Levon wears a diadem and is kneeling before the figure, the latter is not touching either his crown, head, or any part of him. On the contrary, both hands of the left figure are held open like that of the orant. There are an extremely large number of minor variants of the scene, but in none of these is either the position or the gestures of either person essentially different. On Byzantine coronation issues either Christ or the Virgin is clearly seen touching the crown of the emperor (Figs. 5-8).

The number of variants of this coin, the two distinct reverse varieties, and the number of obverse and reverse dies (Bedoukian lists 111 of the latter in the hoard), suggests what the hoard confirms,

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8 For the common type, Bedoukian, "A Large Hoard," passim; for the second variety, Bedoukian, Coinage of Cilician Armenia (1962), pl. V, figs. 77-79.

11 Most recently, Bedoukian, "A Large Hoard," col. 419, says, "The coronation issues showed on the obverse the crowning of the king, with Christ standing and the king kneeling," and col. 421, "on the obverse of the coronation trams is standing, and the king;" see also idem, Coinage of Cilician Armenia, p. 37. Earlier literature on the coronation issue includes: V. Langlois, Numismatique de l'Arménie au moyen âge (Paris, 1855), pp. 38-39; L. Alishan, Sisouan (Venice, 1885), in Armenian, p. 279; C. Sibilian, Classification of Roumian Coins (Vienna, 1892), pp. 8-9; A. Sekoulian, "Two-lion Silver Coronation Coins of Levon I," HANDES AMEROSY, Vol. LXXXIV (1970), cols. 365-370, all in Armenian. To the best of my knowledge the only numismatist to raise doubt on the identification of Christ was Fr. Clement Sibilian himself, who in a letter (published for the first time in this volume, in Armenian) of September 19, 1870 to Fr. Simon Antonian, says, "Christ (standing to the left with hands open..." supra in this volume p. 20.

9 In addition to the literature cited in Bedoukian, "A Large Hoard," cols. 411-420, see now Ani Atamian, "The Date of the Coronation of Levon I according to Armenian and Western Sources," The Armenian Review, Vol. XXXII, No. 3 (1979), pp. 280-291; the author argues for a coronation in 1199.

7 Though Bedoukian does not say exactly "Christ is crowning King Levon," that is certainly the implication in the two quotations cited in note 7 above.

10 Sibilian in the letter quoted in note 7 above already pointed out that gesture, ܡݲܕܳךܟܠܳܟܝܐ ܒܚܛܟܬܪܐܕ ܣܪܐ."

11 Figs. 5-7 show the Virgin and are respectively gold issues of Emperors John Zimisces (969-976) and John II Comnenus (1118-1143), illustrations after P. O. Whiting, Byzantine Coins (New York, 1973), figs. 297, 281. Figs. 7-8 show Christ crowning Andronicus I (1183-1185) and Andranikos III (1282-1348) respectively, Whiting, figs. 346, 391. This list is far from exhaustive; ivories, mosaics, and lead seals also show similar iconographic compositions. On at least one seal of Romanus IV (1068-1071), dated to the year of his coronation, we see both Christ and the Virgin, on the obverse and reverse respectively, crowning the emperor; Cecile Morrisson and George Zacos, "Image de l'empereur byzantine sur les sceaux et les monnaies," La Monnaie, Miroir des Rois (Paris, 1978), p. 67, no. 119.
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namely, that extremely large quantities of these coins were struck and that the issues were minted not just for a specific event, the coronation of King Levon, but over a longer period, perhaps years. That this type of coin may have been issued for a number of years does not of itself exclude the possibility that the original striking was for the coronation. We know from the Byzantine experience that such coronation issues were often extremely popular and, therefore, issued well after the event originally commemorated. Bedoukian already put forward the hypothesis that single lion "coronation" coins were struck from 1197, when Levon received the crown with the Pope's blessing from the legate of the German emperor, to the consecration, and that the double lion reverses were struck at the time of the actual church anointing.\(^\text{12}\) The two lions, kept thereafter on Levon's trams, symbolize, according to this interpretation, the two crowns which the king received, that of Henry VI, endorsed by the Pope, and that sent by emperor of Byzantium, Alexis III.

Yet, there are some problems with this designation of the reverse iconography, for it does not seem logical to suppose the use of a crowned single lion (double trams and the rarer "coronation" type) on what is regarded as an earlier issue and that of two uncrowned lions, representing the donation of crowns, on the more abundant "coronation" types. The reverse, whether with single or double lion, has been treated by other scholars and no discussion of the origin of its iconography will be considered in this article.\(^\text{13}\)

There are even greater questions about the iconography of the obverse of this issue. In neither Byzantine nor Armenian art is Christ depicted orant. He is never shown in this position of prayer, simply because as Christ-God He is the highest authority and, therefore, would not need to appeal to a higher one for intercession. The only example known to me in Armenian art of the period of Christ with hands out similar to that on the coins is in a Cilician Gospel of ca. 1268 attributed to T'oros Roslin in the Freer Gallery of Art.\(^\text{14}\) In the scene of Christ appearing to His Apostles, after the Resurrection, He is shown nearly frontally with hands open at waist-height to show His followers the nail wounds from the Crucifixion. In Byzantine coronation scenes, an upright Christ is either touching the emperor's head or offering the sign of benediction to the emperor who, on thirteenth century issues, is sometimes seen prostrate before Him (Fig. 8). Furthermore, in no example that I can recall in either Armenian or Byzantine art of the period is Christ, when depicted in this act of spiritually crowning the king/emperor, accompanied by either the hand of God, the Father, or a bird, the dove symbolizing the Holy Ghost. They do not accompany Christ because He is God and includes them in His Trinitarian person, and they would, therefore, be redundant details.

\(^\text{12}\) Bedoukian, "A Large Hoard," cols. 414, 419, 423; \textit{idem}, <span>Coinage of Cilician Armenia</span>, p. 76. According to Bedoukian, Levon actually received the crown from Emperor Henry VI in 1196.


Furthermore, the standing figure on all recorded variants of the obverse has a simple halo (Figs. 1-4), whereas Christ in all scenes of crowning or benediction or seating in judgement in Byzantine and Armenian art is graced with a cruciform halo (Figs. 7-8), one with three arms of the cross at the top and both sides within the halo, a motif usually reserved for Him and only Him. In fact in all Armenian art of Cilicia, Christ is depicted with the cruciform halo.

Finally, the last major problem with the figure on the left is in the garments worn by it. Christ is normally depicted wearing a tunic, revealing an open neck to the level of the collar bones, and hanging down near ankle-length showing bare, sandaled feet. Over this tunic is a mantle extending over His left shoulder and then around the waist. He is bare-headed, bearded, with the lines of the hair and beard clearly indicated (Fig. 8). Yet, the "Christ" on the coronation issue has a garment which covers both shoulders and drapes over on both sides down past waist length, where, the extended hands lift the fabric to form a single curved fold from left to right. Only the upper part of the neck is revealed; the under garment, which hangs down to below ankle-length, is not the normal tunic, and the head on most variants appears to be covered with a monk's cowl.

All of these details taken together suggest that the figure to the left is not Christ, but rather the Virgin Mary. Even a cursory glance at any of these coins shows the standing figure to be wearing a heavy under garment with characteristic folds moving down and amply flowing out, unlike Christ's tunic, but like that of the Virgin's. Her perennial headdress, the maphorion, covers our figure's head leaving only her face (revealed up to mid-forhead) and the upper neck. Then, it hangs down like a mantle, as is customary, over the shoulders and to just above the knee, while her hands protrude out of its front hem. The cut of the Virgin's garment is such that when her hands are revealed or held out, a single, shallow, dipping arc is formed from left to right, and, just as on the coins, the rest of this outer garment drops down in tapered folds on each side to the knees, or, at the tips of the cloth, even below. In Armenian and Byzantine art this is the Virgin's garment in virtually all renderings of her in every period.

Perhaps the actual pose of the standing figure is the most revealing point in the iconography, for though Christ is never represented orant, the Virgin is very commonly shown in this stance. As Theotokos, the Mother of God, intermediary between man and her Son, she is shown, especially in the early Armenian tradition and again often in contemporary Cilician Armenian art, with hands
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open asking Christ’s intercession. She never bears the cruciform halo either. Additionally, because the Virgin is acting as an agent for man before God, she is, from early Christian times, often shown accompanied by the hand of God or the Holy Ghost in the form of the Dove, showing that God reinforces her power of intercession.

In miniature paintings from the thirteenth century executed for Cilician kings, Mary is depicted in nearly the precise pose (Figs. 9-10) as that on these coins issued a little more than fifty years earlier. In most Byzantine coronation issues, she is shown, rather than Christ, touching the crown of the emperor, and at least on one tenth century issue, the hand of God accompanies the action (Fig. 5). On certain trams of King Oshin (1308-1320) the hand of God is seen on the right side of the seated king; these coins are considered coronation issues because of this feature and probably rightly so.

If the field marks on some of the coins under examination, the Armenian letters H and A, represent the words, "In the Name of God" ՄԱՐԱԴԱՆԵՐԵ, this too would reinforce the concept—like the hand and the dove—that the Virgin is acting as God’s agent. Christ Himself would not require this unnecessary and repetitious legend.

It may be asked why Levon chose to have himself appealing to the Virgin rather than directly to Christ. The Virgin had already become closely associated with royalty in the west. The double trams of Levon, imitating coins of the German Emperor Henry VI, show him seated and crowned with a fleur-de-lys in his left hand. This flower, a symbol of purity, had become attached to the Virgin and represented her already in the twelfth century. Thus, if the double trams are in date prior to the so-called coronation trams, as Bedoukian maintains, the favor shown for the Virgin and Levon’s associating her with his sovereign prerogative of striking coins was already manifest through the fleur-de-lys motif before she herself was depicted on the coins under discussion.

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20 In addition to the later examples already cited, she is in the orant pose in the oldest dated and illustrated Armenian manuscript, the Mk’r Gospels of 862 A.D., Venice, Mekhitarist Library at San Lazzaro, MS no. 1144, fol. 8, the Ascension; Der Nersessian, op. cit., p. 85, fig. 57.
21 In the Ascension scene on ampulla no. 10 from Monza dated to the sixth century and originating from Jerusalem; André Grabar, Ampoules de Terre Sainte (Monza-Bobbio), (Paris, 1958), p. 26, pl. XVII.
22 Respectively, Erevan, Matenadaran, MS no. 10675, fol. 89 (formerly Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate, MS no. 3627), Gospel of 1268 illustrated by Toros Roslin, detail of the Last Judgment, our figure is after Der Nersessian, op. cit., p. 130, fig. 93, and, Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate, MS no. 2568, fol. 5, Gospel of Prince Vask, second half of the thirteenth century, detail of the incipit of the Gospel of St. Matthew, after ibid., p. 149, fig. 110.
24 Some issues of Smpad (1296-1298) apparently also have the hand of God; this information was communicated to me by Y. T. Nersessian and J. Guevrekian both of whom I would like to thank for having made comments to an early draft of this article. The hand coupled with the legend, "With the Strength of God," is a forceful argument for a coronation issue.
Once it has been established or accepted that the obverse of these coins represents King Levon kneeling in supplication before the Virgin, who in turn is appealing to Christ, at least two interpretations of the image come to mind. Until now only one of these has been put forward, namely, that she (mistakenly taken for Christ) was blessing the king or was asking God for His benediction. The problems with this analysis have been presented above. But another explanation is possible by analogy to manuscript illuminations from the court of the same Armenian kingdom of Cilicia. In surviving miniature paintings commissioned by Levon's immediate successors, the Virgin is several times represented with members of the royal family kneeling before her. In two royal Gospel miniatures of the third quarter of the thirteenth century, we have a type, found especially in Western iconography, known as the Virgin of Mercy, in which Mary is seen presenting to Christ the king or prince and his family shown protected by her mantle.

In these representations of the Virgin of Mercy, there is no question of coronation, but simply a pious gesture on the part of royalty toward the Virgin imploring her to function as protector and direct intermediator with Christ. As Sirarpie Der Nersessian has pointed out in a long and detailed article, this type, which makes its appearance in western art in the later thirteenth century, occurs in Armenian examples chronologically prior to surviving Italian paintings. She postulates the existence of earlier Italian works with this motif, perhaps shortly after the first quarter of the thirteenth century, as possible prototypes of Armenian miniatures. Though it is evident that on the coins the Virgin does not spread her mantle out to protect King Levon, still, it well may be that these coins, struck by Levon in relatively large quantities compared to the rare one-of-a-kind Italian pictures or Armenian miniatures, showing Mary in a pose similar to that in the later Italian works, may have served as initial prototypes for the later Armenian miniatures of the Virgin of Mercy. Whether or not the coins or the manuscript illuminations themselves had any iconographic influence beyond Armenia can only be considered after further investigation.

Very little research has been done on the iconography of Cilician Armenian coins. This is unfortunate, for since they were issued in large quantities, circulating to all or nearly all members of society and viewed—unlike the manuscripts—by more than just limited and elite royal and ecclesiastical circles, these broadly distributed artistic objects would have been excellent purveyors of aesthetic ideas and could have functioned well as iconographically productive models.

In the final analysis these coins may have served in part as a coronation issue on the basis of the:

\[27\] Respectively, Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate, MS no. 2568, already cited in note 22 above, fol. 320, and Brussels, Feron-Stoclet Collection, a detached folio.

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hand seen on some rare specimens (Fig. 4), though this is by no means a certainty.29 The variety of issues with or without a hand, a ball or orb, field letters, the dove, suggests strikings over many years including perhaps 1198/99. Whatever more research may demonstrate on this question, the presence of the Virgin (previously thought to be Christ) on these silver trams does not necessarily reinforce the coronation concept, but rather the notion of a king already in possession of legitimate power turning to the Virgin for individual mercy and the protection of his kingdom.

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Fresno-Paris

29 Only on a few of the more than one thousand recorded specimens is a hand seen, occasionally seemingly turned toward King Levon, cf. Bedoukian, "A Large Hoard," cols. 425-435. The hand of God often appears in Christian iconography in scenes having nothing to do with either coronation or baptism or anointing, but alone, e.g. the sixth century Ascension scene on the ampulla cited in note 21 above or in the Ascension of the Rabbula Gospels, a Syriac work of 586 A.D. (Florence, Biblioteca Mediceo-Laurenziana, MS Plut. I. 56, f. 13a; Michael Gough, The Origins of Christian Art [New York-Washington, 1974], p. 181, fig. 176), or sometimes with the Holy Spirit in the form of a bird, e.g. the carved eleventh century Armenian wooden panel showing the Crucifixion originally from Hayots'-T'ar now in the Treasury at Holy Etchmiadzin, Der Nersessian, L'Art Arménien, p. 111, fig. 81. In fact the very rare appearance of a hand on these coins may argue for the exception which proves the rule, namely that the basic obverse design on the great majority of these coins does not refer to coronation, but rather reveals the close relationship that Levon felt toward the Virgin.
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Բանի ակուցական զարգացման առաջընթաց սուրաբ, ինչպես բազմաթիվ օձի զարգացման գրավում
բազմաթիվ իրավունք են դասական Քրիստոս։ Քրիստոսի ակուցական զարգացման փաստ, այսպիսի ակուցական
զարգացման առաջընթաց է գրավում, իրավունք են բազմաթիվ իրավունք են դասական Քրիստոս։ Քրիստոսի
ակուցական զարգացման գրավում առաջընթաց է գրավում, իրավունք են բազմաթիվ իրավունք են դասական Քրիստոս։
5. AV, JOHN ZIMISCES (969-976)

6. AV, JOHN II COMNENUS (1118-1143)

KOUYMJIAN, THE "CORONATION" TRAMS OF KING LEVON I (Enlarged)
7. ELECTRUM, ANDRONICUS I (1183-1185)

8. AV, ANDRONICUS III (1282-1328)

9. VIRGIN, MATENADARAN, MS 10675

10. VIRGIN, JERUSALEM, MS 2568

KOUYMJIAN, THE "CORONATION" TRAMS OF KING LEVON I (Enlarged)