

Solidus of Christ

The Solidus of Christ was minted under Justinian II in Constantinople around 692-695 CE. It is 4.5 grams of 24-karat gold, and the buying power of one solidus is equal to almost \$38 in modern USD.¹

With both Jesus and Justinian II pictured on the coin, the symbology draws from the Orthodox Christian tradition of divine right, wherein God appoints the emperors. In Byzantium, this divine right did not claim the infallibility of the emperor. It was held that “when God chooses a king [...] God can also ‘unchoose’ him.”² The emperors were only seen as legitimate, as chosen by God, as long as they upheld the Gospel and their law was beholden to God’s law and church canon.³ This solidus reflects this dynamic. The depiction of Jesus on the obverse is because, for Orthodox Christians, God is the ultimate source of power and is where the money gains its authority. The inscription “IhS CRISTDS REX REGNANTIuM,” which translates to “Lord Jesus Christ, King of Kings,” makes this more explicit. Justinian II is then placed on the reverse as the receiver of power from God. With the inscription “D IuSTINIANuS SERu ChRISTI,” which roughly translates to “Justinian, servant of Christ,” Justinian is humbled beneath God’s authority and power, perfectly aligning himself with the expectations of a holy emperor.

However, the reign of Justinian II was not as exemplary as the coin symbology implies. Crowned at 16 in 685, he made a treaty with the Arabs, but in 689, disputes arose surrounding newly conquered territories, prompting an Arab attack. He convened the Quinisext Council, preparing disciplinary canons to supplement the fifth and sixth ecumenical councils in 692. This was not attended by Pope Sergius I, sparking animosity between the papacy and the emperor.⁴ Justinian’s land and tax policies caused the people to revolt in 695. His nose was cut off, and he was exiled to Crimea.⁵ His

¹ “Ancient World Money Converter.” *Drevlit.ru - ДревЛит - библиотека древних рукописей*, drevlit.ru/converter_money_eng.html. Accessed 8 Apr. 2024.

² John Anthony McGuckin. *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture*. John Wiley & Sons, 9 Dec. 2010, pp. 382.

³ John Anthony McGuckin. *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture*. John Wiley & Sons, 9 Dec. 2010, pp. 380–395.

⁴ “Justinian II | Byzantine Emperor .” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 18 Mar. 2024, www.britannica.com/biography/Justinian-II.

⁵ Georg Ostrogorsky. *History of the Byzantine State*. New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 1969, pp. 116–122.

deposition began what is known as the Twenty Years' Anarchy, a period from 695 until 717 of many emperors claiming the throne in quick succession.⁶ This period includes Justinian II's second reign when he seized back the throne in 705 with a gold nose prosthetic and was determined to get revenge against his past adversaries.⁷ The mass executions he held only served to alienate former supporters of his. During his second reign, however, he reconciled with the papacy, reinforced by Pope Constantine visiting Constantinople in 710. In 711, another revolt broke out, and his rule ended with his arrest and the execution of him and his family.

Six years after Justinian II's death, Leo III was crowned emperor, ending the Twenty Years' Anarchy. Leo III issued a series of edicts banning the use of icons in religious veneration.⁸ This sparked significant discourse over the use of icons called "iconomachy" by the Byzantines, though it is more commonly referred to as "iconoclasm" today.⁹ Coins minted under Leo III reflect his edicts, depicting him and his successor Constantine V on the solidus.¹⁰ This solidus of Christ represents one of the last monetary representations of Christ before it was outright banned.

⁶ Heald Jenkins, Romilly James. *Byzantium : The Imperial Centuries, AD 610-1071*. Toronto Etc., University of Toronto Press, 1 Jan. 2001, p. 56.

⁷ John Julius Norwich. *Byzantium: The Early Centuries*. New York, Knopf, 1998, p. 345.

⁸ Treadgold, Warren T. *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*. Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press, 2000, pp. 350, 352–353.

⁹ Freeman, Evan. "Byzantine Iconoclasm and the Triumph of Orthodoxy – Smarthistory." *Smarthistory.org*, 11 Jan. 2021, smarthistory.org/byzantine-iconoclasm/.

¹⁰ Shutterly, Michael . "Coins of the Iconoclasts, Part I." *CoinWeek*, 2 Sept. 2022, coinweek.com/coinweek-ancient-coin-series-coins-of-the-iconoclasts/.