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### WHO IS THE AUDIENCE, EMPEROR? TARGETING AUDIENCES ON LATE ROMAN AND EARLY BYZANTINE COINS<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This article suggests that audience targeting occurred on late Roman and early Byzantine coins by differentiating imperial attributes on the obverse rather than images on the reverse. Although late Roman and early Byzantine coin types are substantially more standardized than previous Roman imperial issues there are still subtle differences to be found between the various metals and even denominations. By focusing on imperial attributes this article indicates the way in which targeted messages were sent by changing the representation and subsequent role of the emperor on the obverse. By analyzing the appearance of the so-called military and consular types, this article will provide two case studies of imperial representations that were struck on rare gold, and occasional silver, issues intended for a specific audience well into the Byzantine era. Additionally, these imperial representations were under specific circumstances also broadened to a larger audience using bronze coins.

**Keywords:** *audience, imperial communication, consul, soldiers, imperial representation.*

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In recent years several studies have indicated that Roman coins were used to spread imperial messages targeted at specific groups.<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon of ‘audience targeting’ on coins is a practice that is currently only known from Roman coins that were struck before the reign of the emperor Diocletian. During the reign of Diocletian coinage was standardized reducing the rich variety in reverse types that had existed before.<sup>3</sup> This article will suggest that audience targeting still occurred on late Roman and early Byzantine coins but on the obverse rather than the reverse. Focusing on the imperial attributes on the obverse will indicate the way in which targeted messages were sent by changing the representation and subsequent role of the emperor. This article will consider two specific imperial Roman attributes with ancient connotations going back to the Roman Republic that were not

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<sup>1</sup> This article comes forth from a part of my MA thesis *The Attributes of the Emperor: A gradual transformation (378-711)* that was written under the supervision of Olivier Hekster at Radboud University in the academic year of 2021-2022. This article was greatly improved by the critical comments of Olivier Hekster and Liesbeth Claes who were kind enough to read earlier versions. Needless to say, all remaining errors are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Most recently see: HEKSTER 2020, 279-281; BETJES 2022, 28-43; CLAES 2023, 56-79.

<sup>3</sup> KEMMERS 2019, 30-31.



**Img. 1.** Histamenon of Isaac I Komnenos (r. 1057-1059). Left: DOC 3.2 Isaac I - 1. Right: DOC 3.2 Isaac I - 2.

abandoned during the ‘Christianization’ of the imperial image. These two imperial attributes concern the spear, also referred to as *hasta*, often combined with military helmet and the white cloth, known as the *mappa*, often combined with the consular scepter.

That imperial attributes were relevant to the beholders of Byzantine coins is illustrated by the two eleventh-century texts written during the reign of Isaac Komnenos I:

*After Isaac Komnenos ascended to the throne, he ascribed this accomplishment to himself instead of the will of God. This became clear from the fact that he portrayed himself on coins with a sword, as if he meant to say: ‘this has earned me the empire and nothing else’.*<sup>4</sup>

*After Isaac Komnenos ascended to the throne in the way described, having confirmed his reputation for courage and military valor, he promptly had his likeness engraved on the imperial coinage bearing a sword, since he ascribed all that had come about not to God but to his own prowess and proficiency in war.*<sup>5</sup>

These texts indicate the importance given to imperial attributes by some of the contemporary beholders of the solidi struck under the authority of Isaac Komnenos I. The first solidus represented the emperor holding a *labarum* in his right hand and a sheathed sword in his left hand. This type was, however, soon replaced by another type on which the emperor held a drawn sword in his right hand while holding the sheath in his left hand (Image 1).<sup>6</sup> The differences between these two types might seem minor, but they were immediately noticed by some contemporaries. The new image of the emperor with a drawn sword was interpreted as a symbol of pride, indicating that his military successes were due to personal skills instead of the will of God. This particular military type of Isaac did not return on the coins of his successor. It seems that this military representation

was not how some people expected the emperor to appear on coinage.<sup>7</sup> This eleventh-century anecdote indicates that, although they seem to be minor features, imperial attributes on imperial self-representations did matter to some of the contemporary beholders. The question then remains, could these imperial attributes also function as a means of sending a message to a specific target audience? This article will suggest that this is the case, by arguing that imperial attributes could and were consciously used to send specific messages on coins to certain targeted groups. This argument will be illustrated by two case studies in which the emperor appeared as a soldier and as a consul on coins meant for a specific audience.

### THE SOLDIER EMPEROR

Emperors were represented as soldiers on various visual mediums because the emperor was the supreme military leader in the empire. Some emperors actually went to the battlefield and secured major victories, other emperors were less fortunate, especially in the later centuries of the Roman Empire.<sup>8</sup> Between the death of Theodosius I and the reign of Justin II no emperor personally led a military campaign. Nevertheless, these emperors were still expected to be represented as the supreme military leader, whether they had military experience or not.<sup>9</sup>

On the coins of the late Roman emperors (379-491), imperial attributes are not that common on the obverse (22%) or the reverse (26%) if the emperor is portrayed there at all. When imperial attributes are depicted, however, military attributes are the most common (~20%) (Fig. 1&2). On Byzantine coins, imperial attributes on the obverse are substantially more common (70%). Military attributes are, however, less common on Byzantine coins, only ~4% of the total coins struck in this period depict military attributes

<sup>4</sup> Johannes Zonaras, *Ἐπιτομή Ἱστορίων*, 18.4, trans. TRAPP 1986, 121-122.

<sup>5</sup> *Skylitzes Continuatus*, book I-1, trans. MCGEER/NESBITT 2020, 37-38.

<sup>6</sup> For these two specific types see: *DOC 3.2 Isaac I - 1* & *DOC 3.2 Isaac I - 2*

<sup>7</sup> For the discussion about these types see: NELSON 2011/2012, 176-177; WALKER 2012, 3; KAZHDAN 1983, 14.

<sup>8</sup> For the military role of the emperor in the Roman empire see: HEKSTER 2022, 109-132.

<sup>9</sup> TROMBLEY/TOUGHER 2019, 179-180.

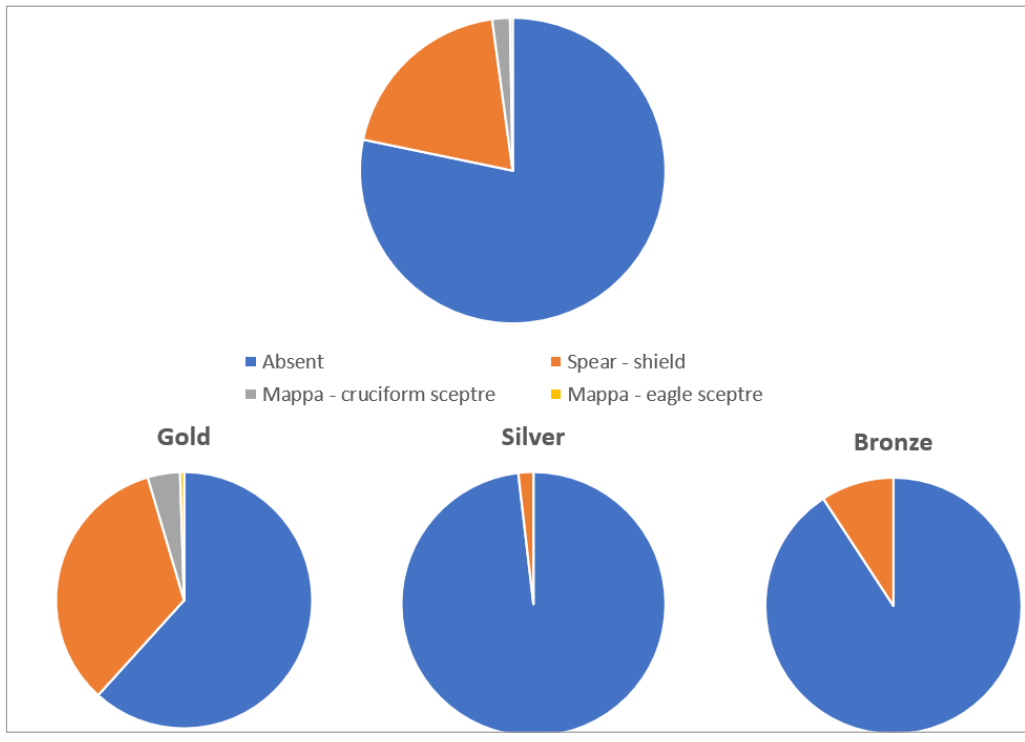


Fig. 1. Distribution of attributes on the obverse Roman coins 379-491 overall and per metal class (RIC).



Img. 2. Military representations of various emperors on gold coins. Left: Solidus of Marcian (RIC X Marcian 523). Middle: Solidus of Justinian I (DOC I – Justinian I – 1a). Right: Solidus of Constantine IV (DOC 2.2 – Constantine IV – 4)

in the hand of the emperor (Fig. 3).<sup>10</sup> It is notable, however, that military attributes did not disappear from Byzantine coinage but kept being struck on specific coins at least until the end of the seventh century.<sup>11</sup>

Military representations of the emperor could take different forms. Most of them portrayed the emperor as a  $\frac{3}{4}$

bust portrait with a military helmet and a spear (Image 2). Spears were a common symbol in republican and early imperial Rome, being depicted on tombstones, *fibulae*, and other small ornamental objects.<sup>12</sup> The spear as an imperial attribute on coinage does not appear before the time of the ‘soldier-emperors’ who reigned during the crisis of the third century.<sup>13</sup> In the fourth century, spears become a more common imperial attribute on coinage, often combined with the  $\frac{3}{4}$  bust. This so-called military bust, including the spear, emphasized the emperor’s *virtus*, which had been an important feature of imperial representations since the time of Augustus.<sup>14</sup>

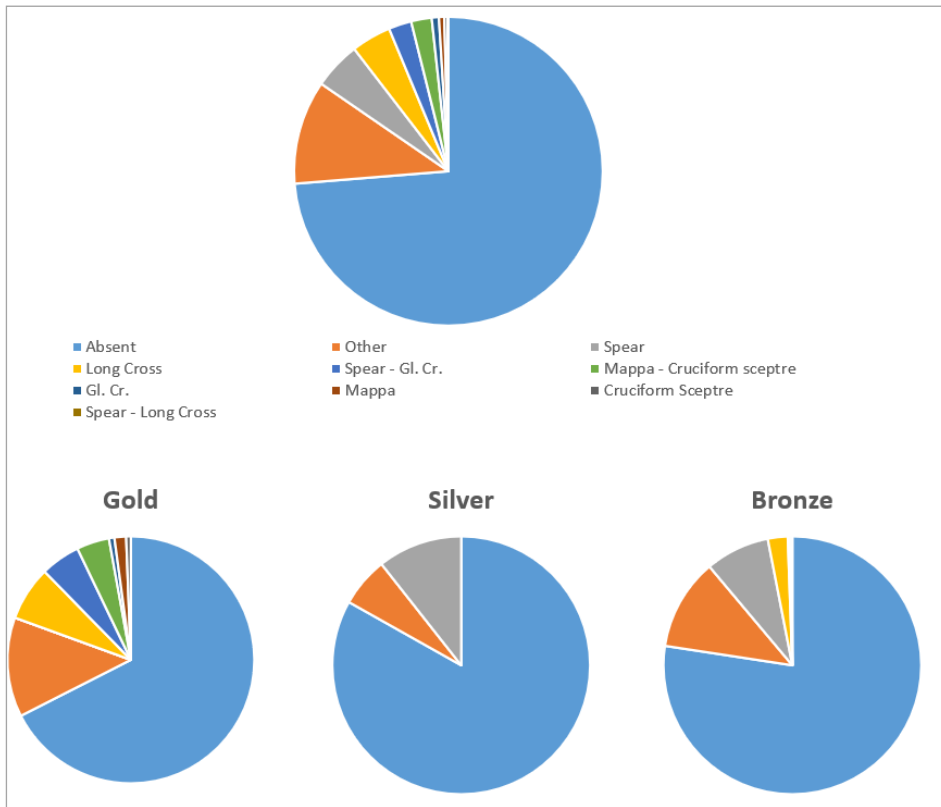
<sup>10</sup> The quantities in this article will be based upon the museum catalog of the Dumbarton Oaks and Whittemore collection. Although this catalog is also often used as a standard typology for Byzantine coins, in this article the quantities of the museum collections will be considered to indicate the rarity of specific types; for the representativeness of this collection see: GANDILA 2009, 153-156, 158-161, 191-192.

<sup>11</sup> Military attributes could mostly be found on Byzantine gold coins struck in the period from 491-527, and 668-685. The prominent position of military attributes on these gold coins would not return until the eleventh century. For the reintroduction of military attributes on numismatic self-representations in the eleventh century, see: SAXBY 2017, 12-14.

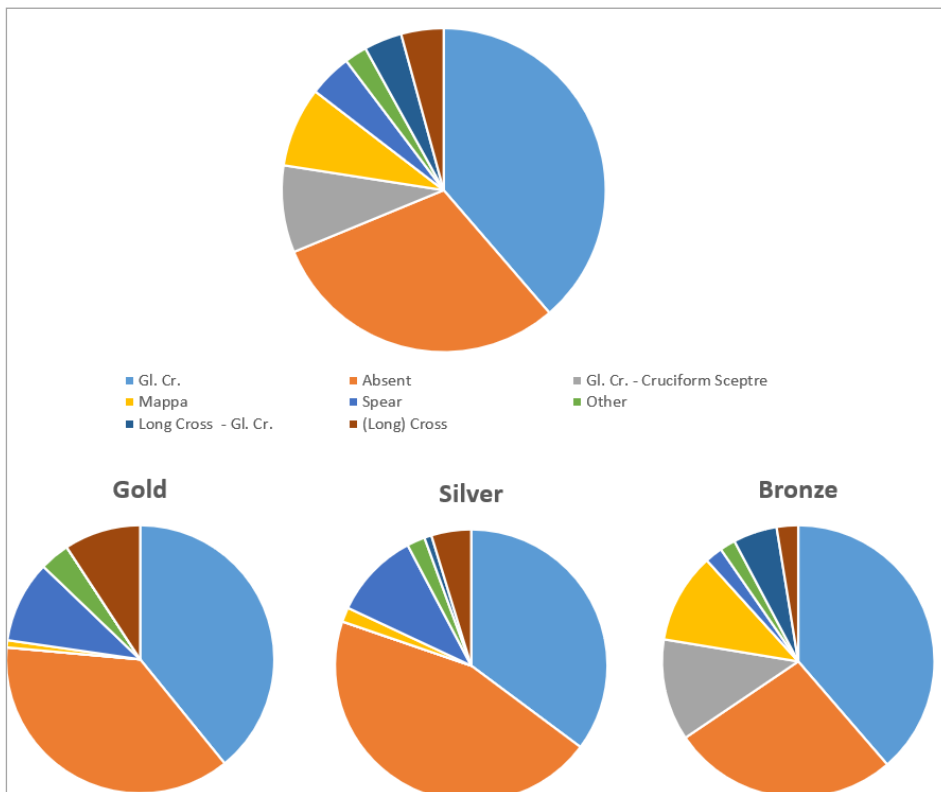
<sup>12</sup> For the spears as a symbol of sovereignty in republican and imperial Rome, see: ALFÖLDI 1959, 3-5, 11.

<sup>13</sup> HEDLUND 2008, 52-56; See, for example, RIC V Gallienus (joint reign) 19.

<sup>14</sup> KING 1999, 132-143; BETJES 2022, 68-71; HEKSTER 2022, 109-132.



**Fig. 2.** Distribution of attributes on the reverse of Roman coins (379-491) overall and per metal class (RIC).



**Fig. 3.** Distribution of imperial attributes on the obverse of Byzantine coinage 491-711 overall and per metal class (DOC).

Looking at the representation of military attributes on coins struck between 379-491 indicates that over time the use of these military attributes increased. The military



coins did not play a prominent role in the early Byzantine monetary system which is also by their low quantities in collections and hoard finds. The gold coins were, therefore, the main precious metal coins in circulation. For more

types start to appear on the gold coins of Theodosius' sons, and became more dominant in the course of the fifth century. From the 440s onwards military types even became the most dominant gold coin type (Fig. 4). A connection can be found between the use of this headgear type and the specific gold denominations. Only four of the 327 military types in the RIC catalog for this period can be found on a tremissis, the other 323 military types (98%) are depicted on the more regularly struck solidi. This could be connected to the introduction of the  $\frac{3}{4}$  bust type on the solidi of Arcadius, which was always combined with the military helmet and often with a spear.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, on silver and bronze coins military types remained rare, only ~2% of the bronze and silver types in the RIC catalog depict the emperor with a helmet and rarely with a spear (Fig. 5). Military representations of the emperor on late Roman coins (379-491) overall remain therefore somewhat uncommon. Of the 2136 types recorded in the RIC catalog for the period 379-491, 357 types (16%) depict the emperor with a military helmet (Fig. 5). When the military types do appear, they appear almost exclusively on the solidi, which were the most circulated gold coins in the empire.<sup>16</sup>

Considering the Byzantine numismatic iconography overall, between 491-711, reveals that military attributes are not common (~4%). Again military attributes appear predominantly on gold coins (Fig. 6, 7, 8&9).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> On the lower gold denominations, the more traditional profile bust remained being adorned with 'only' a diadem, the diadem-helmet combination type is almost completely absent from the lower gold denominations; See also: GRIERSON 1999, 6-7, 24-25.

<sup>16</sup> GUEST 2008, 299-300.

<sup>17</sup> Only 2% of the over 4000 bronze issues depict the spear type, while 10% of the precious metal coins depict the emperor holding a spear in his right hand. Silver

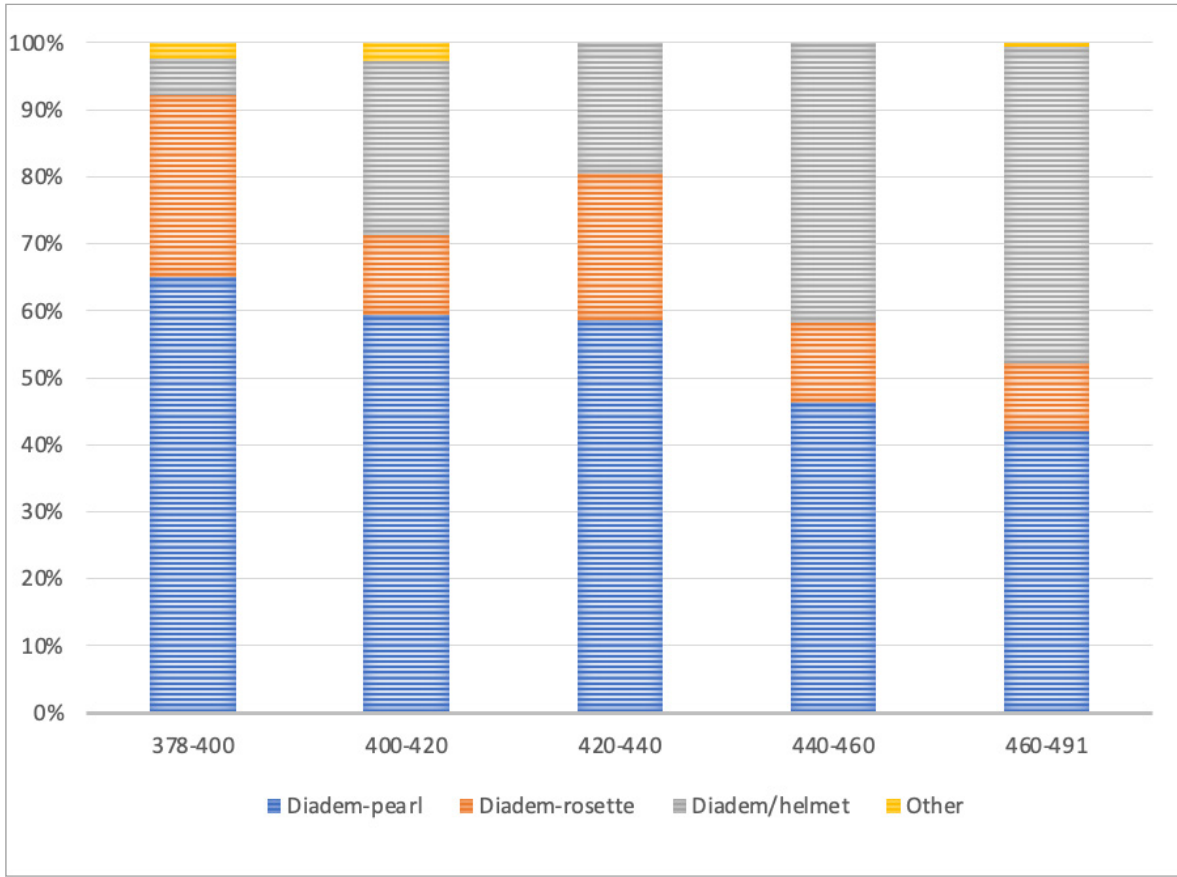


Fig. 4. Appearance rates of headgear types on gold coins 379-491 (RIC).

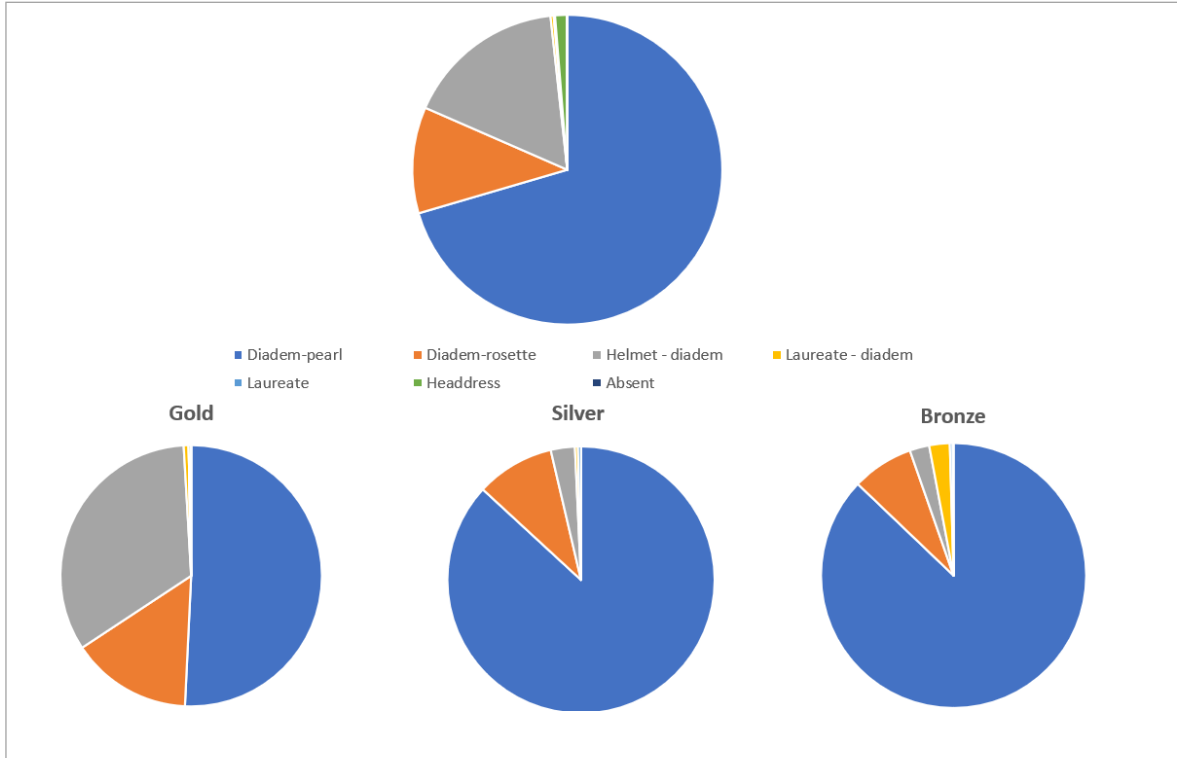


Fig. 5. Distribution of headgear types on Roman coins 379-491 overall and per metal class (RIC).

Considering the appearance of imperial attributes on gold coins, military attributes are actually the most dominant attributes on gold coins struck during the reigns of Anastasius, Justin I, and Justinian I until the spear disappears in 538 being replaced by the *Globus Cruciger* (Fig. 6). Even though the spear was replaced by other imperial information see: HENDY 1985, 449-450, 494-495; GRIERSON 1999, 12-13.

dominant attributes on gold coins struck during the reigns of Anastasius, Justin I, and Justinian I until the spear disappears in 538 being replaced by the *Globus Cruciger* (Fig. 6). Even though the spear was replaced by other imperial

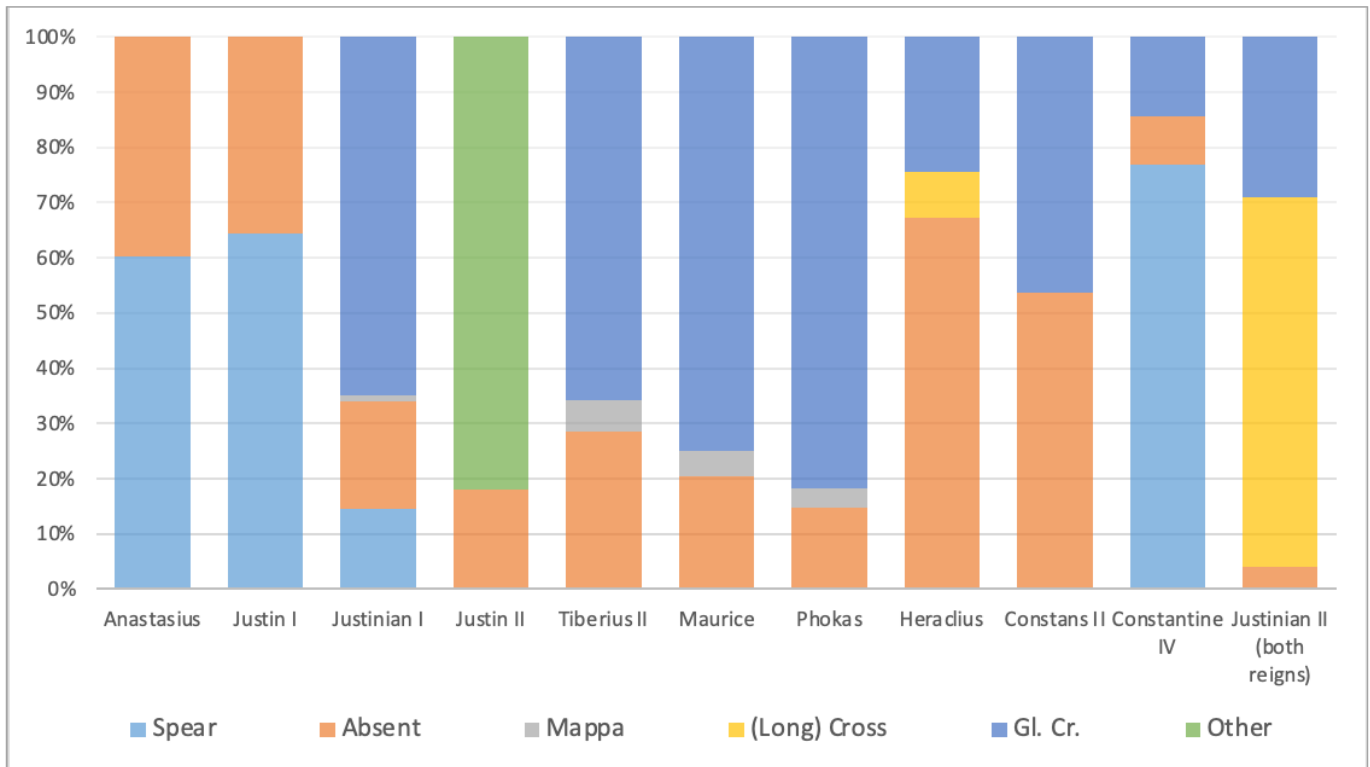


Fig. 6. Distribution of imperial attributes on Byzantine gold coins 491-711 (DOC).

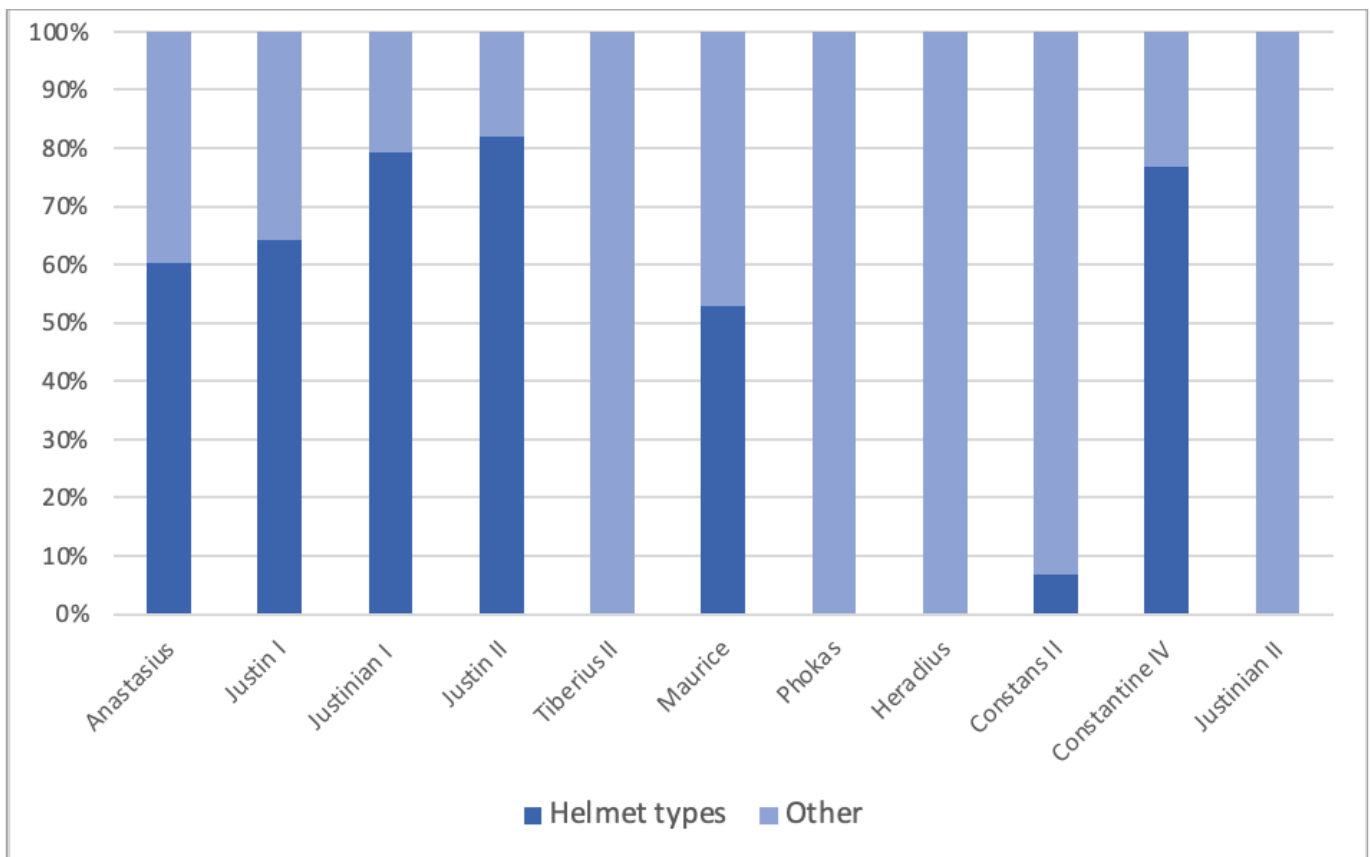


Fig. 7. Appearance rates of helmet types on Byzantine gold coins (DOC).

attributes after 538, the military helmet kept appearing on gold coins until the end of the seventh century, although its dominance dramatically declined after the reign of Tiberius II (Fig. 7).

Leaving some rare exceptions aside, the military types including the military helmet and spear appeared on solidi and were especially dominant (~ 45%) in the late fifth century (Fig. 1, 4&6). The dominance of this military-type

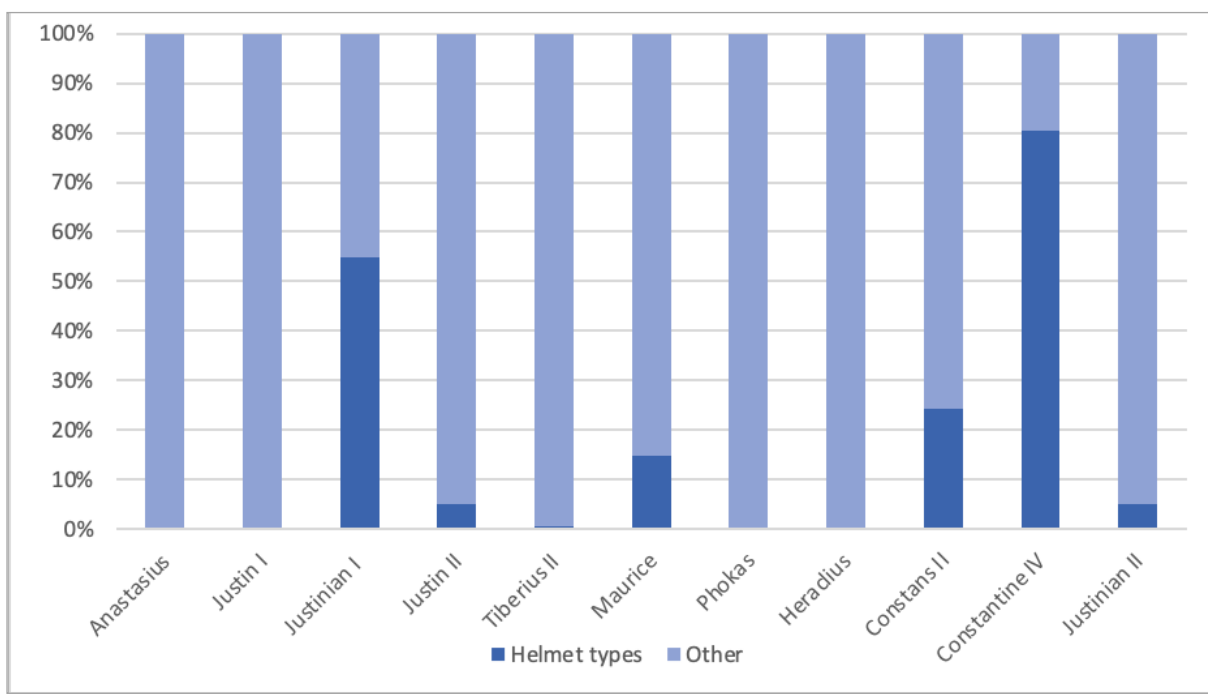


Fig. 8. Appearance rates of helmet/military types on Byzantine bronze coins (DOC).

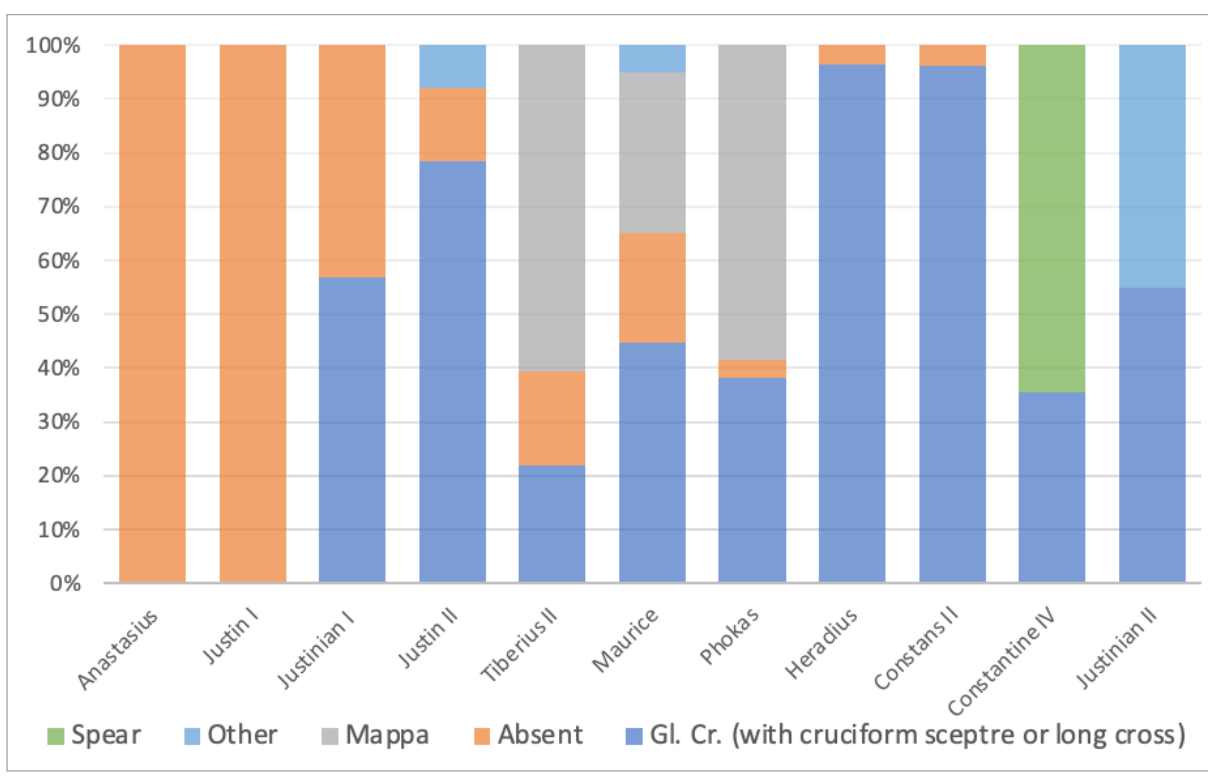


Fig. 9. Distribution of attributes on the obverses of Byzantine bronze coins 491-711 (DOC).

continues in the transition from ‘Roman’ to ‘Byzantine’ coinage, at least until the introduction of the crown-cross in 578. After the introduction of the crown-cross, helmet types keep appearing on some solidi but they become increasingly rare (Fig. 7&8). The helmet type, including the ¾ bust, was, however, revived and regularly struck on the coinage of emperor Constantine IV (Fig. 7&8).<sup>18</sup> The ‘traditionalist’

coinage of Constantine IV does not follow the trend of the appearance of the military helmet or the spear on the coinage of his predecessors. More than 70% of the gold coins of Constantine IV in the *DOC* collection depict the spear and 80% of his gold coins depict the military helmet (Fig 6, 7, 8&9).

Even though these military attributes were not overall significant, their dominance in specific metal classes indicates that these military representations were likely

<sup>18</sup> For the revival of ancient types by Constantine IV, see: VRIJ 2016, 90-91.

adopted for a specific target audience. The helmet type found on these military types is very similar to the helmets on the heads of Praetorians depicted on Trajan's column and the so-called 'Praetorian relief'. The Praetorians depicted on these reliefs wear ornamented Attic helmets with crested plumes. These helmets are not similar to common army pieces, and seem to have been a specific feature of high ranking soldiers and/or generals.<sup>19</sup> The helmets that are worn by emperors on coins were therefore meant to convey a military image, most likely associated with a high military function. Some of the first appearances of the helmet as an imperial headgear type were on coinages of so-called 'soldier-emperors' who also held a spear on their numismatic representations. The military characteristics of these types on both the late Roman and early Byzantine coinage and the fact that these types were predominantly depicted on solidi seems to indicate that they were targeted at the audience of soldiers. Several studies already indicated that specific messages were included on coins that were sent to the garrisons, as 'freshly' struck coins were often immediately sent to the frontiers of the empire to pay the soldiers.<sup>20</sup> The army was, during most times, the main expenditure of the empire; meaning that these gold coins were primarily used for paying the soldiers, which indicates the potential of broadcasting imperial messages on these coins. This could explain the reason that these military types were predominantly depicted on solidi as these were the actual coins that were used to pay the army in the late Roman and early Byzantine empire.<sup>21</sup> In this case, these solidi would have a different ruler iconography because their intended audience were soldiers. The emperor would subsequently be depicted as 'their general', with a matching helmet, even though very few of these emperors actually lead the army in person.<sup>22</sup>

It seems, therefore, that the representation of the emperor could be altered for the intended primary target audience. The emperor appeared without a military helmet and spear on the ceremonial silver and regular bronze coins. Instead on these coins a traditional profile bust wearing a diadem could be found. Something similar can be traced on the bronze coins of Justinian I with the introduction of the *Globus Cruciger* in 538. Before 538, Justinian I appeared on the gold coins with a military helmet and a spear. On the bronze coins he was represented as a profile bust with a diadem. After 538, however, Justinian I appeared on both gold and bronze coins with a military helmet and the *Globus Cruciger*. This seems to indicate that apparently the representation of the emperor with a helmet and the *Globus Cruciger* was deemed more appropriate for the bronze coin audience than the completely militarized image of the emperor found on the solidi before 538.

There is, however, one exception to this trend which concerns the coinage of the emperor Constantine IV. This

emperor not only suddenly reintroduced the  $\frac{3}{4}$  military bust type complete with helmet and spear, but also for the first time introduced this militarized image to the users of bronze coins. The first gold coins issued by Constantine IV depict the emperor as a facing bust bearing a *Globus Cruciger* and wearing a crown-cross, like his predecessors.<sup>23</sup> After a few months, this type was discontinued and replaced by the earlier discussed military type (Image 2.3).<sup>24</sup> The question is why? According to Philip Grierson, the return to a more traditional iconography was simply a way of Constantine IV to imitate Justinian. This argument is based on a few commonalities: the fact that Constantine was hailed as the 'new Justinian' at the Sixth Oecumenical Council (680-681), the reintroduction of Justinian's heavy bronze *folles* during this period, and finally the name of Constantine's son, 'Justinian'.<sup>25</sup> However, Justinian I was only depicted in this military manner on his gold coins struck before 538. It seems therefore more likely that Constantine IV must have had more reasons to revert to this ancient military ruler portrait.

The revival of this type is more likely related to the immediate military threats this emperor faced during his early reign. In 668, Constantine had to put down the rebellion in Sicily that had cost his father, Constans II, his life. That same year, the Umayyad caliph Muawiya started his conquests of parts of the empire, like Carthage and Cyzicus, which ultimately resulted in the failed siege of Constantinople (AD 674-678).<sup>26</sup> Because of the troubling times, it is likely that military spending was increased during the reign of Constantine IV. Since the military threats already started in the first year of Constantine's reign (668), the change of his representation on these solidi could be related to the specific audience of soldiers for these newly struck gold coins to whom the emperor represented himself as their general.

This situation seems similar to that of the late fifth and early sixth century striking gold coins with a military representation of the emperor specifically for the audience of soldiers which were being paid with these solidi. However, during the reign of Constantine IV, soldiers were not the only people who stood on the battlefield. As Constantinople was under siege between 674-678, war suddenly became an everyday reality for all residents of the capital. This seems to be reflected in the bronze coin iconography of Constantine IV, as this image changes in 673 from a helmeted bust with a *Globus Cruciger* to the  $\frac{3}{4}$  military bust complete with helmet and spear (Image 3.2).<sup>27</sup> Although the year 673 is just before the actual siege, the siege of Constantinople was already expected in that year because four Arab fleets were dispatched from Syria to establish bases in the eastern Aegean. These bases had only one goal, to sail to Constantinople.<sup>28</sup> In this case, the targeted audience of this military image would have widened, because now not only the soldiers but also the

<sup>19</sup> NEGIN 2015, 32-34, 38.

<sup>20</sup> For example: CLAES 2015, 40-41; KEMMERS 2005, 43-48; HEKSTER 2022, 351.

<sup>21</sup> For an overview of the wages of the soldiers in the period from Diocletian until Constans II see: TREADGOLD 1995, 147-157; KEMMERS 2019, 59; HENDY 1985, 183, 190-191, 221-223.

<sup>22</sup> For the military characteristics of the emperor in late antiquity see also: GAG 1933, 1-5, 19.

<sup>23</sup> See: DOC 2.1 Constantine IV – 1a

<sup>24</sup> See: DOC 2.1 Constantine IV – 4.1

<sup>25</sup> GRIERSON 1968, 512-516.

<sup>26</sup> HERRIN 2007, 92-95.

<sup>27</sup> See: DOC 2.2 Constantine IV – 28a (Gl. Cr. bust) & 29&31b (Military bust).

<sup>28</sup> TREADGOLD 1997, 325-327.



**Img. 3.** Folles of Constantine IV. Left: DOC 2.2 Constantine IV – 28c. Right: DOC 2.2 Constantine IV – 25.

citizens of Constantinople, and perhaps elsewhere, should see the emperor as their ‘general’ saving them from the pagan army outside their Theodosian walls.

The military types were often accompanied by a spear on the ruler portrait on the obverse, but this imperial attribute could also appear on the reverse of late Roman coins. When considering the appearance of the spear on the reverse, another trend emerges. Of the 559 reverse types struck between 379-491 recorded in *RIC* that depict the emperor, 159 (28%) contain the spear as an imperial attribute. Most imperial attributes, and diversity of types, can be found on the gold coins (Fig. 2).<sup>29</sup> Of the 46 silver reverse types that depict the emperor, 17 (37%) contain the spear as an imperial attribute. The spear on the bronzes is held by the emperor on 71 (36%) of the 199 bronze reverse types that depict the emperor. Of the 324 gold coin reverse types, 51 (15%) depict the emperor with a spear. The spear thus appears more frequently on silver and bronzes reverses than on gold reverse types, which is the opposite of the trend seen on the obverse of these late Roman coins. The fact that the spear type appears more on silver and bronze reverses than those of the gold coins deserves further investigation (Fig. 1&2).

The appearance of the spear on the reverse of silver coins can be connected to two specific denominations. Of the 29 spear reverse types in *RIC*, only one could be found on the common *siliqua* while all other types can be found on the less common light and heavy *miliarensis*.<sup>30</sup> The heavy *miliarensis* was struck at a weight of 5.4 g. (light at 4.5 g.), the *siliqua* on the other hand varied in weight from 3.4 to only 1.5 g. and was thus clearly a less valuable silver coin.<sup>31</sup> The military reverse types thus almost exclusively appeared

on the less common but higher value silver coins. In general, silver coins did not play a prominent role in late antiquity, as is attested by their gradual disappearance from hoard finds in this period.<sup>32</sup> However, recent hoard studies indicate that many of these silver coins did enter circulation, especially in Britain.<sup>33</sup> More importantly, other studies indicate that silver coins were still used to pay the army, only in a lesser extent than gold coins. For example, one-third of the 9.5 million solidi paid to the army for the invasion of North Africa in 468 consisted out of silver bullion and coins.<sup>34</sup> Considering all light and heavy *miliarensis* types for this period in the *RIC* catalog, we find that 28 (53%) of the 48 types depict the emperor holding a spear on the reverse. In conclusion, the military types of silver coins overall are rare, but their specific appearance on only the two highest silver denominations makes it conceivable that these coins were specifically targeted at soldiers when they were occasionally paid in silver. This represents a rare occurrence of audience targeting on reverse types of late Roman coins but still by changing the representation of the emperor rather than depicting specific gods or personifications. The appearance of the spear on the reverse of bronze coins cannot be connected to any specific denomination or mint which indicates that it is unlikely that these coins were targeted at a specific group.

The audience targeting of the discussed military types seems a likely possibility for the solidi, and some *miliarensis*, of late Roman and early Byzantine emperors. This could also explain the sudden resurgence of this type during the eventful reign of Constantine IV, in which the emperor for the first time since Constantine I was represented as a soldier to the bronze coin audience. Although late Roman and Byzantine coin types were a lot less diverse than Roman reverse types, important differences can still be found when looking at coins of different metal classes and denominations

<sup>29</sup> An exception is the depiction of the spear as a sole attribute, which cannot be found at all on the gold coin reverse types in this time period.

<sup>30</sup> If we consider all silver types recorded in *RIC* for this time period per denomination, we find that the *siliqua* and *half-siliqua* were by far the most dominant denominations together making up more than 75% of all silver types, see Fig. 10.

<sup>31</sup> MOORHEAD 2012, 608-609, 624.

<sup>32</sup> KEMMERS 2019, 49-50.

<sup>33</sup> GUEST 2005, 28-31; CARLA-UHINK 2020, 1-16.

<sup>34</sup> GRIERSON/MAYS 1992, 14; HENDY 1985, 221-226; MOORHEAD 2012, 610-612.



**Img. 4.** Left: Solidus of Theodosius II – RIC X Theodosius II (East) 221. Middle: Follis of Tiberius II – DOC 1 Tiberius II - 11a. Right: Solidus of Maurice – DOC 1 Maurice – 2a.

indicating that the representation of the emperor could be altered depending on the primary target audience.

### THE EMPEROR AS CONSUL

Traditionally, the emperor was represented as a consul on various visual mediums, among them coinage. Holding on to the consulship and several other high-ranking republican functions, had created the basis of what would become the office of Roman, and later Byzantine, emperor. The republican function of consul would be ceremonially assumed by most of the Roman and Byzantine emperors from Augustus until the reign of Leo VI in the late ninth century. At the same time, however, the office of consul was still open to ‘normal’ Roman citizens. The power of the consul was, however, drastically reduced in the empire. Being a consul became more a mark of imperial favor than a real position of political power. Nonetheless, the office of consul remained a highly sought after position in imperial times, mainly as a way to get into the imperial administration. Consuls in imperial times were given presidency over the senate, had some judicial functions, and most importantly they were allowed to provide the (expensive) games.<sup>35</sup>

Over time, the office of consul became increasingly reserved for the emperor and his family. Between 302-322, thirty of the forty consulates were occupied by (co) emperors. There were multiple reasons for an emperor to assume the office of consul. Traditionally every emperor, since Vespasian, would assume their first consulate in the first January after their accession of the throne. Usurpers, whether successful or not, would also assume the office of consul in January indicating the importance of this ceremony for the legitimacy of an emperor. Another reason for emperors to assume the office of consul, often for a second time, was if their co-emperors or sons would assume the office. Finally, some emperors assumed the office of consul in the their quinquennial, decennial or even vicennial years.<sup>36</sup>

Emperors could thus assume the office of consul multiple times during their reign. For example, Theodosius II assumed the consulate no less than eighteen times during

his 42 years on the throne (Table I).<sup>37</sup> Already in the mid-fifth century this trend declines, Marcian and Zeno only assumed the office of consul respectively one and two times (Table I). The office of consul was abolished for private citizens in 541 presumably because Justinian found it to be a too dangerous vehicle for self-advertisement of a potential usurper. Although this may seem an overestimation of the potential of this office, two former consuls from this period were able to claim the imperial throne in the west; respectively Petronius Maximus and Anicius Olybrius. In the east, no former consul would assume the purple, aside from sons of emperors, but that was not for a lack of trying. During the reign of Zeno two rebellions were led by former consuls. The same could be said for the infamous Nika Rebellion of 532 which was also led by two former consuls.<sup>38</sup>

The abolishment of the office of consul for private citizens in 541 was met with strong contemporary reactions.<sup>39</sup> When Justin II inherited the throne, he was applauded for assuming the title of consul in the traditional manner, namely in the first January after his accession to the throne (566). Although Flavius Corippus praised the emperor in a poem celebrating Justin’s accession with the claim that he would restore the consulship for private citizens, he never did and neither did any emperor after him.<sup>40</sup> Even though the office of consul was abolished in 541, the consular title remained part of the imperial title until the ‘Basilika reforms’ in 892.<sup>41</sup> Eventually, the ritual of granting honorary consulships was transformed into the Byzantine court ritual of the *hypatos* which lasted until the twelfth century. This was, however, no more than a honorific title without any real responsibilities.<sup>42</sup>

Emperors had issued commemorative coins mentioning their consulate in the legend in all metal classes since Augustus but these types did not contain any

<sup>35</sup> BAGNALL *et alli* 1987, 1-4.

<sup>36</sup> BAGNALL *et alli* 1987, 23-24.

<sup>37</sup> GRIERSON/MAYS 1992, 137; BAGNALL *et alli* 1987, 3-4.

<sup>38</sup> HEKSTER 2022, 192-195; BAGNALL *et alli* 1987, 8-10.

<sup>39</sup> For the negative reactions to this imperial decision see: KRUSE 2020, 116-145.

<sup>40</sup> For this poem celebrating the accession to the throne by Justin II see: Flavius Cresconius Corippus, *In laudem Iustini Augusti Minoris Libri IV*, book 2.355, trans. CAMERON 1976, 101; See also: BAGNALL *et alli* 1987, 12; HEKSTER 2022, 194.

<sup>41</sup> RIEDEL 2018, 99-100; HEKSTER 2022, 156-158, 194.

<sup>42</sup> For the court ritual of the *hypatos* see: KAZHDAN 1991, 963-964.

**Tab. I.** Appearance of mappa types on late Roman and early Byzantine solidi and medallions

Emperor	Date consular type (RIC/DOC)	Consul Prior <sup>43</sup>	Consul Posterior
Theodosius I (379-395) - Valentinian II (375-392)	388-393	380, 388, 393 (Theodosius) 376, 378, 387, 390 (Valentinian)	-
Honorius (393-423)	396	386, 398, 404, 407, 409, 412, 415, 417, 418, 422	394, 396, 402
Theodosius II (408-450)	416, 420, 422, 425, 435, 439, 444	403, 411, 416, 420, 425, 426, 430, 433, 435, 438, 439, 444	407, 409, 412, 415, 418, 422
Valentinian III (425-455)	426, 430, 435, 450, 455	440, 445, 450, 455	425, 426, 430, 435
Marcian (450-457)	450	451	-
Majorian (456-461)	457	(Leo I)	458
Leo I (457-474)	458	458, 462, 466, 471, 473	(Libius Severus)
Libius Severus (461-465)	462	(Leo I)	462
Anthemius (467-472)	468	468	455
Zeno (474-491)	475	475, 479	469
Basiliscus (475-476)	475	476	465
Justinian I (527-565)	528	-	521, 528, 533, 534
Tiberius II (578-582)	579	579	-
Maurice (582-602)	583 or 602	583, 602	-
Phokas (602-610)	603	603	-
Heraclius the Elder & Heraclius (610-641)	608-610	608 (Heraclius the Elder) & 611 (Heraclius)	608 (Heraclius)

consular imagery.<sup>44</sup> Consular representations of the emperor emerged in the late third-century and were (almost) always accompanied by the traditional attributes of the *mappa* and eagle-tipped or cruciform scepter (Image 4). These types were struck on the highest gold denomination or medallions only in mints of (former) imperial capitals, indicating that they were likely meant for a very specific audience. Both the consular and the military coin types were introduced during the tumultuous third century and kept appearing somewhat regularly in the following centuries but only on specific coins.<sup>45</sup> Although never a dominant imperial attribute, the *mappa* and consular scepter kept appearing in low quantities on the coins of the late Roman and Byzantine emperors until at least the end of the seventh century (Fig. 1, 6&9).

Consular types are extremely rare on the obverses of late Roman coins, only 46 (2%) out of the 2088 types depict the emperor as consul (Fig. 1).<sup>46</sup> On the reverses of these coins consular attributes appear on 56 (3%) types (Fig. 2). When only considering types that contain imperial attributes, consular attributes appear on 10% of these obverse and reverse types. These consular types can almost exclusively be found on gold coins, only one bronze type

depicts a consular attribute. When consular issues appear on gold coins they always concern solidi or occasionally medallions.<sup>47</sup> A substantial number of these types depict the emperor with the consular attributes on both sides of the coin.<sup>48</sup> On the obverses of early Byzantine coins, consular attributes can be found on ~8% of the coins in the DOC collection struck between 491-711. These 461 coins consist out of 12 gold, 4 silver, and 455 bronze coins (Fig. 3). There seems to have been a shift in the depiction of consular types from appearing predominantly on some gold coins of late Roman emperors to appearing on a substantial amount of Byzantine bronzes, as well as on some Byzantine precious metal coins. The 12 gold consular coins in the DOC collection can be attributed to Tiberius II, Maurice, and Phokas. An extremely rare consular issue of Justinian I is also known to exist, but is absent in the DOC collection.<sup>49</sup> In each case, the *mappa* appears on a solidus or a medallion. When comparing the approximated dates of these late Roman and early Byzantine consular solidi with the years in which the emperor assumed the office of consul a striking connection can be found (Table I).<sup>50</sup> Emperors assumed the office of consul, as tradition prescribes, in the first January after their accession to the throne.<sup>51</sup> In most cases, the consular gold type of the emperor can be attributed to their first

<sup>43</sup> Emperors always took precedence over other subjects, during the tetrarchy Augusti took precedence over Caesars, and senior Augusti took precedence over junior Augusti. If there were two citizen consuls, a former consul would take precedence over a new consul, if both were new consuls the emperor would decide the hierarchy; see also: BAGNALL *et alli* 1987, 22.

<sup>44</sup> BAGNALL *et alli* 1987, 86-87.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, RIC VII Heraclea 43; BRUUN 1966, 41; ALFÖLDI 1935, 34-36; For the consular bust, mappa and eagle-tipped scepter on Roman coinage see: BASTIEN 1992, 281-301, 420-424, 535-541.

<sup>46</sup> Of the 46 types, 41 (89%) types depict the emperor with the *mappa* and the cruciform scepter, five types still depict the eagle-topped scepter.

<sup>47</sup> Of the 45 obverse types that depict the *mappa*, two can be found on gold medallions and the other 43 types on solidi. Of the 56 reverse *mappa* types, 53 are struck on solidi and three on medallions.

<sup>48</sup> In total 73 types with the *mappa* can be found in RIC, of which 32 (43%) types depict the symbol on both sides of the coin.

<sup>49</sup> For this specific specimen see: CARAMESSINI-OECONOMIDES 1996, 75-77.

<sup>50</sup> For the lists of consulates see: BAGNALL *et alli* 1987, 47-57, 91-94.

<sup>51</sup> GRIERSON/MAYS 1992, 137; BAGNALL *et alli* 1987, 23.

consulate, except for emperors that became consul before they became emperor (Table I). Some emperors assumed the office of consul multiple times, which could be reflected in multiple consular issues, specifically on the coins of Theodosius II and Valentinian III, but most consular issues remained limited to the emperor's first consulate (Table I). The consular types struck between 379-491 came from six different mints, namely Rome, Constantinople, Ravenna, Milan, Thessalonica, and Aquileia. All of these mints were, or had been, capitals of parts of the empire (Fig. 10). In the case of the Byzantine *mappa* coins, all of them are from the imperial mint of Constantinople.

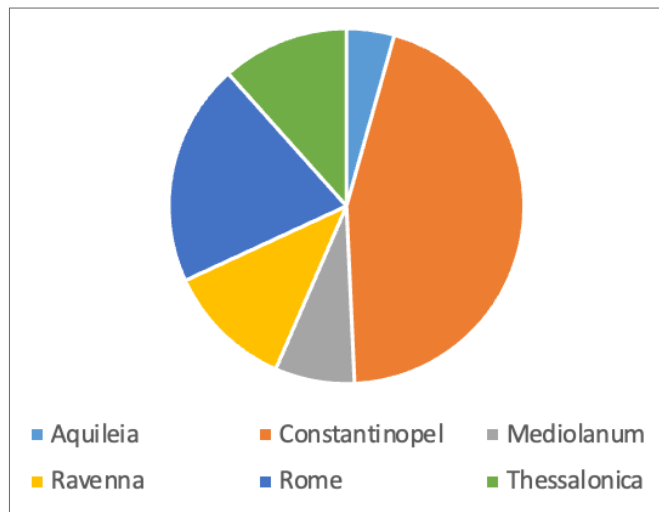


Fig. 10. Mappa types on gold coins per mint (379-491) (RIC)

These commonalities between the different consular types in both periods might again explain the function and targeted audience for these rare unusual coins. It seems clear that this image of the emperor was not meant for everyone, and not even for most of the 'gold coin audience'. These gold types were struck on the highest denomination or medallions and only appeared when an emperor assumed the office of consul, usually for their first consulate, and were not re-issued after that year. Finally, these types were only struck in mints of (former) imperial capitals. The denomination, low frequency, and specific mint indicate that these types were struck to commemorate the assuming of consulship by the emperor. Part of the ceremony of assuming consulship consisted of the distribution of gold coins by the consul during the procession.<sup>52</sup> In this interpretation, these coins with consular imagery could have been the actual coins that were distributed during the ceremony in a capital city. This would explain the rarity, specific mint, iconography, and dating of these particular solidi and medallions. Consequently, the primary target audience of these types would be very directly the people that were given these particular coins. The emperor distributing coins bearing a consular representation of himself could be considered the most literal and direct form of audience targeting imaginable.

That these coins were meant for a limited and specific audience, like the military solidi, seems evident.

<sup>52</sup> GRIERSON 1955, 59-61; CAMERON 1979, 10-13.

The question remains, however, who exactly would this targeted audience be and why would the emperor want to represent himself as a consul to these recipients? It seems likely that the people present at the imperial court were the primary target audience of this specific imperial message. The imperial court was a mixture of various people all attempting to gain proximity to the emperor. Emperors were expected to listen, or at least pretend to listen, to the institutionalized elite, like bishops and senators. There were, however, no formal offices for these elites at court, meaning that their relevance was entirely dependent on imperial favor. Nonetheless, united as an institutional group they were better not to be ignored.<sup>53</sup> Traditionally, senators had played an important role at the imperial court advising the emperor. The senate, as an important part of imperial rule, survived the Constantinian capital transfer from Rome to Constantinople. Senators remained important in Rome and subsequently Constantinople by symbolically representing a traditional (republican) counterbalance to the absolute rule of the emperor.<sup>54</sup> The consul presided over the senate, meaning they were an important part of this former republican institution. By embracing this function and representing himself as such, the emperor communicated a message of continuity towards the senators, and other members, at his court. In this way, the emperor represented the traditional power balance, in which he resided as consul over the senate. Even though the political influence of senators gradually decreased, especially after the move of the capital to Constantinople, they were still a necessary link to the past that symbolized imperial rule rather than define it.<sup>55</sup> The consular coins of the late Roman period could be directly connected to this audience of senators, as they were likely among the primary recipients of this numismatic message.

The first Byzantine consular issue can be attributed to Justinian, and was likely issued before the abolishment of the office of consul (Table I).<sup>56</sup> No consular issues are known to exist from the reign of Justin II, but already during the reign of Tiberius II consular gold issues reappear. The consular gold issues seem to have been a way of communicating the traditional ceremony in which the emperor officially assumed the office of consul, which most emperors had done since the time of Augustus. Most of these issues concerned rare solidi or even medallions, which were likely distributed during the ceremony. Something had changed, however, since there was now only one consul and this consul theoretically did not have to step down after a year of service. It is precisely at this point, that the consular representation of the emperor was suddenly widened to the audience of the bronze coins. It seems therefore that these Byzantine consular issues aim to do something quite different from their late Roman counterparts.

Justinian's consular gold coin aside, all other Byzantine consular issues appear simultaneously on gold

<sup>53</sup> For the role of elites at the Roman and Byzantine court see: WEI/KELLY 2022, 85-87; KAZHDAN/MCCORMICK 1997, 172-174.

<sup>54</sup> HEKSTER 2022, 192-195, 209-213.

<sup>55</sup> For more information about senators and their role until the reign of Justinian I, see: HEKSTER 2022, 192-195; WEI/KELLY 2022, 85-87.

<sup>56</sup> CARAMESSINI-OECONOMIDES 1996, 75.

**Tab. II.** The consular types of Tiberius II, Maurice, and Phokas (DOC).

Emperor	Gold consular type	Silver consular type	Bronze consular type
Tiberius II	579	-	579-582
Maurice	583 or 602	602	583- 602 (Antioch) 602 (other mints)
Phokas	603	603	603-610

and bronze coins. The consular type on the Byzantine bronze coins appears during the reign of Tiberius II, Maurice, and Phokas. The appearance of the bronze type aligns with the appearance of the gold, and occasional silver types. The only difference is that the bronze coins types were struck for a considerably longer period of time (Table II). During the reigns of Tiberius II, the consular bronze types were struck from the year that the office of consul was assumed until the end of his reign. It seems that Tiberius chose to broaden the message of his consular appointment to people all over the empire, a choice succeeding emperors took over.

The consular solidi and bronzes of Maurice are dated to either 583 or 602. According to Theophylact Simocatta (c. 580-630) and Theophanes the Confessor (c. 758-818), Maurice assumed the office of consulship in the winter of 583 on 25<sup>th</sup> of December.<sup>57</sup> Unlike Tiberius II, Maurice only struck consular issues in the year(s) he actually assumed the office of consul, although no one else could have assumed the office in the years between 583-602. Whether these issues are dated to 583 or 602, they indicate that Tiberius' widening of the consular message to the audience of the bronze coins was taken over by his successor.<sup>58</sup> The date of 602 would, however, make more sense when considering the coinage of the subsequent emperor Phokas, who came to power with a rebellion. Because Phokas did not have a hereditary claim to the throne, he used a wide spectrum of ceremonial elements to bolster his imperial claim.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps, his choice for a consular representation on coinage was a way of imitating an imperial representation people were used to. After all, Maurice had appeared as a consul on the last bronze coins that contained his portrait.

Phokas did not, however, immediately appear as a consul on his bronze coinage. The first coins struck in his name depicted the emperor in military clothing, wearing a crown-cross and holding a *Globus Cruciger* in his right hand. When Phokas assumed the office of consul in December 603, the representation of the emperor changed into that

of a consul with a *mappa*, the eagle-cruciform scepter was, however, replaced by a cross.<sup>60</sup> The bronze coins struck during the reign of Phokas kept depicting the emperor as a consul until the end of his reign. Interestingly enough, it was the successor of Phokas, Heraclius, on whose coinage the last consular numismatic representation of a Byzantine emperor would appear. In the year 608, the exarch of Carthage, Heraclius the Elder, began a rebellion together with his son, the future emperor Heraclius, that would eventually lead to the downfall of Phokas in 610. However, before Heraclius actually usurped the throne from Phokas, he already struck consular coins on which he appeared together with his father. These coins depict Heraclius and his father as facing busts wearing consular robes but without any of the traditional consular attributes (Image 5). This Heraclian consular type appeared on solidi struck in the mints of Carthage and Alexandria, as well as on the silver and bronze coins struck in Carthage, Alexandretta (Iskenderun), and Cyprus.<sup>61</sup> After usurping the throne, Heraclius traditionally assumed the office of consul on January the 15<sup>th</sup> 611, but this time no commemorative coins were struck, or at least none have survived.<sup>62</sup> It seems, therefore, that the early association with the office of consul by Heraclius, and his father, might have been a way to create legitimacy for Heraclius as an usurper. Although the traditional consular representation of the emperor on coinage disappeared after the reign of Heraclius, the attribute of the *mappa* was not completely abandoned but transformed into the *akakia*, which was a scroll-like bag of purple silk that the emperor carried on certain occasions, like Easter.<sup>63</sup>



**Img. 5.** Consular solidus of Heraclius and his father Heraclius the Elder – DOC 2.2 Interregnum – 10.

<sup>57</sup> The consulship of Maurice only lasted to the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 583. Maurice assumed the office of consul a second time on the 6<sup>th</sup> of July 602, which lasted until the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November, a mere five days before Maurice was executed by the usurper Phokas; see also: Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, Book 1.12, trans. WHITBY/WHITBY 1986, 73; Theophanes Confessor, *Χρονολογία*, AM 6076, AD 583/4, trans. MANGO/SCOTT 1997, 376; For the dating of the consular coins of Maurice see: DOC 1 Maurice - 1, 2a, 2b, 2c & 3d; GRIERSON 1955, 67-68.

<sup>58</sup> A rare silver consular coin struck during the reign of Maurice in the mint of Carthage is dated to 602, as well as all of his consular bronzes, making the 602 dating of the consular types of Maurice more likely. The only exception concerns the consular bronzes from the mint of Antioch who are struck from 583-602; however, these bronzes are of extremely low quality (barbarous) which makes the dating difficult. The current dates (583-602) are based on types rather than legends, for more information see: KENT 1959, 99-103.

<sup>59</sup> For the ceremonies surrounding Phokas' acclamation and crowning as emperor see: OLSTER 1993, 165-168, 183-185.

<sup>60</sup> See: DOC 2.2 Phokas – 24b.1 & 26a.

<sup>61</sup> See: DOC 2.2 Interregnum – 1-18.

<sup>62</sup> For these specific coins see: GRIERSON 1950, 72.

<sup>63</sup> GRIERSON 1968, 86-87; DAGRON 2007, 203-220.

The consular bronzes seem to be linked to the practice of striking consular imperial images on gold and occasionally silver coins in the year that the emperor officially assumed the office of consul. Since the office of consul was now an exclusive honor of the emperor, this imperial representation was, for the first time, presented to the population at large. During the reigns of Tiberius II and Phokas, the consular bronzes were even the most common bronze coins that are recorded of these emperors in the *DOC* collection (Fig. 9). In this case, these consular bronzes were not just struck to celebrate the fact that the emperor had assumed the office of consul, although they were certainly initially struck for that purpose. The continuous minting of these consular bronzes could have several reasons, perhaps the minting authorities were indifferent about the bronze types and it was simply practical to use the same dies. It seems more likely, however, that this practice is related to the abolishment of the office of consul during the reign of Justinian I.

Public life in this period was centered around the spectacles and ceremonies in the arena or the circus which presented consuls with an important opportunity for self-advertising.<sup>64</sup> Consuls organized, and to a certain extent paid, for the games in Rome and later the races in Constantinople. Over time fewer and fewer consuls were appointed, and even emperors would not assume this office more than two times during their reign (Table I). In the late fifth century an honorary consulate was introduced in return for a contribution of 100 pounds of gold to an aqueduct fund which became a popular and significantly cheaper way of acquiring the consulate.<sup>65</sup> For 'the people', the abolishment of the consulate meant that the games held by the consul, which were already held less frequently than in previous decades, were now only held once or twice during an emperor's reign. It seems, therefore, logical that there was an outrage over the abolishment of the consulate by more people than just senators and other aristocrats. After all, the races were an important part of the city life of Constantinople and other major Byzantine cities.

In this context, the appearance of a consular representation on bronze coinage is less surprising. This could also be connected to the subsequent disappearance of consular bronzes in the early seventh century. During the reign of Heraclian emperors (610-711), races were not held in provincial cities anymore and the number of races in the capital was drastically reduced as a result of the military setbacks following the Arab conquests.<sup>66</sup> By appearing as a consul on the coins that would be able to reach almost everyone in the empire, the emperor could have attempted to reassure the people that the consular tradition had not disappeared and neither had the games. Since the reign of Justinian I only the emperor himself could assume this ancient office, which had transformed the consular representation from something associated with the times of the Republic to something strictly imperial. In this interpretation, the consular bronzes were a conscious widening of the consular representation of the emperor as a

sign of continuity of this ancient tradition of the consulate and the races.

The appearance of the consular message on Byzantine bronzes could also be connected to the consular issues of Heraclius. Since the office of consul had become an exclusive honor of the emperor, representing himself, and his father, as consuls on coins in all metal classes was a way to create legitimacy as an usurper. Phokas was also represented as a consul on bronze coins struck in the same years (608-610), meaning there was barely any difference between the emperor and usurper on the coins in circulation. Heraclius did, however, immediately abandon consular imagery once he became emperor, even when he officially assumed his first consulate in 611. It could be the case that the consular coins of the Heraclians, therefore, tried to do something more subtle. Instead of representing himself as a traditional emperor, without being crowned as emperor, he chose to represent himself as consul. An office that had been open to private citizens for over a thousand years, which only in the last decades had become an exclusive imperial position. Representing themselves as consuls could have been an intentional ambiguous message being both imperial and non-imperial. Perhaps this was precisely the ambiguity desired by Heraclius since he had not (yet) secured the throne, once he was crowned emperor he abandoned all consular imagery which associated him with his rebellion.

Emperors assumed the office of consul at least once in their reign, which in late Roman times was commemorated by special *solidi* which were distributed to the elite present at the ceremony. In this way, the emperor literally targeted an audience to communicate his taking of the consular office to the people for whom this mattered the most, senators. This imperial representation was only deemed appropriate for the general public after the office of consul closed for private citizens. It seems likely that consular bronzes were a way of sending a message of continuity indicating that the consulate and the corresponding races were still respected. Consular representations became just another way of representing the emperor in one of his several roles. That does not mean that the original interpretation of the consulate was forgotten, Heraclius might have cleverly played into this by representing himself as a consul during his rebellion. As in the case of the military audience targeting, this message was initially targeted at a special group who would have expected the emperor to fulfil this particular role and, as in the case of the military *solidi*, this message was presented to the population at large only when it was deemed appropriate to do so.

The military and consular representation of the emperor were a reflection of the different roles that emperors had to play in the Roman and Byzantine world. Although many things changed in the gradual transition from Roman empire to Byzantine state, the roles of the emperor remained mostly the same.<sup>67</sup> Even though the office of consul had little meaning in Constantinople after 541, emperors were still expected to assume the office of consul and represent themselves as such. The same could be said for the military

<sup>64</sup> OLOVSDOTTER 2011, 100.

<sup>65</sup> BAGNALL *et alli* 1987, 9-10.

<sup>66</sup> PARNELL 2020, 10.

<sup>67</sup> HEKSTER 2022, 106-108.

representation of the emperor. No emperor lead the troops for over 170 years, but they were still expected to represents themselves as if they assumed the role of supreme military leader.

By focusing on imperial attributes this article has indicated that there are differences in imperial representations between various metals and denominations. The military representation of the emperor occurred almost exclusively on solidi, and some late Roman *miliarensi*, struck in the late fifth and early sixth century. These coins were primarily used to pay soldiers, which makes it likely that the military representation of the emperor was targeted towards the primary target audience of soldiers. The revival of the military type during the reign of Constantine IV could be related to the immediate military threats faced by the empire in this period. Only when Constantinople itself was attacked by the Arabs was the message of the soldier emperor widened to also reach the recipients of bronze coins.

The consular representation of the emperor only appeared on solidi, or even medallions, which were struck in (former) imperial capitals in the year that the emperor assumed their first consulate. These coins seem to have been struck specifically for distribution during the ceremony in which the emperor assumed his role as consul. During the reign of Tiberius II, the consular representation was widened to the audience of bronze coins. This was likely meant as a message of continuity of the ancient tradition of the consulate after its controversial abolishment in 541. The abolishment of the office of consul for private citizens opened the way for emperors to represent themselves as consul on regularly struck bronze coins. Some of the consular types might also have functioned as a way of creating legitimacy for the emperor, especially in the case of Heraclius' consular issues.

Although late Roman and early Byzantine coins are substantially more standardized than earlier Roman imperial issues, there are still differences to be found between the various metal classes and denominations. By focusing on imperial attributes this article has indicated the way in which targeted messages were sent on coins by changing the representation and role of the emperor. The examples of the soldier emperor on solidi, and Constantine IV's bronzes, and the consular issues on solidi, medallions and post-541 Byzantine bronzes indicate that messages could, and likely were, sent to specific targeted groups on late Roman and early Byzantine coins.

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