

# Exhibiting coins as economic artefacts:

Curating historical interpretation in *Faith and Fortune: visualizing the divine on Byzantine and early Islamic coinage* (Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham, November 2013-January 2015)

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## Introduction

The economics of research and the nature of academic output are two of the most significant issues facing the modern British academy, underpinning debates about open access publication and tuition fees and driving initiatives such as the Research Assessment Exercise/Research Excellence Framework (RAE/REF) and the development of publisher-services such as Altmetrics.<sup>1</sup> The heritage sector is likewise under pressure to justify its increasingly limited share of public funding.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On all of these issues the literature and discussion is now dizzying in quantity and spread across printed and electronic media, and different arenas of debate. The following references are intended to provide an introduction only. On the open access debate, especially in the UK, see Bo-Christer Björk and David Solomon, *Developing an effective market for open access article processing charges*; London: Wellcome Trust, 2014; Rebecca R. Darley, Daniel Reynolds, and Chris Wickham, *Open access journals in humanities and social science*, London: The British Academy, 2014; Nigel Vincent and Chris Wickham (eds), *Debating Open Access*; London: British Academy, 2013; Kathleen Fitzpatrick, 'Open-Access Publishing', in Daniel J. Cohen and Tom Scheinfeldt (eds), *Hacking the academy: new approaches to scholarship and teaching from digital humanities*; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/dh.12172434.0001.001>>. On the debate over tuition fees and the value of a higher degree Sarah Amsler, 'Beyond all reason: spaces of hope in the struggle for England's universities', *Representations*, 116/1 2011, 62-87; Gudrun Biffl and Joe Isaac, 'Should Higher Education students pay tuition fees?', *European Journal of Education*, 37/4 2002, 433-55; Ingrid Lunt, 'Beyond tuition fees? The legacy of Blair's government to higher education', *Oxford Review of Education*, 34/6 2008, 741-52. On the RAE and REF and systems of assessment <http://www.rae.ac.uk/>, consulted 14/08/2014 and <http://www.ref.ac.uk/>, consulted 14/08/2014. For discussion Mills Kelly, 'Making Digital Scholarship Count', in *Hacking the academy*, Douglas W. Vick et al., 'The perceptions of academic lawyers concerning the effects of the United Kingdom's Research Assessment Exercise', *Journal of Law and Society*, 25/4 1998, 536-61. On Altmetrics and different ways of establishing impact see Jonathan Jarrett, 'Views, comments and statistics: gauging and engaging the audience of medievalist blogging', *Literature Compass*, 9/12 September, 2012, 991-95; Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, Mark Sample, and Daniel J. Cohen, 'Voices: blogging', in *Hacking the academy*; Alice Meadows, 'Four ways of measuring influence', *Wiley Exchanges* [blog] <<http://exchanges.wiley.com/blog/2014/08/14/four-ways-of-measuring-influence/>> published and accessed 14/08/2014.

<sup>2</sup> Parliamentary Select Committee (ed.), *Culture, Media and Sports Committee - publications, 3 - Heritage funding*, London: UK Parliament, 2011; 'The Government's Spending Review: Impacts and Announcements', *Southwestern federation of museums and art galleries* [website]

The following article uses the case study of an exhibition at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts in Birmingham, designed in collaboration with the University of Birmingham Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies (CBOMGS), to examine new ways of displaying an artefact type with a traditionally esoteric reputation: coins. In so doing it examines the interplay between research and exhibition, suggesting the utility of research collections for the promotion of original approaches to material and innovative presentation to a wider public.<sup>3</sup>

A brief introduction to the historical period addressed by the exhibition and the Barber Institute coin collection provide context for three interpretative sections examining space, text and time as elements simultaneously of exhibition design and frameworks for analysing the material on display. Exhibition represents, like any other form of academic output, a dialectic mechanism for approaching, interpreting and presenting historical evidence.<sup>4</sup> The constraints it imposes and the opportunities it presents, and thus the interpretations it may produce, are distinct from those of, for example, academic publication. The questions which underpin analysis of any source, however, may be shared across many different media of investigation and presentation. This article examines how focussing on the economic role of coins, not to the exclusion of their political or visual dimensions, but as a foundation for examining these elements, structured this exhibition and generated further research.

### **Late Antiquity c. 498-750**

*Faith and Fortune: visualising the divine on Byzantine and early Islamic coinage* primarily exhibited coins minted between A.D. 498 and 750, and drawn entirely from the Barber Institute collection. The coins were almost all minted in the east Mediterranean and Near East and bear witness to a time of dramatic social, political and economic change. Briefly, the Roman Empire, having from the third century split into two increasingly autonomous eastern and western halves, fully separated. The western half collapsed as an imperial system and came to be ruled by numerous competing powers, while the eastern half continued to operate as a political entity until 1453, a state usually termed by historians the Byzantine Empire. This process occurred parallel to the gradual Christianisation of both halves of the Roman Empire, officially as a state religion from the fourth century. The Byzantine Empire

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<<http://www.swfed.org.uk/index.php/component/content/article/1-latest-news/282-the-governments-spending-review-impacts-and-announcements>>, accessed 14/08/2014.

<sup>3</sup> The impetus to write this paper and reflect more deeply on the implicit research elements of curating the *Faith and Fortune* exhibition was given by the invitation to the authors to speak at the 2013 'Curating Art History' conference at the University of Birmingham. The authors wish to thank the organisers of this conference, the Department of Art History, Film and Visual Studies and the *Journal of Art Historiography*, as well as fellow participants, for stimulating discussions and the opportunity to prepare this paper for publication. The authors would also like to thank the reviewer for helpful and generous suggestions. We remain, of course, responsible for all errors.

<sup>4</sup> David Parry, 'Burn the Boats/Books', Jo Guldi, 'Reinventing the Academic Journal', and Gardner Campbell, 'A Personal Cyberinfrastructure', in *Hacking the academy*.

was, therefore, a Christian state built on Roman systems of government, in which the emperor ruled as Christ's viceroy on Earth.<sup>5</sup>

From the third century Rome's greatest threat on its eastern front was the Sasanian Persian Empire, a state which was itself centred upon a ruler by divine right, the Shah-an-shah, or King of Kings, endorsed by the dualist state religion, usually termed Zoroastrianism.<sup>6</sup> Far less is known about this state than the Byzantine Empire, because it left fewer written records and archaeological excavation in its heartlands, the modern states of Iran and Iraq has been difficult in recent decades.<sup>7</sup> It was nevertheless, a powerful state with a formidable army and a regular silver currency which spread as far as China in trade for silk, spices and eastern goods.<sup>8</sup> The relationship between the Sasanian and Byzantine Empires could be cordial but was always tense and at times, most particularly in the sixth and early seventh century, erupted into drawn-out and bloody wars.

By the end of the core period of the exhibition, the political and social landscape of the Near East had changed completely. In A.D. 622 the Prophet Muhammad, preaching a religious message which became formalised as Islam, formed his first organised religious community. Within a generation of the Prophet's death this community had expanded militarily out of the Arabian Peninsula. The Arab expansion met the Byzantine and Sasanian states at a point when both were exhausted by over thirty years of war, and the Sasanian state rapidly collapsed. The Byzantine Empire survived its first encounter with Islam but by the time borders settled around 750 Byzantium had lost more than two thirds of its territory and had been forced to reorganise socially and politically. The state which now controlled the Mediterranean was the Muslim Umayyad Caliphate, ruled by a Caliph (meaning 'Successor') who governed the community with divine blessing as the spiritual heir to the Prophet. These changes permanently reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the Old World, and this first meeting of the Christian Byzantine and Islamic Umayyad states entailed the formulation by both of much more firmly delineated ideas of what such religious identities meant politically than had ever before been necessary.<sup>9</sup> The focus of the exhibition was, therefore, a period which has little presence in British school curricula or popular historical

<sup>5</sup> On the split of the Roman Empire and the rise of new states in the west Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000*; London: Penguin Books, 2009. For an introduction to the Byzantine Empire Judith Herrin, *Byzantium: the surprising life of a medieval empire*; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. On the Christianisation of the Roman Empire and its adoption as the state religion Timothy David Barnes, *Constantine: dynasty, religion, and power in the later Roman Empire*; Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011; Augustine Casiday and Frederick Norris (eds), *The Cambridge history of Christianity. Volume 2, Constantine to c. 600*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> M. Boyce, *A history of Zoroastrianism*, 1; Leiden: Brill, 1989; Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: the rise and fall of an empire*; London: I. B. Tauris and Co. Ltd., 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Tim Power, *The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate AD 500-1000*; Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2012, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Karam Skaff, 'Sasanian and Arab-Sasanian silver coins from Turfan: their relationship to international trade and the local economy', *Asia Major*, 11 1998 [2000], 67-115.

<sup>9</sup> Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the age of the Caliphates*, 2 edn; London: Routledge, 2004.

imagination, but one with far-reaching and current importance for the organization of the modern world.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Barber Institute Collection and the background to the exhibition**

The Barber Institute is known primarily as one of the finest small art collections outside London.<sup>11</sup> Endowed to the city of Birmingham in 1939 as a gift of Dame Martha Constance Hattie Barber, it houses a collection of paintings, sculptures and a small selection of antiquities. It regularly hosts exhibitions of contemporary art, frequently showcasing local artists.<sup>12</sup> The Barber Institute, while independent, has a close research relationship with the University of Birmingham, facilitated by its on-campus location. It was in this capacity that in 1970 the Barber Institute of Fine arts acquired the coin collections of Philip Whitting and Geoffrey Haines.<sup>13</sup> Its numismatic collections amount to more than 15,000 items, with a major strength in Byzantine and Roman numismatics, intended to complement the work of the CBOMGS. In addition, the Barber Coin Collection also contains holdings in Arab-Byzantine, Sasanian and western medieval coins, crusader coins and a small collection of Byzantine lead seals. A 2006 endowment consisted of a major collection of medieval and modern Hungarian coinage and supporting numismatic literature.<sup>14</sup>

The 2013-15 exhibition, *Faith and Fortune: visualising the divine on Byzantine and early Islamic coinage* was curated by a team of postgraduate students from the CBOMGS, with preliminary meetings beginning in June 2013 for an exhibition

<sup>10</sup> For example, while not precluded from being taught as one of the optional examples in the English school curriculum, late antiquity and the themes of the exhibition are not required material and supporting material is not made available to teachers to use this period as one of a repertoire of regularly presented examples: UK Government, 'National curriculum in England: history programmes of study', <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-history-programmes-of-study>>, accessed 14/08/2014 . Reflecting the deep importance of this period to modern realities, there has recently been greater media attention paid to early Islam and Byzantium, represented by programmes such as 'Byzantium: a tale of three cities' (Simon Sebag Montefiore, 'Byzantium: a tale of three cities', <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03l2shc>>, accessed 14/08/2014 ) and 'Islam: the untold story' (Tom Holland, 'Islam: the untold story', <<http://www.channel4.com/programmes/islam-the-untold-story/episode-guide>>, accessed 14/08/2014 2014) but the period remains marginal to popular British experiences of history in school, the media and museums.

<sup>11</sup> For information about the Barber Institute of Fine Arts <http://barber.org.uk/>.

<sup>12</sup> For local artists on display <http://barber.org.uk/new-art-west-midlands/>.

<sup>13</sup> J. P. C. Kent, *Selection of Byzantine Coins in the Barber Institute of Fine Arts Principally from the Collection of Dr.P.D.Whitting, G.M.*; Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1985.

<sup>14</sup> For information about coins and seals in the Barber Institute Collection, including the Edgar Guest Collection of Hungarian Coinage and numismatic literature <http://barber.org.uk/coins/>.

opening on November 8<sup>th</sup> 2013.<sup>15</sup> While the working title, 'Faith and Fortune', was elaborated to favour the strengths of the curators' research foci, the exhibition also became an opportunity to explore new ways of exhibiting coins. Numismatics has traditionally been perceived as esoteric, technical and dry; numismatic exhibitions have sometimes confirmed these suspicions, and coins are often underused as elements of broader exhibitions.<sup>16</sup> The Barber Institute also has its own traditions of exhibiting, developed for a fine art collection. The aim of this exhibition was, therefore, to present coins centre-stage, in a way which could engage audiences with their historical context rather than primarily their visual or 'artistic' dimension. This both drew upon and sought to modify the existing tradition of numismatic exhibitions which dates back to the early 1990s at the Barber Institute. N. Hampartumian's *The Coinage of the Twelve Caesars* (1993), E. Georganteli and B. Cook's, *Encounters, Travel and Money in the Byzantine World* (2006), and R. Clay and S. Tungate's, *Matthew Boulton and the Art of Making Money* (2009), among others, demonstrate the commitment of the Barber Institute to displaying its numismatic holdings and to enabling creative and thematically challenging approaches by curators.<sup>17</sup> All, however, made the imagery of the coins their centrepiece, focussing implicitly or explicitly on visual analysis and the attractiveness of the objects selected. Aesthetically the aim in *Faith and Fortune* was to provide a modern and accessible exhibition, which promoted coins to a range of audiences, as artefacts

<sup>15</sup> The curatorial team consisted of Rebecca Darley (curator), Daniel Reynolds (co-curator), Maria Vrij and Ali Miynat (assistant curators). Michael Saxby (CBOMGS) also contributed to the initial concept design and subsequent outreach events associated with the exhibition. The authors would like to thank their assistant curators. Director and Head of Collections and Learning at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Nicola Kalinsky and Robert Wenley, offered guidance and support and the invaluable opportunity to undertake this exhibition. Organisation and installation would have been impossible without the unfailing assistance of Katie Robson (Exhibitions and Loans Officer) and John van Boolen at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts and Andrew Clarke (Showcase Services). Our ideas were beautifully and intelligently rendered into working designs by Selina Goodfellow and Nigel Hopkins at Blind Mice Design and printed by Pinstripe Printing, Birmingham. Jen Ridding (Learning and Access Officer) and Andrew Davies (Communications and Marketing Manager) helped us to ensure maximum accessibility and to extend the appeal of our exhibition into learning initiatives with the local community and beyond. The curators also thank the University of Birmingham Multifaith Chaplaincy for its input. Finally, Professor Leslie Brubaker, Director of the Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek studies provided academic support throughout.

<sup>16</sup> John Orna-Ornstein, 'Coins are small and boring: the importance of an education programme for a numismatic collection', *Actas de la VIII reunión del Comité Internacional de Museos Monetarios y Bancarios (ICOMON) = Proceedings of the 8th Meeting of the International Committee of Money and Banking Museums (ICOMON)*, Barcelona, 2001; Barcelona: Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, 2003, 96-102.

<sup>17</sup> Nubar Hampartumian and John Taylor, *Coinage of the twelve caesars*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1993; Eurydice Georganteli and Barrie Cook, *Encounters: travel and money in the Byzantine world*, London: Giles Ltd., 2006; Richard Clay and Sue Tungate (eds) *Matthew Boulton and the art of making money*, Studley: Brewin Books, 2009.

readily relatable to contemporary experiences as well as reflective of a very different historical situation, not necessarily as objects of beauty.

The ability as well as the desire to try something new, however, was crucial. Restrictions on displaying coins have traditionally also been determined by the physical parameters for mounting and presenting them. Coins are usually balanced on pins on a pH-neutral, cloth-covered board. This, therefore, required commentary to be printed on boards either below or next to the coins. The coins themselves were consequently usually presented in rows for ease of viewing alongside these labels. In this exhibition, the curators decided to experiment with using large boards of printed Foamex, which is pH neutral but which also allows coins to be mounted anywhere within the main design. Fig. 1 demonstrates the use of this technique.

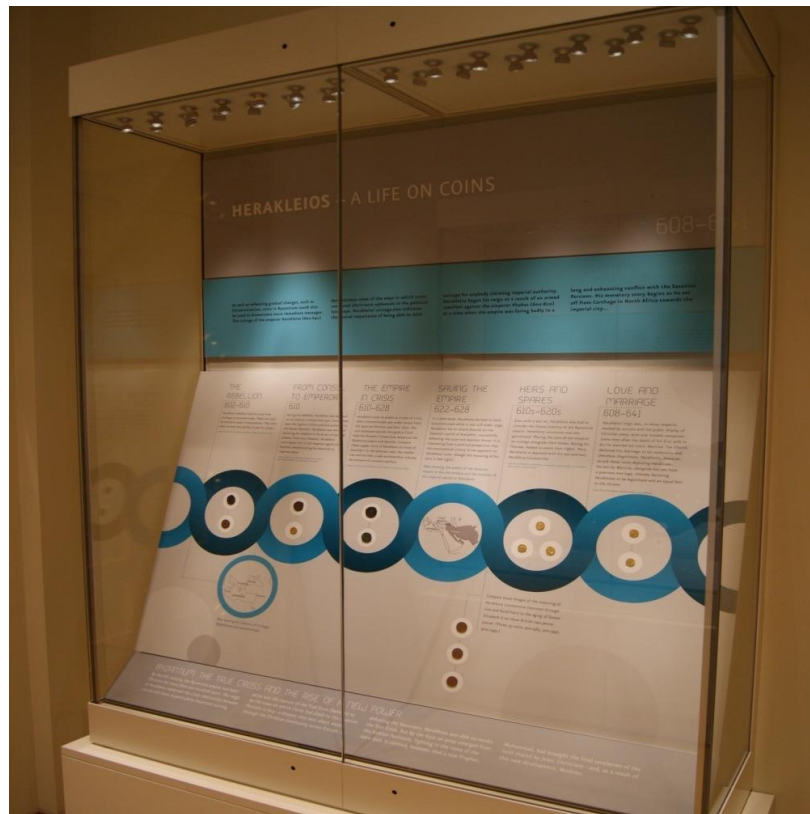


Figure 1 The use of printed boards onto which coins could be mounted directly enabled visual presentation to be used to encourage visitor engagement with objects and interpretation, as in the case of cabinet six, here, in which coins were presented in the form of a timeline of the reign of the emperor Heraclius (610-41).

Developing a new style of display furthermore invited reflections on the role of display, particularly in the context of a fine art gallery, and the application of certain 'ways of seeing' to objects which were never intended to operate as 'art'. Displaying coins as economic artefacts was not an effort to efface the visual in examining Byzantine and early Islamic coins, but rather an attempt to reflect upon the multiple ways in which seeing and interacting with coins gave the objects value in the late antique world and how the coins in turn generated networks of shared expectation, rhetoric and material exchange which defined people's lives.

### From cabinet to continent to coin: exhibiting space

Coins are inherently mobile objects, designed to pass through space but also define it – where is a coin valid, where is it known, where is it foreign?<sup>18</sup> For the curatorial team, however, space had more immediate and less theoretical implications. Space is an issue in all research, like access or time, but these are factors often obscured when producing the expected outputs within the context of academic research (articles, dissertations, books), because the restrictions of form are also expected and can thus seem inevitable. The circularity and habituation of research designed to produce outcomes which are in turn tailored towards research has been noted in debates concerning the possibilities of digital publishing in particular, but it is still often the case that references to shortage of time (implicitly, before a publication deadline, the end of a funding stream or, more recently, an RAE/REF cycle), insufficient space in an article or difficulty of access to an archive will appear in the footnotes or front matter of a book or article, presented informally before the ‘real’ research is reached, as if what was researched, for how long and to fill what final presentation space have only passing relevance for the questions asked and the answers reached.<sup>19</sup>

The nature and implications of form were, in the context of exhibition design by contrast, new and thus more immediately obvious to the curatorial team. In this case, an exhibition needed to open in early November 2013, since the previous exhibition was due to close in late October, with the return of many items loaned from other collections.<sup>20</sup> The size of the gallery and the layout of its cases, as indeed, their interior spaces, were largely pre-determined. Both time and budgetary constraints ensured that, with two exceptions discussed below, only items in the Barber’s own collection could be used.

The layout of the coin gallery at the Barber Institute provides significant display space and its contained nature as an annex, rather than a corridor presented both challenges and opportunities. The exhibition needed immediately to attract the

<sup>18</sup> It is implicit analysis of this which drives the vast quantities of research on coins of all periods circulating beyond their region of legal validity, but the idea of monetary circulation organising space also has modern and ancient currency, revealed, for example by John of Chrysostom’s sixth-century assertion that a shared coinage bound together the life of the late Roman and early Byzantine Empire cited in Cecile Morrisson and Jean-Pierre Sodini, ‘The sixth-century economy’, in Angeliki Laiou (ed.), *The economic history of Byzantium: from the seventh through the fifteenth century*, vol. 1; Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2001, 171-220, 217. The modern Eurozone provides parallel analysis of modern cultural and political space defined and structured by currency union or disunion, explored for example in Daniel Daianu et al. (eds), *The Eurozone crisis and the future of Europe: the political economy of further integration and governance*, International Political Economy Series, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> For discussion of the future of print format in the humanities, ‘Preface’ to *Hacking the academy*; Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki (eds), *Writing history in the digital age*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Cityscapes <http://barber.org.uk/cityscapes/>.

attention of passing visitors, who must choose to enter the gallery space rather than passing through it to reach another part of the building. Having entered, however, the space invites a visitor at least to notice each of the cabinets before leaving again. Space is, therefore, more than simply a question of how many coins will fit in each cabinet or how many visitors can get in at once. It is a major component conditioning the ways in which visitors experience and may be part of the process of conveying information and interpretation.

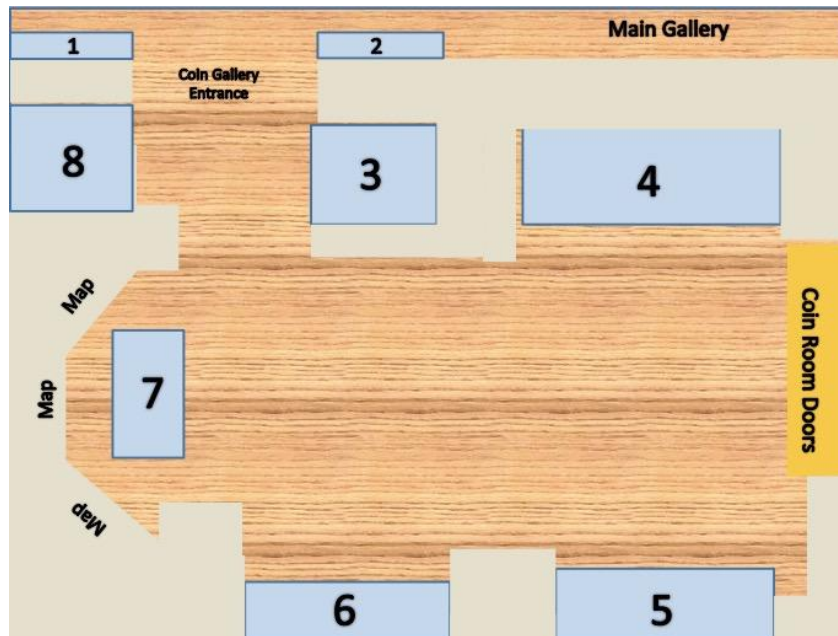


Figure 2 Ground plan of the Barber Institute coin gallery created for exhibition design, including display cabinets numbered for reference throughout this article.

In some respects this presents the same issues as other research outputs, just with different absolute parameters: how much information can be included, for example? Usually, the total mass of information in an exhibition is less than that which a historian might give if presenting the same subject as an article or book project, though these too require selectivity.<sup>21</sup> In other cases, however, the challenges were entirely new. Directionality, for example, was an area considered but not implemented with absolute success. *Faith and Fortune* had a narrative structure, a decision made because the ideas in it pertained to a complex and unfamiliar period of history. The cases were therefore designed to be viewed in a specific order (see Fig. 2). Visitor movement around museum space has been quite extensively studied and suggested to the curatorial team that movement clockwise

<sup>21</sup> In comparison to other forms of academic output, the average article length for a publication in the arts and humanities is approximately 8000-10,000 words, while a book may be between 80,000-150,000 words. *Faith and Fortune* (which uses a higher ratio of text to object than many museum displays are able to, for reasons discussed below) presents a total text of around 6000 words, covering a far larger span of history than would ever be attempted in a short article.



around the gallery from the case first on the left on entering would be the most natural in this gallery, and so the cabinets were planned in that order with discreet chronological markers in the upper corner also leading in this direction, but without any clear instructions or signage to that effect.<sup>22</sup> Subsequent observations of this gallery space, however, have shown that this is not how many people choose to experience it. Whether this is because the ground plan (see above) is not circular, but conceals the two alcoves at either end, so that many visitors move straight from cabinet three to six or eight, or whether for other reasons, it became clear that the exhibition would have benefitted either from clearer directional indicators or a looser narrative structure, in which each cabinet could stand entirely independently but within a general theme. For researchers used to constructing written arguments which flow conceptually but also grammatically from beginning to end this was an unexpected consideration but for future exhibitions also suggests the possibility of exploring themes, such as, for example, the different users of medieval currency, in non-linear ways which are usually not possible in historical writing and which would allow visitors to construct their own route(s) and interpretations around the scholarship presented to them and would reduce the imposition of hierarchical categories.

Conveying a sense of the real space of Late Antiquity was also a crucial concern for the exhibition team. While the modern geography of the Near East is well-known by many people its historical configuration is frequently unfamiliar, and the changes which were wrought to this space in Late Antiquity have subsequently changed the political landscape of the world. Maps therefore featured prominently in the exhibition, including as a means of integrating the large, high alcove space of the gallery. A challenging space therefore became the opportunity for presenting the seismic shift represented by the Umayyad seizure of most of the southern Mediterranean in the seventh and early eighth century.

If the display of continental space proved one of the most successful elements of the exhibition, in terms of fulfilling curatorial ambitions, the negotiation of space at the micro-level, by contrast, provided one of the most challenging moments in the exhibition, and one which highlighted the enormous complexity of ways of seeing which people past and present bring to their world. Cabinet three was the first substantive interpretative case, after the two smaller cabinets (one and two) outside the gallery, which were intended to attract visitors and showcase the themes of the exhibition. Cabinet three therefore entailed brief introductions to the three powers of Late Antiquity – the Byzantine Empire, the Sasanian Empire and the Umayyad Caliphate. At the centre of this board, the image was used of a composite, made from one-third pieces of a coin of each state.

<sup>22</sup> In particular the various chapters on visitor orientation and circulation in Stephen Bitgood, *Social Design of Museums: The Psychology of Visitor Studies*; Edinburgh: MuseumsEtc, 2011.



Figure 3 A hanging map of the Umayyad Caliphate (in green) c. 700 was used to help visitors to appreciate the huge change in the geopolitical landscape of the Mediterranean by the rise of Islam.



Figure 4 Three coins, used to represent the Byzantine and Sasanian empires and the Umayyad Caliphate, were presented as components of a single composite image at the centre of the display board in cabinet three.

One of the coins chosen (upper left, Fig. 4) was the Byzantine gold *solidus* of Justinian II, which bears on its obverse, instead of the emperor, the bust of Christ. Upon seeing this for the first time, a colleague with a background in Byzantine art history and theology pointed out that the way in which the coins had been divided entailed cutting the image of Christ, which could be perceived as iconoclastic. Apart from highlighting a possible and overlooked area of offence, which was in no way the aim of the exhibition, in the context of Byzantine coins and the imagery on them, this has particular significance.

Byzantium became from the seventh to the ninth centuries, indeed from almost exactly the time that this coin was issued, enmeshed in lengthy debate, at least at the level of church elites, over the use of images of the divine, which have shaped Catholic and Orthodox Christian tradition ever since. During these debates, before the so-called Triumph of Orthodoxy in 843 and the decision that it was acceptable, even a requirement of piety, to represent divinity in human form, complex arguments were presented about the relationship of images to the divine, about the propriety of images in relation to biblical prohibitions against idolatry and about the ways in which images of the divine ought to be treated and responded to. While argumentation was often theoretically sophisticated and metaphysical in bent, it could also be bluntly pragmatic, especially at its early stages in the late seventh century.<sup>23</sup> The Council of Trullo in 692, the first church council to address the question of images of the sacred, determined for example that images of the cross should not be placed on the floor where they might be walked on or similarly disrespected.<sup>24</sup> Penalties were instigated for placing new cross designs on the floor and clerics were recommended to remove cross designs already on the floors of their churches, though without sanctions being specified for failure to do so.

It was in this atmosphere of growing concern over the treatment of images of the divine that Justinian II, at some point between 690 and 695, issued his strikingly Christocentric coin. Apparently prohibitions designed to prevent accidental disrespect towards the cross did not apply to coinage, which had carried the cross as a central motif since the reign of Tiberius II (r. 578-82), and which still bore it on the reverse of Justinian II's Christ coinage. Indeed, Tiberius' decision to place the cross on his coins was presented as an explicit act of piety, inspired by a dream in which the emperor was commanded to remove non-Christian symbols (specifically the ancient Roman image of the goddess Victory, who had adorned coins since long before Christianisation) from his coins.<sup>25</sup> The possibility of compounding mistreatment by placing not only the image of the cross but also an icon of Christ in jeopardy of casual and thoughtless use, on an object bound eventually to be melted and re-struck as fresh coinage, does not seem to have caused recorded concern. Indeed, this design like the cross before it is usually interpreted, as a visual source, as a pious statement, declaring the loyalty and subordination by Justinian II to Christ at a time when the empire felt the need of divine assistance against the emergent threat of the Umayyad state.<sup>26</sup> While plausibly a motive for the imperial officials instituting such a design, however, it does not address the contradiction that making such a statement on coinage exposed the emblem of the divine to a

<sup>23</sup> L. Brubaker and John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast era c. 680-850: a history*; Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Henry. R. Percival (ed.), *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: Second Series. the seven ecumenical councils of the undivided Church*, Volume 14, 1 edn, London: James Parker, 1900, Canon LXXIII, 399.

<sup>25</sup> Discussed by Philip Grierson, *Byzantine coins*, 1 edn, London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1982, 52.

<sup>26</sup> For example: Hans Belting, *Likeness and presence: a history of the image before the era of art*; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 135; Paul Magdalino, *Byzantium in the year 1000*; Leiden: Brill, 2003, 235.

whole spectrum of mundane, tawdry and even profane uses. From sloshing ignobly around in a purse to being scratched or shaved by money-changers, forgers or thieves, to paying for the worldly needs and pleasures of the Byzantine elite, Justinian's coin seems emblematic of the contemporary debates about (mis)use of the divine image, yet seems to have been by-passed by them.

That Christian imagery on coins did not end up at the centre of written debates (or those that survive), however, does not mean that seventh- and eighth-century coin users were not equally diverse in their responses to it as were the curatorial team or the exhibition's art historical viewer. Though the curators were aware of the visual significance of Christ's portrait on the coinage, and indeed made that the centrepiece of cabinet six, it required the input of a different perspective to observe the inconsistency (from an Orthodox viewpoint) in being aware of this significance and still treating the coin simply as an object to be used as part of a larger design scheme. It is also perhaps significant that in this period Justinian II was the only emperor to display Christ on his coins. Though the image returned in later centuries, his successors immediately discontinued the practice. Use of coins in Late Antiquity, in other words, demonstrates similar inconsistencies and layered considerations to those apparent in the range of modern responses to these coins. These inconsistent responses are, moreover, uncommonly visible on the coinage at a different level to theoretical texts, giving a rare insight into individual behaviour and personal choices beyond the clergy or the literati of the court.



Figure 5 These two *solidi* of Justinian II (first reign 685-95, second reign 705-11) and Leo III (r. 717-41) demonstrate the different ways in which users might respond to the images on coins, reflected in the position of the piercings in relation to the image of the cross and the portrait. (Barber Institute Collection, B4464 and B4504, used with kind permission of the Barber Institute.)

Also in the Barber Institute collection are two *solidi* (above) of Justinian II and Leo III, both bearing the cross on the reverse and a portrait (of Christ on the former and the emperor on the latter). Both were at some point pierced, probably to be worn as jewellery. It is impossible to date the piercing of these coins, but using coins in jewellery was not uncommon in the early Byzantine Empire, so there is no reason to think that it was done substantially later than the

issue of the coins, and even if later, was probably performed in a cultural context in which behaviour concerning the treatment of divine images had become even more, not less, clearly defined.<sup>27</sup> On the coin on the left it seems plausible that the interest of the modifier was precisely in a pious way of seeing the divine imagery, though focus seems to have been on the cross on the reverse rather than on the portrait of Christ. The portrait of Christ is pierced to hang upside down, and the hole is off-centre, while it is aligned perfectly with the cross on the obverse. The way in which the act of piercing has pushed metal outwards also demonstrates that this coin was pierced from the reverse to the obverse, i.e. somebody lined up an implement on the reverse, specifically over the top of the cross, then punched a hole in the coin, which consequently pierced the bust of Christ off-centre and at the bottom.<sup>28</sup> It is impossible to know how, if at all, this squared with the user's response to the image of the cross.

The other piercing reflects a rather different interaction with the images on the coin. The hole this time would leave the cross to hang upside down, and the direction of piercing suggests that this was an accidental result of the wearer or user wanting to ensure that the imperial portrait on the obverse hung upright. For this wearer, then, one might assume that what mattered was either the image of the emperor, or simply the ability to wear a high-value gold coin as jewellery without deep consideration of the meaning of the images. The coinage of the seventh and eighth centuries, therefore, was minted and used at the messy edge of Late Antique debates about images. In their intellectual heartlands, in episcopal councils and monastic libraries and in the early scholarly communities of the Caliphate, these debates sought to impose logic and restriction upon a practice which almost immediately at their threshold – in the streets, purses and markets of the imperial cities – mingled into the same elisions that our colleague had pointed out: money, divine image, political tool? The interest of coinage is that it is and always has been all of these things, even if museum display has traditionally privileged the image.

<sup>27</sup> Rebecca Darley, *Indo-Byzantine exchange 4th-7th centuries: a global history*; PhD thesis: University of Birmingham, 2013, Chapter 5.

<sup>28</sup> The piercing of coins carrying crosses in such a way that the cross hangs upside down has perplexed historians and archaeologists before now. In the case of the Wilton Cross, previously displayed at the Barber Institute as part of the *Encounters* exhibition, and discussed in the associated publication (*Encounters*, 14) the image of the cross appears without doubt to have been hung upside down intentionally (though nonetheless as the centrepiece of a complex and rich setting), leading to the suggestion that this would have caused it to be the right way up if lifted to be viewed by the wearer. In the case under discussion here, however, the direction of piercing, suggesting that the modification was made with the image of the cross, not Christ, visible, and the fact that the piercing would not only leave Christ hanging upside down but also rather lopsidedly so, combine to suggest that little thought was given to the image of Christ in comparison to that of the cross in terms of the piercing of the coin. Various other examples of pierced coins from the Barber collection, which leave the cross or Christ at a range of angles and with piercings passing through arms or facial areas respectively further suggest that consideration of the significance of these images, or at least all of the images, was by no means always a factor when piercing coins for suspension.

### Seeing money and messages: exhibiting text

The images on coins have, perhaps, been the focus for display because they provide illustration for histories and people known mainly from text. The association between rulers, authority and their coinage is particularly strong in numismatic interpretation.<sup>29</sup> Coinage is therefore alternatively seen as a general statement of centralised authority, viewed in terms of the messages it conveyed.<sup>30</sup> These perspectives are not invalid and indeed still reward further study.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, as the pierced coins above demonstrate, coins move across and may therefore, in Late Antiquity as now, transgress frontiers between sections of life and experience which official top-down systems of faith and government either wished to separate entirely or else bring universally under the regulation of only one stakeholder. They are therefore evidence not only of the official narratives they display but also of wider ways of behaving and seeing, which were not of interest to, or perhaps even approved by the authors of surviving textual sources.

This is particularly true of one coin in the exhibition, minted in Skythopolis in Syria-Palestine in the mid-seventh century, the uses and meaning of which invite parallels with 'unauthorised' responses to modern currency. According to a November 2013 survey by the Bank of England, 3.04% of pound coins currently in circulation in the UK are forgeries.<sup>32</sup> The Bank offers guidelines about how to identify these forgeries but often, even without them, forgeries are easily spotted and quickly passed over in large handfuls of change or into vending machines, or less commonly, as the law demands, are taken to police stations and surrendered. In many cases the recipient of such a pound coin will not easily be able to define what is wrong with the coin: it is 'dodgy', which usually means some combination of a weight discrepancy, a moderate colour deviation from the normal range, lack of alignment of the designs on each side, a technicality referred to by numismatists as 'die axis' but which many people notice without being able to define or even identify as the feature that has triggered their suspicions, and perhaps most commonly of all, a vague sense that the coin does not 'feel right' – minute deviations from the norm in its fabric, in the relief and sharpness of the design, in the texture of the metal. These readings may be performed on a coin in seconds as it passes through the hand, or may in edge cases be mulled over for several minutes. The offending coin may be passed around whoever is standing nearby to see what they think. All of this – discussion, community interaction and careful examination – may and indeed often does take place without any engagement with the meaning

<sup>29</sup> Joe Cribb, 'The president's address: money as metaphor 2', *The Numismatic Chronicle*, 166 2006, 493-517, 493-500.

<sup>30</sup> Cecile Morrisson, 'Displaying the emperor's authority and Kharaktèr on the marketplace', in Pamela Armstrong (ed.), *Authority in Byzantium*; Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, 65-82.

<sup>31</sup> Indeed, taking a purely art historical approach, *Faith and Fortune* was also able to facilitate engagement with Byzantine numismatics by the Campaign for Drawing and The Big Draw. Dr Tom Jones led two workshops introducing students from backgrounds in Art, Art History, History and Archaeology to coins as foci for close analysis of line and design.

<sup>32</sup> Royal Mint, '£1 counterfeit coins', <<http://www.royalmint.com/discover/uk-coins/counterfeit-one-pound-coins>>, accessed 14/08/2014.

of images on the coin intended by its creators. Whether they look right, that is to say, conform to what is expected, is an entirely different mechanism of looking and reading than registering the gradual ageing of Queen Elizabeth II on British coin portraits, or decoding the various heraldic emblems used in reverse types. It necessitates almost no engagement with the Latin legend declaring in heavily abbreviated form that Elizabeth II is, by grace of God, defender of the faith, Queen of England, a formulation which even expanded and translated, has little meaning or relevance for millions of users of forged and official pound coins.

This is not to suggest that the political messages declared on modern British coinage do not matter, that they are not subject to deep consideration and debate (illustrated strikingly and somewhat disturbingly by the anti-feminist outcry over the depiction of Jane Austen on the £10 note).<sup>33</sup> For the numismatist of the future they may likewise suggest gradual changes in the political and social culture of modern Britain, as well as its on-going traditionalism. Coinage often tends, with rare exceptions, to be a conservative medium precisely because people trust what they expect.<sup>34</sup>

In the case of ancient and medieval coins, however, where the messages stamped on coins are frequently one of the only remaining sources of chronological narratives and major political debates, the temptation is strong to read only this official text and to disregard entirely the completely different register in which the majority of users probably interacted with these coins. It is this register which is exposed on the seventh-century coin of Skythopolis. In the midst of wars with Persia then the first Islamic army, central government in the region seems to have temporarily collapsed. At the very least, official currency was not being supplied. To meet the currency shortfall, therefore, Skythopolis, a city which did not previously have its own mint, issued copper coins directly imitating coinage of the Byzantine Empire but of a type which had been struck some seventy years earlier.

It is unclear precisely who issued these coins, though perhaps either the local ecclesiastical hierarchy or a council (however informal) of local elites. What is clear is that these coins were always intended to be read in multiple different ways. There was evidently some desire to advertise or exhibit local affiliation. To either side of the seated figures on the obverse is the name of the minting location, Skythopolis. However, in all other respects this issue conforms to its Byzantine prototype, right down to the letters NIK, beneath the M on the reverse. The M denoted the face

<sup>33</sup> Alex Wellman, 'Woman who campaigned for Jane Austen to become face of £10 note bombarded with rape threats', *Mirror*, 27/07/2013 2013; Jamie Doward, 'Twitter under fire after bank note campaigner is target of rape threats', *The Guardian*, 27/07/2013 2013.

<sup>34</sup> One of the most striking exceptions to this generalization was the coin reform of Abd al-Malik in the 690s which, at the same time as Justinian II innovatively used Christ on his coins, created an entirely new Islamic style of aniconic coinage, and forms the centerpiece of the *Faith and Fortune* exhibition narrative. On Arab-Byzantine coinage and its role in the development of an Islamic coinage, Clive Foss, *Arab-Byzantine Coins: An Introduction, with a Catalogue of the Dumbarton Oaks Collection*; Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, 2009; Tony Goodwin, *Arab-Byzantine Coinage*; eds Nasser D Khalili et al., 1 edn, *Studies in the Khalili Collection*; London: The Nour Foundation, Azimuth Editions, 2005.

value of the coin, of 40 *nummi* though it is impossible to tell what these local issues might have been worth or how this may have been calculated or enforced. NIK was the mint mark of the city of Nikomedeia, which had produced coins of this design in the late sixth century, probably including the prototype for this example. Thus, a range of different texts are displayed on this coin, some with conflicting meanings. Their relevance depends on the register in which they are read: NIK conveyed the familiarity of the type and therefore its reliability and usability, just like the choice of an out-dated but recognisable and traditional type, but it no longer carried any geographical meaning. 'Skythopolis' communicated its local origin and perhaps something about the authority which issued it.



Figure 6 This *follis*, minted in Skythopolis in the mid-seventh century, displays a range of features imitating Byzantine prototypes, but the die cutter also made distinctive and local choices about the information presented. (Barber Institute Collection, A-B01, used with kind permission of the Barber Institute.)

This coin is an example of a series of local coinages which were issued throughout Syria-Palestine in the seventh century in response to the breakdown of central government. The similarities and differences in minting choices reflect the complex ways in which such coins might be seen and used. On an economic level they represent the resilience of expectations in a highly monetized society, such that even when the state could no longer provide small change with which to do business, the local area managed to do so.<sup>35</sup> This was a region-wide response, visible in a number of cities, but those cities also made choices subtly different from Skythopolis, such as choosing the same denomination of Byzantine coin (the M – 40 *nummi*), but a different design, or in many cases by combining Byzantine design with inscriptions in Arabic.

These varied responses to the disruptions of nearly sixty years of intermittent warfare and the advent of a new religious and political authority in the area are clearly visible on the coinage even if their meaning is not, and perhaps was not for many of the users of these coins at the time.

<sup>35</sup> Morriison and Sodini, 'The sixth-century economy', 216-17.





Figure 7 These *folles* also minted in the mid-seventh century in Damascus and Baalbek likewise represent local uses of widespread imperial prototypes but in these cases and that of the Skythopolis coin previously examined, the choices made are different. (Barber Institute Collection, A-B05 and A-B19, used with kind permission of the Barber Institute.)

It should be noted that in focussing on the economic as a sphere in which to see diverse interactions and concerns through the coinage, *Faith and Fortune* was not breaking new ground, but rather following from and expanding upon the approaches pioneered by exhibitions of coinage as money, most notably at the Geldmuseum of the Bundesbank in Frankfurt, and the HSBC, now Citi, Money Gallery at the British Museum.<sup>36</sup> Both exhibit coins in the wider context of monetary history. Visually these exhibitions also moved away from traditional ways of displaying coins (or, in the case of Frankfurt, placed traditional coin displays alongside other interpretations), towards coins used alongside a wide range of other artefacts, from credit card machines and Bit-coin receipts to a stuffed cow, to convey wider patterns of exchange and value. The Barber collection, however, is far more focussed in its holdings than either of these: it is a coin collection, and so the challenge became to use these innovations while presenting an entirely coin-based experience. Only one exception was included, for a desk case (cabinet seven). Desk cases are often difficult places to exhibit coins due to reflection from the surface and visitors blocking light as they lean over to view the coins. The loan of objects mainly from the Cadbury Research Library and Special Collections (University of Birmingham) therefore provided an opportunity to bring together two of the exceptional collections of eastern Mediterranean and Near Eastern artefacts located on the campus, and to illustrate the continuity of one of the exhibition themes (the Byzantine move towards pictorial representations of divinity and the early Islamic rejection of it) in a completely different medium.

<sup>36</sup> 'Geldmuseum der Deutschen Bundesbank',

<<http://www.bundesbank.de/Navigation/DE/Bundesbank/Geldmuseum/geldmuseum.html>>, accessed 14/08/2014 ; 'Money: the Citi Money Gallery, Room 68',

<<http://www.britishmuseum.org/money>>, accessed 14/08/2014 .



Figure 8 9th-century Qur'an, written in Kufic script on vellum, uses no figural imagery. Its production location is unknown. Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, used with permission.

### Temporary durable things: exhibiting time

The coins of Skythopolis and other Decapolis cities underscore one further feature of both coins and exhibition, which is crucial to representing the former and curating the latter: the importance of temporality. The Skythopolis coins and associated Damascene and Baalbek series represent an extremely brief window of time – perhaps two generations, in which people were forced to rely on regional resources to meet some of the basic needs, such as coinage, which had for centuries, and subsequently would be for centuries more, met by central imperial government. Their messages were embedded in tradition but also made immediate choices about what was required, in terms, for example of denomination or additional inscriptions beyond the prototype. The same is true of exhibitions, and particularly non-permanent exhibitions: they are time-limited. They are, therefore, also able to speak much more directly to a temporally specific audience, though through a medium which is serialised and well-understood.

Part of the aim of *Faith and Fortune* was to offer a response to current questions about western European interactions with the Islamic world (and mainly the Middle East), by examining the point at which that geopolitical context was created. For a collection like the Barber Institute's, which is embedded into the research and teaching culture of the University of Birmingham, an exhibition also provides opportunities for tailored teaching, likewise able to respond to current preoccupations and promote the immediacy of medieval or Late Antique studies to students. During the first six months of the *Faith and Fortune* exhibition over four hundred students were given the opportunity to handle coins in the collection, learn techniques for studying them and see how they might be applied to a range of courses in Classics, History and Archaeology. These classes were tailored to the needs of individual courses but also incorporated the themes of the exhibition, so that teaching, research and exhibition became part of a combined experience for

students, undergraduate and postgraduate, at the university and beyond.<sup>37</sup> Sessions were organised usually for groups of five to eight students at a time, with an opportunity to view the exhibition with a guide, followed by a handling session. This would usually include highlighted coins from the exhibition and a selection of other coins chosen to reflect other key events or personalities from their course of study, and examples of very large and clearly legible coins which students could be taught quickly to read and describe for themselves.<sup>38</sup> The aim was, therefore, to equip students to discuss numismatic evidence in their own work and introduce them to the resources of the Barber coin collection and library. The classes also capitalised on the fact that coins are one of the few categories of object from this period which can be handled and which can thus offer an exciting and tangible connection to distant events. These sessions have since resulted in six undergraduate and graduate volunteers from the University of Birmingham offering time to catalogue parts of the Barber collection which have consequently been made available online, and several other students using the coin study room and library for work on MA and BA dissertations.<sup>39</sup>

Following the close of the exhibition, one of the discussions begun at the Curating Art History conference concerned how a temporary output such as an exhibition might be turned into a longer-term resource for teaching and the public. On the basis largely of that discussion *Faith and Fortune* in its physical form will be followed by a virtual exhibition using the design boards and digital images of the coins.<sup>40</sup> While this will hopefully contribute to the depth of engagement with the Barber Institute numismatic collection and especially to the student experience at the University of Birmingham, however, it must be remembered that it is, in many respects, an exercise in artificial preservation exactly like that of museology itself.

Exhibiting coins as economic artefacts demands engagement with their impermanence as objects of use and the concomitant artificiality of keeping, studying and displaying them as permanent objects. In a predominantly fine art collection the danger of overlooking this dimension is especially real, as the tradition of displaying and interpreting art, though increasingly sensitive to the

<sup>37</sup> Access to the coin collection for teaching and learning included handling sessions and gallery tours for four undergraduate courses in Byzantine history, Late Antiquity, medieval history and archaeology, and postgraduate handling sessions and numismatic training for postgraduate students at the University of Birmingham, and from the universities of Leicester, Nottingham and Oxford. In addition to these sessions for students, the exhibition was viewed by around 21,000 visitors, many of whom participated in gallery tours by the curators and other Barber Institute volunteers.

<sup>38</sup> For this, *folles* of the sixth century, rather like the prototype for the Skythopolis coin, are ideal.

<sup>39</sup> For Barber Institute coins currently catalogued online

<<http://mimsy.bham.ac.uk/info.php?s=coin&type=all&t=objects>>, accessed 01/09/2015.

<sup>40</sup> Implementation of this plan was delayed by a request to exhibit the display boards at the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter. This version of the exhibition, using images of all coins rather than original objects, ran from May to September 2015 and further demonstrated the flexibility of the Foamex display method.

historical context of its production, also emphasises its timeless quality.<sup>41</sup> However beautiful, significant and meaningful the images on late antique coins were, however, there is no evidence that they were intended as 'art' in this sense. Coins are required to be durable to be fit for purpose. They must pass from hand to hand, remain recognisable, and be able to withstand weather and travel. Their durability, however, was not intended as a gesture towards posterity. Coins were understood to be valid for as long as the authority (whether the individual ruler or the state) that issued them was operative and endorsed them. When this ceased to be the case such coins quickly lost their value and either stopped being used, as in the case of local, small-scale coinage, such as that of Skythopolis, or were melted and re-coined into new designs. Preserved in museum collections, and displayed as artworks, coins are transformed by permanence into static referents to the authority which created them, and which by this means also takes on an aura of permanence. This is, again, not an invalid reading. Coins are one of the most durable legacies of many past civilizations, and especially the Roman and Byzantine worlds. They are also one of the most mobile and proliferating icons of power in any society, and certainly were in the Byzantine Empire, spreading a message of wealth and authority to the edges of the world in a web which at least some viewers evidently saw as linked to the divinely ordained expansion of Byzantine, Christian power.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, coins could also be objects which operated in extremely narrow windows of time. Each one might pass through the hands of its various users only briefly. This is particularly true of gold coins which might only have been seen infrequently by poorer inhabitants of the Byzantine Empire.<sup>43</sup> Coins such as the anarchy coinage of Skythopolis, highlighted above, had a relatively short period of use. Even if their period in circulation might have been a generation or, for some other coin series which were used long after they were issued, a few centuries, the point at which many coins were made was often brutally circumscribed by necessity and unconcerned with anything beyond the immediate. Some issues were certainly produced in the probably ordered environment of an imperial mint, implied by their careful workmanship, closely controlled gold content and effective serialization. Others, however, were the product of rapid, even chaotic manufacture. They are not beautiful. Sometimes they are barely even legible. But they are testimony, in the case of this exhibition, to a period of history which transformed the geopolitical landscape of the world. Exhibition has the potential both to highlight and to efface the excitement of this immediate insight into the past.

One of the efforts made in this exhibition in order to preserve a sense of the immediacy of coins as used objects was to display a large number of copper coins,

<sup>41</sup> For a broad discussion of ideas of time and the temporal context of work and viewer in art historical discussion, Antoinette Roesler-Friedenthal and Johannes Nathan (eds), *The enduring instant: time and the spectator in the visual arts: a section of the XXXth International Congress of the History of Art, London = Der bleibende Augenblick : Betrachterzeit in den Bildkünsten : eine Sektion des XXX. Internationalen Kongresses für Kunstgeschichte, London*; Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 2003.

<sup>42</sup> Wanda Wolska-Conus, *Cosmas Indicopleustes: Topographie Chrétienne, tome I*, 1 edn, Sources Chrétienne 141; Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1968, Book two, chapter 68.

<sup>43</sup> Morrisson and Sodini, 'The sixth-century economy', 214.

the metal most people would have encountered. This contrasted with a tendency in museum exhibitions to favour gold and silver coinage because it is seen as being of higher value (which by one measure, of course, it is), because the designs are often clearer and because it is easier to light in often dark museum spaces. This was a compromise which was noticeable at times in *Faith and Fortune* – some coins were not as clearly lit as might have been ideal. Nevertheless, the emphasis on copper coins in this exhibition at least highlights one disjuncture between the ways in which coins are seen in museums and the ways in which they were seen (or not seen) at their point of use.<sup>44</sup>



Figure 10 The high-quality gold coinage of the Byzantine Empire was closely associated with imperial glory and reflects tightly-controlled manufacturing processes. (Barber Institute Collection, B0012, used with kind permission of the Barber Institute.)



Figure 11 At times of crisis, copper coinage in particular demonstrates few of the qualities associated with fine gold coins, being often illegible, poorly designed and inconsistent in execution. (Barber Institute Collection, B3080, used with kind permission of the Barber Institute.)

<sup>44</sup> On the use of 'copper' or 'bronze' to describe copper-alloy coinage, C. E. King, D. M. Metcalf, and J. P. Northover, 'Copper-based alloys of the fifth-century: a comparison of Carthage under Vandalic rule, with other mints', *Revue numismatique*, 34 1992, 54-76.

## Reactions, reflections and outcomes

Constructing *Faith and Fortune* was a learning curve for the whole curatorial team and while it succeeded in realizing many of our aims there are things which might have been done differently to better effect, or which while successful here, would not translate well to all other museums. In particular, the freedom to attempt some quite complex explanations, for example, of the comparative Christianisation and Islamicization of Byzantine and Umayyad coinage, was afforded by housing an exhibition on a university campus. By contrast, such an exhibition in a larger national museum or in a corridor rather than a gallery space would have required a smaller ratio of text to object and a complexity of text better suited to large numbers of visitors, often not stopping to read each cabinet. The importance of handling and teaching is something also borrowed from larger and more public galleries such as the Citi Money Gallery, but which took on a different quality with this exhibition due to its university affiliation, and which could be conducted in greater depth, using the full length of university teaching sessions.

Above all, exhibiting the coins of the Barber collection highlighted to the curatorial team the potential of exhibition as a forum for research rather than purely dissemination. In addition to this article, it has spawned a conference paper and developing article publication on the anarchy coinage of Skythopolis and the Decapolis, looking at the correlation between these coins and pottery assemblages. It has provided an opportunity for research students at different points in their careers to examine coins of interest for their own work and to think about conveying their research interests to a non-discipline-specific audience, and it has deepened questions relevant to any numismatic study about the ways in which coins are viewed and used. Rather than representing a 'simplified' or 'condensed' version of published research, or a simple story stripped of the complexities which a historian expects to encounter and examine in an article or book, the visual space of an exhibition, its physical parameters and focus on a particular corpus of material constitutes another arena in which to conduct research and focus on different questions. The areas of this exhibition best received have been those which have sought to convey some of the ambiguities of cutting edge research rather than only the firm conclusions of common wisdom and to engage the audience in consideration of the things historians do not understand.<sup>45</sup>

This is not to say that all research can and should be exhibited, nor that all the skills of one arena are entirely transferable to another, but in a world of heated debates about the nature of 'impact', what counts as scholarly production and where the permeable lines are between research conducted in the academy and in the heritage sector the capacity for exhibitions not only to showcase but also to constitute viable research should be recognized. Collections with close relationships with university departments, such as that of the Barber Institute with the University

<sup>45</sup> Robert Bracey, 'Faith and Fortune: visualising the divine on Byzantine and early Islamic coinage at The Barber Institute of Fine Arts - a review', *Money and Medals*, 60 2014, 1-3. Feedback has also been collected from the visitors' book placed in the coin gallery.

of Birmingham, represent a particularly valuable opportunity for generating such interactions and making the case for their consideration as part of a wider research setting.

## Conclusion

Presenting the challenges and opportunities of exhibiting coins as economic artefacts at the conference, *Curating Art History*, was an unparalleled opportunity also to reflect on the research implications of exhibition and to discuss with other members of the academy and the heritage sectors the challenges of conveying the ambiguity of research to a public audience, but also the benefit to research and teaching of having a close focus on a single collection of objects or a theme for exhibition. *Faith and Fortune* has demonstrated ways in which exhibition can result in traditional outputs of research – articles, conference papers and lectures -, but these have not developed simply as an adjunct to exhibition, nor as the leaders of exhibition content. Rather they have evolved precisely from the process of viewing a specific set of objects and seeking to present questions about them within a set of constraints unfamiliar to the curators. The result has been to recover new ways of looking into past lives.

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