

"YOU HAVE THE TWO KINGS HERE:" COINAGE, THE ROYAL IMAGE, AND THE NATURE OF KINGSHIP IN THE VISIGOTHIC KINGDOM OF TOLEDO AND BEYOND

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I. "*You Have Two Kings Here:*" The Story of Sopatrus and the Ceylonese King

According to the sixth-century monk and chronicler Cosmas Indicopleustes, sometime earlier in that century a Greek man by the name of Sopatrus traveled to the island of Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka) where he met with one of the kings of the island; at that meeting, he was joined by Persian traders who had arrived on the island at the same time.¹ The Ceylonese king asked Sopatrus and the Persians which of their kings was more powerful, to which one of the Persian men immediately responded "[o]ur king is both more powerful and the greater and richer, and indeed is King of Kings [...]," using the traditional appellation of Persian royalty.² When the Ceylonese king asked Sopatrus to respond to this assertion, Sopatrus did so by saying "[...] if you

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¹ Stefan Faller, "The World According to Cosmas Indicopleustes: Concepts and Illustrations of an Alexandrian Merchant and Monk," *Transcultural Studies* 1 (2011): 193–232; Horst Schneider, *Kosmas Indikopleustes, Christliche Topographie: Textkritische Analysen. Übersetzung. Kommentar* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011); Maja Kominko, *The World of Kosmas: Illustrated Byzantine Codices of the Christian Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Wanda Wolska-Conus, "La 'Topographie Chrétienne' de Cosmas Indicopleustes: hypothèses sur quelques thèmes de son illustration," *Revue des études byzantines* 48 (1990): 155–91.

² Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk*, ed. and trans. John Watson McCrindle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 368.

wish to learn the truth you have the two kings here. Examine each and you will see which of them is the grander and the more powerful."³

Taken aback by this wild claim, the Ceylonese king asked Sopatrus to explain himself, which the Greek did by producing two coins, one a gold Byzantine *aureus* and the other a silver Sasanian *drachm*. After examining the coins, the Ceylonese king proclaimed that the Byzantine emperor must indeed be the superior of the two because of the quality of the *aureus*. Cosmas does not tell us whether the quality that swayed the Ceylonese ruler pertained to the images or to the weight and purity of the gold, but based on Sopatrus' emphasis on the imagery it seems as though the king considered both aspects before rendering his verdict.

This short story contains a wealth of information about how coinage traveled and how they were related to the concept of royal power during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. The fact that this story was set on the island of Sri Lanka hints at the expansiveness of trade networks in the sixth century, and the presence of both Persian merchants and Greeks like Sopatrus at the Ceylonese court is just one instance of the political and cultural connections fostered by international trade. Additionally, by stating that "you have two kings here," Sopatrus (or, perhaps more accurately, Cosmas) is indicating that the image of the king found on a coin functioned as an index of the king himself, an itinerant version of the real corporeal king that could assert royal dominance over his rivals even from thousands of miles away through the imprint of his image. Cosmas's tale hints at one way in which royal visualities and ideologies traveled during the Early Middle Ages, through the use of numismatic portraiture and the shifting meanings those royal portraits were believed to carry with them.

Coins are perhaps the ultimate mobile art object, designed to be passed hand-to-hand across any range of distance. While their monetary value and their use as economic tools fluctuated throughout history, coins have always been essentially and purposefully nomadic in nature. Visigothic coins, with their various versions of numismatic portraiture, were no exception, although the evidence for their movement outside of the Iberian Peninsula is spotty and incomplete.⁴ Given the almost total lack of contemporary images of any

³ Cos. Indic., *Topography*, 369; Peter Brown, "'Charismatic' Goods," in *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity: Rome, China, Iran, and the Steppe, ca. 250-750*, ed. Nicola di Cosmo and Michael Maas (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018), 105–06.

⁴ There are multiple proposed causes for this lacuna in the numismatic map of the early medieval world, including the restriction of foreign coinage within particular kingdoms (including the Kingdom of Toledo) and the melting and reminting of foreign coinage into domestic issues. See Andrew Kurt, *Money, the State and Economy in the Visigothic Kingdom*:

Visigothic king, the royal portraits on Visigothic coins offer a tantalizing, if physically small, window into the ways in which Visigothic kingship was visually conceived. This chapter discusses these portraits and their connection to Visigothic rulership practices to build a more holistic view of Visigothic kingship and its relationship to the wider world.⁵

II. Making Meaning Through Royal Numismatic Portraiture in the Visigothic Kingdom of Toledo and Beyond

As illustrated by the story of Sopatrus and the Ceylonese king, during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, numismatic portraits were an important way for rulers to circulate their own self-fashioned image of authority and connect that authority to economic circulation. As Andrew Kurt contends, with regard to Visigothic coins, royally produced coinage bearing the image of the sovereign created “tangible proof of the reach of a central authority capable of extracting productive resources in [the] kingdom.”⁶ Visigothic coins, the majority of which were gold *tremissis*, were physical evidence of the authority of any given Visigothic king whose name and portrait appeared on the coin matrix. As Ruth Pliego notes, Visigothic coins function as a “concise symbolic manifestation of the Visigothic monarchy.”⁷ They proved that the king was wealthy, organized, and powerful enough to mine precious metals, move those materials to a central location, and use skilled labor to create coinage through the process of minting, all of which required large resources and a well-maintained infrastructure. These coins were, in essence, Visigothic kingship made manifest in metal.

Visigothic coinage is a particularly interesting instance of this nexus of practical and symbolic meaning because of the almost complete lack of any other contemporary images of Visigothic kings. Aside from one ring from the late fifth century which likely depicts the early Visigothic king Alaric II (r. 484–507), there are to my knowledge no extant images of the body or face of any Visigothic king outside of numismatic portraiture from the sixth through

From Settlement in Aquitaine through the First Decade of the Muslim Conquest of Spain (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 84–85.

⁵ For more on the connection between Visigothic coinage and conceptions of royal power, see Ruth Pliego, “*Figura et potentia*: Coinage and Power in the Visigothic Kingdom,” in *The Visigothic Kingdom: The Negotiation of Power in Post-Roman Iberia*, ed. Sabine Panzram and Paulo Pacha (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 235–55.

⁶ Andrew Kurt, “Visigothic Currency in its Making and Movement: A Varying State of Circumstances,” *Visigothic Symposia* 3 (2018–19): 174.

⁷ Pliego, “*Figura et Potentia*,” 236.

early eighth centuries.⁸ The earliest full-body portrait of a Visigothic sovereign outside of coinage comes from the *Codex Vigilanus*, made in the ninth or tenth century in northern Spain, well after the early eighth-century collapse of the Kingdom of Toledo.⁹ This manuscript, which contains texts from the Councils of Toledo and the *Liber Iudiciorum* among others, is illuminated with a multitude of images, one of which includes portraits of the Visigothic kings Chindaswinth (r. 642-653), Recceswinth (r. 649/653-672), and Egica (r. 687-701/703).

These royal portraits, made at least a century after the death of the last Visigothic king, are quite formulaic in their rendering of the royal bodies. This is particularly noticeable in the heads of the figures, which are quite similar to royal numismatic portraits from the Visigothic era and may have been based on those formerly ubiquitous images of Visigothic kings. This hypothesis becomes even more likely when one considers the dearth of other contemporary images of Visigothic kings outside of coinage. Because of the essentially aniconic nature of Visigothic kingship, numismatic portraits give us a rare, if murky, vision of how Visigothic kings saw themselves and, more importantly, how they wished to be seen by people within and without their domain. Indeed, as Rory Naismith astutely notes, "coins [...] reflect acceptance of the authority behind them, emblemized by the more or less carefully engraved name, image, or symbol of the ruler."¹⁰

As Naismith states, there is a direct connection between coins, numismatic portraiture, and the actual and perceived power of Visigothic sovereigns. Because Visigothic kings were (mostly) elected rather than being born into the role, having a physical manifestation of authority could mean the difference between life and death for a Visigothic sovereign.¹¹ The Visigoths were famously fond of removing kings from power through violence, so much so

⁸ For a thorough exploration of this ring's attribution, see Genevra Kornbluth, "The Seal of Alaric, *rex Gothorum*," *Early Medieval Europe* 16, no. 3 (2008), 299–332.

⁹ For more information on this manuscript, see Jacques Guilman, "Interlace Decoration and the Influence of the North on Mozarabic Illumination," *The Art Bulletin* 42, no. 3 (1960): 211–18.

¹⁰ Rory Naismith, *Making Money in the Early Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 12.

¹¹ The traditional view of the Visigothic kingdom as a purely elective monarchy has been challenged in recent years, most successfully by Luis A. García Moreno in his article "Prosopography, Nomenclature, and Royal Succession in the Visigothic Kingdom of Toledo," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1, no. 1 (2008): 142–56.

that regicide came to be known as the *morbus Gothicus* or “Gothic disease”.¹² It was, therefore, incumbent upon any newly elected Visigothic king to produce proof of his power and authority, and minting coinage was one important vector for this process of legitimation. In the pre-regal period, roughly 450-560s CE, this was accomplished through the use of Byzantine imagery, particularly numismatic portraits of the Byzantine Emperor adapted or copied from contemporary Byzantine coinage.¹³ The linking of Visigothic sovereignty with the relative stability of Byzantine rulership and Byzantine coinage was a tangible, quantifiable, and easily visible manifestation of legitimacy for Visigothic kings before Liuvigild (r. 569-586).¹⁴

From the 490s to the 570s, Visigothic numismatic portraits on *tremissis* specifically were presented in profile like contemporary Byzantine coins. These pre-regal coins were issued in purposeful imitation of Byzantine coins – although with gradual stylistic departures – and often featured the name of the contemporary Byzantine emperor, hence the appellation “pseudo-imperial coinage” sometimes found in scholarship.¹⁵ Simultaneously, Byzantine imperial issues were being minted on the Iberian Peninsula from the southern colony of *Spania*, therefore providing the Visigoths with readily available Byzantine comparanda. Another common aspect of Visigothic pre-regal *tremissis* was the use of a winged victory figure holding a crown on the reverse, an image borrowed from both contemporary Byzantine and older late-Roman imperial coinage.¹⁶

Many aspects of kingship changed with the reign of Liuvigild, who ushered in a period of alteration and development in many areas of Visigothic elite culture and practices, not the least of which was a change in numismatic portraiture. Beginning in the 570s, the Byzantine imperial name and portrait gradually faded from use on Visigothic coinage. The process of adaptation from pseudo-imperial to regal coinage took several years, and there were

¹² John M Wallace-Hadrill, trans., *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar with its Continuations* 82 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1960), 70: “Cumque omnem regnum Spaniae suae dicione firmasset, cognatus morbum Gotorum quem de regibus degradandum habebant [...]”

¹³ The term “pre-regal” here refers specifically to coinage, and is used to designate Visigothic coinage minted perhaps between c. 420-c. 570 before the changes that occurred during the reign of Liuvigild (discussed below).

¹⁴ Pliego, “*Figura et Potentia*,” 237.

¹⁵ Ruth Pliego Vázquez, *La Moneda Visigoda*, vol. 1: *Historia Monetaria del Reino Visigodo de Toledo* (c. 569-711) (Seville: Universidad de Sevilla, 2009), 75–79.

¹⁶ Philip Grierson and Mark Blackburn, *Medieval European Coinage*, Vol. 1: *The Early Middle Ages (5th-10th Centuries)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 42–43.

coins minted during Liuvigild's reign with portraits and legends of Justin II, but by the mid-580s Visigothic issues feature facing busts that merely resemble older Byzantine portraits. However, as explained below, these post-580 issues may have been conceived as portraits of Liuvigild himself, surrounded by the name of the Visigothic sovereign in place of the emperor's name.¹⁷

Liuvigild's coins were also the first to name their mint location on the coin matrix, thus locating the production of these coins within the geographic boundaries of Liuvigild's dominion.¹⁸ Simultaneously, Liuvigild forbade the use of any money aside from his royally sanctioned coinage; as such an edict would have effectively restricted the circulation of foreign coinage within kingdom, this may partially explain the relative lack of non-Visigothic coinage in the archaeological record within the Iberian Peninsula.¹⁹ This lacuna may also be partially explained by the supposition, supported by evidence according to Xaxier Barral i Altet, that foreign coins were sometimes melted down for their metal content and remade as Visigothic issues at minting sites across the kingdom.²⁰

This lack of non-Visigothic coinage does not, however, necessarily indicate that inter-kingdom trade and numismatic exchange was not occurring during the sixth through eighth centuries. There are instances of Visigothic coins traveling hundreds of miles from one side of the peninsula to the other, so we

¹⁷ It must be noted that Liuvigild's were possibly not the first coins to feature the name of a Visigothic sovereign. It is possible that the first Visigothic king to include his name on royal issues was his eldest son Hermenegild, who issued a small number of coins during his rebellion. Andrew Kurt has convincingly argued that Liuvigild was the first Visigothic sovereign to incorporate his name on coin matrices, but this is still a debated conclusion. See Kurt, *Minting, State, and Economy*, 81-108. Additionally, the reasons for Liuvigild's changes to numismatic portraiture and the mint network are still debated, with the most likely answers being either a) they were an attempt to strengthen the position of the Visigothic king within and without the Peninsula or b) they began in response to his son Hermenegild's rebellion from 580-584. See Pliego Vázquez, *La Moneda Visigoda*, vol. 1, 81-95, particularly 91 fig. 19 for a tremissis featuring the names of both Liuvigild and Justin II; for more on contemporary developments in scholarship around Liuvigild's coinage, see Pliego, "Visigothic Currency: Recent Developments and Data for Its Study," in *Framing Power in Visigothic Society: Discourses, Devices, and Artefacts*, ed. Eleanora Dell'Elicine and Celine Martin, 183-87 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020).

¹⁸ Kurt, *Minting, State, and Economy*, 84-85.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁰ Xavier Barral i Altet, *La circulation des monnaies suèves et visigotiques. Contribution à l'histoire économique du royaume visigothique* (Munich: Artemis Verlag, 1976), 64-66.

can be certain that these coins were used either in intra-kingdom trade or other types of exchange, such as payment for military service or taxes.²¹ It was also not just coins that traveled: based on stylistic comparisons, it is asserted that Visigothic die cutters were itinerant craftsmen, often traveling huge distances across the Peninsula to work at mints from Galicia to Toledo to Seville.²² Additionally, while Visigothic coins found outside of Iberia are rare, several early Visigothic coins have been found in southern England and central France alongside coins from Constantinople, Egypt, Italy, and the Levant, indicating that Visigothic money, and quite possibly Visigothic trade, was occasionally taken beyond the borders of the kingdom.²³

In contrast to the rarity of Visigothic coins, coinage from other contemporary kingdoms to which the Visigoths were deeply politically and economically linked have been found across a wide geographic area, indicating a robust system of numismatic circulation within the early medieval Mediterranean. For example, Ostrogothic coins from the reigns of Theodoric (r. 471-526), Theodahad (r. 534-536), Witigis (r. 536-540) and Totila (r. 541-552 CE) have been found on the Peloponnesus, generally along the coast or near rivers indicating that these deposits were the result of maritime trade between the Ostrogoths and their Greek neighbors to the east.²⁴ Ostrogothic coins from the sixth century have also been discovered in the southeastern Spanish city of Valencia, indicating trade or at the very least by-proxy economic links between the Visigoths and their Gothic cousins across the Tyrrhenian Sea.²⁵

Similarly, several Byzantine coins have been found from the Visigothic period in Spain, most of which are concentrated along the southern and eastern coasts of the peninsula and within the boundaries of the royal city of

²¹ Kurt, "Visigothic Currency," 176; Felix Retamero, "As Coins Go Home: Towns, Merchants, Bishops and Kings in Visigothic Hispania," in *The Visigoths from the Migration Period to the Seventh Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. Peter Heather (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999), 293.

²² See Andrew Kurt, "Clues from Coins: Stylistic Comparisons of Visigothic Die Engraving as Evidence for Mint Administration" in this volume for more on the itinerant nature of Visigothic die cutters and their impact of Visigothic issues and their iconography. See also the contribution in this volume by Jane Sancinito.

²³ Barral i Altet, *La circulation des monnaies*, 64-66; Michael McCormick, *Origin of the Early Medieval Economy: Communications and Commerce 300-900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 645.

²⁴ C. Morrisson, V. Popović, V. Ivanišević, *Les Trésors monétaires byzantins des Balkans et d'Asie Mineure (491-713)* (Paris: Lethielleux Editions, 2006).

²⁵ Framing the Late Antique and Early Medieval Economy (Princeton University), circulation map, <http://cs1a100w.princeton.edu:82/>.

Reccopolis, where they appear alongside Merovingian coins.²⁶ This is likely due to the presence of a Byzantine colony of *Spania* along the southern Iberian coast from 552 to 624, and Andrew Kurt has suggested that the increase in mint activity in southern Iberia during the early seventh century was related to the military conflict between the Visigoths and the Byzantines.²⁷

Because the Byzantine Empire was one of the major economic powerhouses of this period, it is not overly surprising to find Byzantine currency in the southern Mediterranean. More surprising, however, are the multiple Sasanian coins which have been discovered during the course of archaeological excavations in the U.K. and Germany.²⁸ The presence of these Persian coins in England and the European subcontinent suggests that the web of trade routes connecting Europe to Western Asia was strong and flexible enough to move small objects like coins across vast distances. This is further bolstered by the distribution of Byzantine numismatic finds across Europe, Africa, and Asia, with Byzantine coins being found as far afield as Tanzania, Sri Lanka, China, and northern Scandinavia.²⁹ As our friend Sopatrus noted, the Byzantine emperor and his coinage traveled far and wide, reaching the farthest corners of the known world.

These numismatic finds not only indicate that monetary or in-kind trade was occurring across large geographic and cultural spheres during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, but also that, across the interconnected world of the early medieval Mediterranean, peoples well beyond the borders of the court or region in which a given coin was minted were exposed to its

²⁶ David M. Metcalf, "Visigothic Monetary History: The Facts, What Facts?," in *The Visigoths: Studies in Culture and Society*, ed. Alberto Ferreiro (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 1999), 203; Pliego Vázquez, *La Moneda Visigoda*, vol. 1, 83.

²⁷ Kurt, *Visigothic Currency*, 171–72; on the archaeology of this region as it relates to Visigothic-Byzantine exchange, see Jamie Wood, "Agents and Mechanics of Connectivity: The Mediterranean World and the Cities of the Guadiana Valley in the Sixth Century," in *Rome and Byzantium in the Visigothic Kingdom: Beyond Imitatio Imperii*, ed. Damián Fernández, Molly Lester, and Jamie Wood (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 317–44.

²⁸ Caitlin R. Green, "Sasanian finds in early medieval Britain and beyond: another global distribution from Late Antiquity?" accessed January 25th, 2024 from <https://www.caitlin-green.org/2017/07/sasanian-finds-in-early-medieval-britain.html>; Wayne Homren, "Arabic Coins of the Middle Ages Found in Germany," *The E-sylum* 13.37 (September 2010), accessed February 15th, 2024 from https://www.coinbooks.org/esylum_v13n37a18.html.

²⁹ Caitlin Green, "A very long way from home: early Byzantine finds at the far ends of the world," accessed January 25th, 2024 from <https://www.caitlingreen.org/2017/03/a-very-long-way-from-home.html>.

royal or imperial imagery. While the nuance of these royal images may not have been legible outside of their original context (and almost certainly their textual legends were not), the fact that the image of a king could travel so far meant that royal visual propaganda could also travel, bringing many different groups of people into contact with that particular expression of authority. Like the Persian King of Kings and Byzantine emperor in the story of Sopatrus, the numismatic portraits of these sovereigns functioned as a kind of physical manifestation of rulership, linking the image of the king to his ability to fiscally provide for his kingdom and the material substance of the coin itself. While Visigothic coins are less represented in this global archaeological record, it is reasonable to assume that coins bearing the images of Visigothic kings were similarly imbricated within this system of socio-economic circulation.

As Erika Manders notes in her book on Roman imperial coinage in the third century, “Coins were [...] originally minted and brought into circulation because of economic needs. Yet, this need not mean that coins’ ideological importance should be undervalued; the repeated introduction of new types gives evidence of coins’ significance in the distribution of messages.”³⁰ Change and adaptation in coinage often reflected changes in the nature and purpose of royal or imperial propaganda, and was as true for the Visigothic kings of the sixth and seventh centuries as it was for third-century Roman emperors. In the following section, I explore the kinds of images Visigothic kings elected to use for their numismatic portraits, and how the changes across time seen in numismatic portraiture reflect the changing nature of Visigothic kingship.

III. Invisible Kings: Visigothic Coins and Visigothic Rulership

Visigothic rulers, particularly during and after the reign of Liuvigild, created their own visual language of power through a myriad of legal, political, and material means, one of which was the production of coins and the creation and adaptation of numismatic portraiture. This visibility of authority was developed over the course of two centuries into a set of images, ideas, and symbols that would have been recognizable to people both within and beyond the borders of the Kingdom of Toledo.

³⁰ Erika Manders, *Coining Images of Power: Patterns in the Representation of Roman Emperors on Imperial Coinage, A.D. 193-284* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2012), 29; see also Sven Betjes, *The Mind of the Mint: Continuity and Change in Roman Imperial Coin Design from Augustus to Zeno (31 BCE – 491 CE)* (Enschede: Ipskamp Printing, 2022).

Regal coinage, as the post-570 issues are known, developed alongside other novel artistic expressions of royal authority, many of which were adapted versions of similar expressions from elsewhere in the greater Mediterranean. The use of imperial purple clothing in royal ceremonies, the adoption of a royal crown and scepter, and the creation *ex novo* of the royal city of Reccopolis, all of which began during the reign of Liuvigild, established a set of visual and architectural markers of power within the Visigothic sphere that echoed, but did not exactly copy, Byzantine and Ostrogothic visualities of royal or imperial power.³¹ While physically smaller and visually less striking than an entire city or the famous hanging crowns from Guarrazar, royal numismatic portraits were integral participants in the creation of this specifically Visigothic royal identity.³²

It is most instructive to look at three examples of Visigothic numismatic portraiture from three separate kings to trace the development and instantiation of this identity within the context of coinage. The first example, a *tremissis* from the latter half of the reign of Liuvigild (fig. 1), contains elements on obverse that remained on regal Visigothic coins after a period of transition in the late sixth century: a roughly rendered portrait of a sovereign, in this case in profile, wearing what appears to be a ceremonial cloak (possibly a *paludamentum*, the purple-dyed imperial ceremonial garb of the Byzantine emperor that was adopted by Liuvigild) that features an even-armed cross and two shoulder clasps. The ruler's long hair is bound behind his head by two vertical bands, likely some version of a royal crown or headband. All these elements are rooted in or copied from late Roman and contemporary Byzantine numismatic iconography. The only major alteration to this common formula made by the Visigoths before the early 580s is the use of the royal title "rex" in the coin legend, in place of the titles "princeps," "imperator," or "basileus" found on Byzantine coins. The reverse names the mint at which the coin was struck, in this case the royal city of Toledo, along with a cross on top

³¹ For more on the adoption of imperial regalia in the Visigothic kingdom see Michael McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Early Medieval West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 302–14. For more on Reccopolis, see Joachim Henning, Michael McCormick, Lauro Olmo Enciso, Knut Rassmann, and Firkit Eyub, "Reccopolis Revealed: the first geomagnetic mapping of the early medieval Visigothic royal town," *Antiquity* 93 (2019): 735–51.

³² For more on the Treasure of Guarrazar, see Alicia, Perea, ed. *El tesoro visigodo de Guarrazar* (Madrid: Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2001) and Liz Wells, "Regii Honoris Signum: Visigothic Spain and the Transcultural Visuality of Power in the Global Late Antique and Early Medieval World" (PhD diss., University of California, Irvine, 2024), 115–92.

of a set of steps or stairs, which Pliego refers to by the traditional name of the “cruz sobre gradas” (cross on steps) type.³³

While this image is small, simple, and highly stylized, it can still provide important information about how Liuvigild seems to have envisioned himself as a ruler. He seems to have been taking over the previous, adaptive version of the emperor’s image that adorned the Visigothic tremissis for many decades. He is dressed in the standard contemporary accoutrements of rulership, the cloak and crown, denoting his sovereignty and status as king in a manner that would be recognizable to anyone within the pan-Mediterranean milieu. His name is emblazoned directly next to his portrait alongside his royal title, announcing his authority both visually and linguistically to any semi-literate observer. In doing so, he is not only directly associating himself with the commonly accepted visual markers of rulership to a potentially wide and multi-cultural audience; he is also connecting a Visigothic vision of kingship, couched within the Byzantine numismatic milieu, to the coin’s monetary value for the first time in the kingdom’s history. As Rory Naimsmith notes, “[c]oined money reified the means of exchange and cast the participants into a scheme of values closely and clearly dependent on authority, power, and social relations: they needed to be able to believe that the next person to whom they offered the coins would accept them at the same value.”³⁴

This belief now partially rested on the image of the king each coin carried, which verified the coin’s value and authenticity, thus linking the image of the king to the coin’s use as an economic tool. In this way, Liuvigild’s numismatic portraits functioned as both a visual expression of his sovereignty and a statement of authority, wherein the king takes responsibility for the monetary value of the coin through the application of his image during the minting process. Liuvigild took control of the minting process in a firmer and more holistic manner than previous Visigothic kings, and this more direct royal involvement in the creation of coinage reflects an overall increase in Visigothic royal power during Liuvigild’s reign.³⁵

Liuvigild’s youngest son, Reccared (r. 586-601), continued many of his father’s royal projects, including the further development of numismatic portraiture. As seen on a tremissis from Toledo (fig. 2), the portraits on both sides of the coin on Reccared’s issues are the facing bust or front bust type

³³ Pliego Vázquez, *La Moneda Visigoda*, vol. 2, 67 fig. 42 a.1

³⁴ Naimsmith, *Making Money*, 12. Pliego takes the emissions of this stage as royal portraits, while others assume these are immobilized portraits of the Byzantine emperor. See Pliego Vázquez, *La Moneda Visigoda*, vol. 1 90-91, 156.

³⁵ See Kurt, *Minting, State, and Economy*, 81–105.

rather than a profile bust, which can be more reliably identified as portraits of the Visigothic ruler, although it shares many iconographic elements with both Liuvigild's late issues and earlier Byzantine coinage.³⁶ This dual facing bust type was introduced at the end of Liuvigild's reign in 584, and it would become standard for Visigothic coinage for the next century starting in 586 with the accession of Reccared.³⁷ The majority of extant issues from his father Liuvigild's reign feature profile busts in combination with either a Winged Victory or "cruz sobre gradas" on the reverse. However, a significant minority of Liuvigild's coins from the last two to three years of his reign use a dual facing bust, which has been interpreted as representing the reigning king and his heir apparent, Reccared, although this interpretation is not universally agreed upon.³⁸ The use of the dual facing bust type was unique to Visigothic issues: it is not seen in any other contemporary "national" coinage, thus further instantiating a specifically Visigothic vision of royal authority.

The facing bust portraits of Reccared are smaller than their profile bust counterparts from earlier sovereigns, and are completely encircled by the coin legend, which reduces their size and therefore their level of detail. In the example cited above of the common facing bust sub-type, Reccared's image is highly stylized, with a single curved ribbed line indicating the king's hair and a triangular cross-hatched vestment in place of the comparatively elaborate cloaks seen in his father's issues. The king's name and royal title are still present, as is the name of the mint from which the coin was issued.

The reduction in the details of the portrait could be due to a number of factors, from the difference in minting location to a diminution in surface size, although not overall coin weight. Because of their nature as economic tools, coins cannot tell us everything about a polity, nor should they be read as detailed treatises on any kingdom's essential nature. However, changes over

³⁶ Christian Cuello, "Visigothic Coins in the Gale of the Australian Center for Ancient Numismatic Studies," *Journal of the Numismatic Association of Australia* 28 (2017), 28; George C. Miles, *The Coinage of The Visigoths of Spain Leovigild to Achila II* (New York: The American Numismatic Society, 1952), 46–48.

³⁷ Pliego Vázquez, *La Moneda Visigoda*, vol. 1, 156.

³⁸ See Pliego Vázquez, *La Moneda Visigoda*, vol. 1, 156–66 for an in-depth discussion of this period of transition. See also *ibid.*, *La Moneda Visigoda*, vol. 2, 55–76 for a catalog of coins issued during Liuvigild's reign. Miles suggests that the dual facing bust coins from Liuvigild's reign may be intended to represent Liuvigild and Reccared (as heir apparent), but qualifies this suggestion by stating that the continued use of dual facing bust coins in later Visigothic history was almost certainly meant to represent the current ruler on both sides due to the discomfort around hereditary rulership in the later Visigothic period. See Miles, *The Coinage of the Visigoths*, 46.

time in numismatic imagery were not accidents, and often coincided with changes in rulership practices or circumstances. At the risk of proverbially making a numismatic mountain out of a mole hill, it is interesting to note that after the conclusion of Liuvigild's vicissitudinous and often chaotic reign, numismatic portraits are reduced in size and lack a certain amount of refinement and detail in their execution. It is plausible that this change reflected an alteration in Reccared's situation as ruler, as the work of consolidating power done by his father and his own conversion to Catholicism in 587 put an end to many of the conflicts that had afflicted the kingdom in previous decades.³⁹ Reccared therefore may not have needed to visually instantiate his royal image through highly detailed depictions of traditional markers of power like the king's cloak or headgear to the same extent his father did, although a few of Reccared's issues feature a more elaborate garment with a *fibula* or shoulder clasp similar to numismatic portraits of his father and contemporary Byzantine imperial coinage.⁴⁰

Several decades later, in the middle of the seventh century, another Visigothic king may have looked to Liuvigild's coinage as inspiration for his own. Recceswinth ruled for four years alongside his father Chindaswinth until his father's death in 653, after which he ruled alone until his death in 672 CE. During Recceswinth's sole reign, the number of minting sites on the peninsula was reduced, with smaller mints closing in favor of the larger, more centralized mints of Toledo, Caesaraugusta (Zaragoza), Córdoba, Emerita (Mérida), and Ispali (Seville).⁴¹ Concomitantly, the weight and fineness of gold *tremissis* increased during Recceswinth's sole reign, leading to the "highest [average coin weight] during the entire period of Visigothic regal coinage."⁴² These coins, with their high gold content backed by an enlarged royal treasury, also featured a return to an older portrait type, the profile bust,

³⁹ This period in Visigothic history has been much discussed and hotly debated for decades. For more information on Hermenegild's rebellion and Reccared's conversion, see Roger Collins, *Visigothic Spain 409-711* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 56-61; for an alternate view of this turning point in Visigothic history see Isabel Velázquez and Gisela Ripoll, "Recopolis: *Vrbs Relicta*? An Historico-Archaeological Debate," in *Vrbs Extinctae: Archaeologies of Abandoned Classical Towns*, ed. Neil Christie and Andrea Augenti (London: Routledge, 2012), 341-50.

⁴⁰ Pliego Vázquez notes that, during this period, the garment seen on Visigothic numismatic portraiture is very similar, and likely related to, the Byzantine imperial garb featured on contemporary coins and other imperial images. See Pliego Vázquez, *La Moneda Visigoda*, vol. 1, 158; See Pliego Vázquez, *La Moneda Visigoda*, vol. 2, 91 fig. 93 d.1 and 95 fig. 100 a.1 for examples of Reccared's issues with more elaborate clothing.

⁴¹ Kurt, *Minting, State, and Economy*, 154.

⁴² *Ibid.* 163.

which had not been widely used since the reign of Liuvigild in the previous century.⁴³ Recceswinth did issue a very small number of facing-bust coins, but seems to have strongly preferred the profile-bust type, along with reinstituting the "cruz sobre gradas" imagery on the reverse of his profile-bust coins, which had similarly fallen out of favor after 586 (fig. 3).⁴⁴ Kurt proposes that these changes were made as a purposeful reference to Liuvigild as a reflection of Chindaswinth and Recceswinth's "desire to recapture past greatness after a period of decline."⁴⁵

This retrograde design, which ceased to be used after Recceswinth's death in 672, aligns with other aspects of Recceswinth's reign. The most famous extant object from Recceswinth's time as king of the Visigoths, the large hanging crown that bears his name from Guarrazar, is another instance of the king's use of the past to propagate his authority in the present. Not only were hanging crowns used by at least one previous Visigothic king, Suinthila (r. 621-631), they were also a centuries-old marker of sovereignty and spiritual power by the mid-seventh century.⁴⁶ Constantine the Great donated "a golden crown before/in front of the body [of St. Peter], which is a hanging lamp"⁴⁷ to the basilica of St. Peter's in the early fourth century, where it hung for at least 200 years, as evidenced by the image of the interior of St. Peter's on the early sixth-century Pula Casket which shows the *ciborium* of the basilica with a suspended circlet at its apex.⁴⁸ Later in the sixth century, images of hanging

⁴³ Kurt, *Minting, State, and Economy*, 106.

⁴⁴ Pliego Vázquez, *La Moneda Visigoda*, vol. 1, 167–68; see idem, *La Moneda Visigoda*, vol. 2, 350 fig. 578.2 and 354 figs. 583 a.1, 583 b.8, and 584.1 for some of the few examples of facing bust coins from Recceswinth's reign.

⁴⁵ Kurt, *Minting, State, and Economy*, 106. This proposition is backed by Pliego Vázquez, who labels this group as "las tipologías neo-leovigildianas." See Pliego Vázquez, *La Moneda Visigoda*, vol. 1, 167.

⁴⁶ A hanging crown similar to Recceswinth's bearing an inscription that included Suinthila's name was found alongside Recceswinth's crown in the Guarrazar hoard. Unfortunately, Suinthila's crown and accompanying pendant cross were stolen from the Palacio Real in Madrid in 1921 and never recovered. Photographic records of Suinthila's crown have facilitated the creation of several copies. For more on Suinthila's crown and its theft see Christoph Eger, "Krone und Kreuz König Svintilas. Westgotische Hofkunst und 'Plate-inlaying' im 6. und 7. Jahrhundert," *Madridrer Mitteilungen* 45 (2004): 449–506.

⁴⁷ "coronam auream ante corpus, qui est farus cantharus," *Liber Pontificalis* XXXIV, 17. Latin text from The Latin Library online, English translation by author. See also Laskarina Bouras and Maria G. Parani, *Lighting in Early Byzantium* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press and Dumbarton Oaks, 2008), 13.

⁴⁸ For more on the history and interpretation of the Pula Casket (also known as the Pola or Samagher Casket), see Jaś Elsner, "Closure and Penetration: Reflections on the Pola Casket," *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia* 12, no. 26 (2013): 183–227.

crowns were used to mark sacred space and holy people in the Ostrogothic-era mosaics of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo and the Byzantine-era mosaics of Sant'Apollinare in Classe in Ravenna.⁴⁹ Recceswinth's hanging crown is, therefore, part of a long historical lineage, of which the king must have been at least partially aware. Thus, his use of a historical form of numismatic portraiture may have been a part of Recceswinth's attempts to adopt and adapt older imageries and transcultural symbols to suit his contemporary needs.⁵⁰

These three kings, Liuvigild, Reccared, and Recceswinth, all made alterations to their royal numismatic portraits according to the circumstances of their respective reigns. This type of change is not uncommon, even today, when power shifts from one set of hands to another. What is unusual about Visigothic numismatic portraits is their status as the surviving singular bearers of Visigothic royal faces. As noted above, no contemporary images of a Visigothic king are known outside of coinage, and therefore these portraits must be considered as both practical identifiers of a coin's authenticity and important instances of the physical being of the king made manifest through imagery. While this lack of royal images from the Visigothic period may partially be the result of the destructive nature of the passage of time, it does seem that Visigothic kings were much less interested in creating monumental, permanent depictions of themselves than they were in creating aniconic representations of their sovereignty such as Recceswinth's hanging crown. The only exception to this aniconicity is numismatic portraiture, which perforce included portraits based on centuries of Roman and early Byzantine tradition. Understanding these portraits, therefore, is essential to fully

⁴⁹ For more on the images of hanging crowns in Ravenna and their relationship to the Visigothic examples, see Wells, *Regii Honoris Signum*, 176–78.

⁵⁰ Despite decades of scholarly assertions to the contrary, there is very little evidence of the use of the hanging crown within the early Byzantine Empire. While the Byzantines did use circular lighting devices that were visually similar to the Guarrazar crowns, no evidence of their use as markers of sacred space or people exists within the Byzantine context before the twelfth century. There are a few examples of hanging crowns depicted in consular diptychs from the sixth century, which tell us that the Byzantines were aware of this object type, but hanging crowns do not appear in any text related to early Byzantine court ceremonies and there is no material or textual evidence that suggests the hanging crown originated in Byzantium. For more on Byzantine consular diptychs, see Alan Cameron, "The Origin, Context, and Function of Consular Diptychs," *Journal of Roman Studies* 103 (2013): 174–207. For more on the nature of the hanging crown as a typological object and its relationship (or lack thereof) to the early Byzantine Empire, see Wells, *Regii Honoris Signum*, 181–86.

understanding Visigothic kingship, its material expressions, and how ideology and imagery related to rulership functioned across time and space.

IV. Conclusion

If we return to the beginning, to Sopatrus and the Ceylonese king, we are left wondering: if a royal or imperial image on a coin served as an index for the ruler himself, how effective was the numismatic manifestation of Visigothic kingship, with all its complexities and changes? If indeed the king was present wherever there was a coin that bore his likeness and (from the mid-570s) his name, how did Visigothic sovereigns present themselves to their subjects and to the world through their numismatic portraits? Because they are the only record of this royal self-representation, what can Visigothic coins tell us about the nature of Visigothic kingship and the connections between the Visigoths and the broader Mediterranean world?

Coins are, ultimately, practical objects, made to facilitate commerce, the collection of taxes, and the performance of important state fiscal duties like military payments. They are also, however, important and ubiquitous carriers of meaning beyond their economic value. As Henry Maguire notes, coins "pass[ed] through the permeable membrane that separated unofficial from official practices."⁵¹ In the context of our discussion of the nature of Visigothic royal portraiture, these "official practices" involved the promulgation of an idea of kingship, albeit on a physically small and often overlooked matrix (i.e., a coin face). Based on the evidence presented above, it is clear that Visigothic kings, particularly Liuvigild, Reccared, and Recceswinth, had both individual preferences and collective necessities to consider. From Liuvigild's adaptation of the Byzantine emperor's numismatic portraiture to Recceswinth's historically-minded portrait type, these men issued coins that reflected their personal desires as king as well as the contemporary situation of their kingdom. All three sovereigns took local circumstances and broader geopolitical trends into account when issuing coinage, the Byzantines looming large in their worlds as either ally or adversary, and occasionally as both.⁵²

⁵¹ Henry Maguire, "Magic and Money in the Early Middle Ages," *Speculum* 72, no. 4 (1997): 1039.

⁵² For more on the Visigothic-Byzantine relationship, see Jamie Wood, "Defending Byzantine Spain: frontiers and diplomacy," *Early Medieval Europe* 18, no. 3 (2010): 292-319 and Margarita Vallejo Girvés, *Hispania y Bizancio: Una relación desconocida* (Madrid: Akal, 2012).

Our Visigothic rulers did not, however, solely define themselves in relation to Byzantium, either positively or negatively. Through a multitude of means, including the minting of coins and the promulgation of royal numismatic portraiture, these men set about materially and iconographically defining kingship for themselves. While it is known that justice and mercy were the two primary traits that defined a good king according to Isidore of Seville, Liuvigild, Reccared, and Recceswinth visually defined their kingship through their numismatic portraits among other things.⁵³ In these portraits, we see three kings in royal vestments, borrowed from Rome and Byzantium but altered through their context within the Visigothic milieu. We see long hair, something associated with the Goths since the Imperial Roman period, and we see the use of the title “rex,” notably not “imperator” or “princeps.” Through the expansion and contraction of mint networks, we see kings exercising control over where, how, and how many coins were produced bearing their likeness.

It is not revolutionary nor novel to suggest that the Visigothic Kingdom of Toledo was a complicated, changeful, and contradictory place. That fact is evident to anyone with even a cursory knowledge of the kingdom’s history and ultimate demise. It is also not entirely groundbreaking to implicate the Visigoths within a system of material and ideological exchange that encompassed the contemporary Mediterranean world and beyond.⁵⁴ However, the place of coinage within both the local and “global” expressions of Visigothic royal identity remains understudied, and this chapter is intended to be a spur to further study in this realm. Because we lack other images of Visigothic kings from their own time, royal numismatic portraiture is an essential vector for understanding how Visigothic kingly authority was conceived, enacted, and manifested through objects. Further study of these miniature manifestations of sovereignty, including their production, use, and circulation both within and without the shifting borders of the kingdom, must

⁵³ “Reges a regendo vocati. Sicut enim sacerdos a sacrificando, ita et rex a regendo. Non autem regit, qui non corrigit. Recte igitur faciendo regis nomen tenetur, peccando amittitur. Vnde et apud veteres tale erat proverbium: ‘Rex eris, si recte facias: si non facias, non eris.’ Regiae virtutes praecipuae duae: **iustitia et pietas**. Plus autem in regibus laudatur pietas; nam iustitia per se severa est.” Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies* 9.3.4-5 in *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, ed. and trans., Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 200.

⁵⁴ Chris Wickham’s seminal work *Framing the Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean 400-800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) is perhaps the best modern example of this turn in the study of cross-cultural exchange during this period.

occur if we wish to understand the Visigoths as completely as our extant sources allow.

FIGURES



Fig. 1. Gold *tremissis* of Liuvigild, Toledo, 575-586 CE. American Numismatic Society 2015.48.6. Image courtesy of the American Numismatic Society database.



Fig. 2. Gold *tremissis* of Reccared, Toledo, 586-601 CE. American Numismatic Society 2015.48.39. Image courtesy of the American Numismatic Society database.



Fig. 3. Gold *tremissis* of Recceswinth, Emerita (Merida), 649-672 CE. American Numismatic Society 1937.56.6. Image courtesy of the American Numismatic Society database.

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