

Special exhibit

Rulers as represented on mediaeval coins

Throughout history, the form in which rulers have been represented on coins can be broken down into three identifiable basic types: 1) *restriction to a name or title* – only the name of the ruler holding the right of coinage is given, with no picture or image; 2) *the ruler as a type* – the bust or head shown does not represent an individual but stands only for the ruler's "office", the position of ruler as such; 3) *the portrait*; the ruler holding the right of coinage is depicted as a recognisable individual.

All three types were used in the Middle Ages, although the distinction between the second and third categories can be somewhat blurred.



Merovingians (c. 575-675)



Charlemagne, 768-814



Louis the Pious, 814-840

In the Carolingian coinage, for example, the two representations from the eight and ninth centuries differ noticeably from the earlier schematic representational style used by the Merovingians and identifiably bear the rudiments of individual features. In the period when each of them was minted, these coins were the exception; the standard denar of Charlemagne, for instance, looks like this.



The obverse merely bears the name Carolus (Latin: Carolus Magnus = "Charles the Great" or Charlemagne). The reverse bears the monogram of the mint – in this case, probably Paderborn.

Similarly, the *augustalis* gold coins of Emperor Frederick II are located somewhere between "type" and individual representation. It remains an open question whether it is a faithful



Frederick II, 1197-1250



(scale 2:1)



Aurelianus, 270-275



portrait of the emperor, only a likeness, or if it merely represents "emperor" as a type. Be that as it may, there is a clear reference to models from antiquity – the portraits of which were recognisable and identifiable.

The dignitaries depicted on the two pieces below merely represent a certain type of ruler, identifiable by their insignia. The individual represented can be discovered only by reading the inscription along the rim of the coin.



emperor



bishop

(scale 2:1)

The specimens below are quite different. In particular, the large silver coins that emerged in the 15th century used the new denominations' large surface area to bear individualised portraits – a trend which became even more marked in the ensuing period.



Naples



Vatican



Milan



Salzburg



Baden



Milan

Since then, coins or banknotes without lifelike or idealised individual portraits have become an almost universal feature of the design of coins and banknotes worldwide. Even in a multi-media world, however, portraits of rulers and leaders are often difficult or impossible to identify without an explanatory inscription.



Netherlands



Belgium

Further reading

Bernd Kluge, Numismatik des Mittelalters. Berlin/Wien 2007.

Deutsche Bundesbank, Mittelalterliche Goldmünzen. Frankfurt 1982.

Deutsche Bundesbank, Deutsche Taler. Frankfurt 1966.