

Pecuniary Profanities? Money, Christianity and Demonstrative Giving in the Early Middle Ages

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Introduction

Towards the end of the twelfth century, Godfrey of Viterbo (d. c. 1196) included in his *Liber universalis* the first known version of the so-called legend of the thirty pieces of silver: the story of the prior history of the coins for which Judas Iscariot betrayed Christ. According to Godfrey, these coins had enjoyed a long and eventful life. They passed from one great figure of Judaeo-Christian history to another, beginning with Abraham and Terah, and culminating in the gifts of the three wise men at the birth of Christ and the climactic payment to Judas. Godfrey knew he was playing fast and loose with some of the canonical details, not least a sudden shift from gold to silver, which he explained away with a claim that ancient usage interchanged both terms for gold. Nonetheless, by including this tale in his *Liber universalis*, he found a way to integrate the back and forth of monetary circulation into Christian history (Godfrey of Viterbo, *Liber universalis/Pantheon* XIV: Herold [ed.] 1559, col. 406–7).

Appropriation of money into Christianity was far from new — indeed, there was a tradition of identifying and calculating the value of the thirty pieces of silver and other biblical sums of money already in the eleventh century (Anlezark 2009:143–5) — but it had not been incorporated in quite such ambitious fashion beforehand. Godfrey’s account of the thirty pieces of silver struck a chord: it was the first of many, which eventually led to certain ancient coins being co-opted as supposed relics of Judas’s money (Hill 1905; Hook 1997; Cherry & Johnston 2015).

At much the same time as Godfrey wrote, the stained glass windows of Chartres cathedral were being crafted. Intended to speak to the man-on-the-street of c. 1200, these masterfully combined the earthy tones of contemporary trades and crafts with both a lofty medium and a divine message. Among the tasks undertaken by the population of the windows is money changing. Men bargain and gesture over coins and precious-metal objects in multiple scenes of sorting or offering money; in some cases coins are even shown being presented by the magi to the Christ-child and his mother as part of a lively yet harmonious assortment of business under episcopal and, ultimately, godly guidance (Williams 1993:103–38).

The part played by coin in Godfrey’s tales and Chartres’s windows was the result of centuries of parallel developments in religion and economy. Christianity had enjoyed an intimate relationship with material wealth from virtually its earliest days. As lucidly explored in several recent publications by Peter Brown, part of the new faith’s success rested on the extension of its appeal to diverse segments of society, and in turn on harnessing the resources each of those segments brought (Brown 2012, 2013 and 2015). Christianity shifted in the fourth and fifth centuries from being the religion of a mass of generally middling or poor devotees to one which attracted more and more of the empire’s super-rich. The largesse they brought into the orbit of the developing Church transformed its function in society, and established a strong blood-flow of material wealth — arterial and capillary — into and within the Church. The language of salvation slipped casually into commercial metaphors of debt: Prosper of Aquitaine at one point told his readers that ‘you have been bought, and you ought to pay the price of yourself, insofar as you can, so that by paying it you may become richer’

(emptus enim es pretiumque tui resolvere fas est, qua potes, ut solvens sis ditior. Prosper of Aquitaine, *De providentia Dei* ll. 507–8, Marcovich [ed.] 1989:36–7). Earthly and divine riches had a much more direct connection than is familiar (or indeed comfortable) in modern religious discourse.

Gifts of money in a religious setting are a particularly interesting element of this relationship. Use of money did not carry quite the same ideological baggage as in modern times, and was an accepted part of Christian infrastructure and expressions of devotion. At the same time, the universal quality of money (which could be used for any sort of transaction with anyone) posed a challenge. A handover of money was not automatically recognisable as a gift: it had to be imbued with a donative or religious identity by a specific act of giving. By this means the value of money shifted from the impersonal to the personal, from general to particular, and entered a sphere of sacred exchange.

Wealth in and of the Church

There were multiple directions in which the Church funnelled wealth during the early Middle Ages. Growth in the scale of Christianity necessitated an ever-larger infrastructure, and bishops, priests, churches, and monasteries all required support. Thus the Church in itself became a significant holder of land and moveable goods (Nelson 2009; Wood 2013). It also inherited and developed a role in guiding the spiritually sound management of money, including by safeguarding the less fortunate in society. *Pauperes* were not paupers in the modern sense, but rather the weak and powerless such as widows, orphans and the sick, who needed protection and material support from the Church through alms (Devroey 2006:317–28). Exchanges in the orbit of the Church could take on some of its sacred sheen by proxy (Theuws 2004).

Money had to come in if it was to go out. Numerous late antique and early medieval writers built on the admonition of Christ to ‘give to the poor: provide yourselves with a treasure in the heavens which does not fail’ (Brown 2015:20–33). Those with money were encouraged to give generously, opening new channels for the redistribution of wealth in society from its peak to its base; so much so that Odo of Cluny for one worried about the showy and competitive nature of almsgiving, grand in scale but openly geared towards enlargement of the giver’s status (Odo of Cluny, *Collationes*, I, Migne [ed.] 1844–64, CXXXIII, col. 548B). The churches of early medieval Europe established themselves as intermediaries in this process; conduits to the treasures of heaven. Almsgiving, originally a voluntary process, gradually became an obligation, closely associated with the solidification of tithes and similar renders (Tinti 2005; Shuler 2012). Payments to the Church were completely routine. When critiquing the bishop of York, it was the fact that he insisted on payment but provided no ministry that concerned the Venerable Bede, not the charging of payment as such (Bede, *Epistola ad Ecgbertum episcopum*, c. 7–8, Grocock and Wood [ed. and trans.] 2013:134–9). At the beginning of the eleventh century, Ælfric of Eynsham (d. c. 1010) took a similar view: he rebuked certain priests for unseemly and improper competition for soul-scot, a payment due to the priest who performed burial rites – but he had no quarrel with such payments within a priest’s own jurisdiction (letter for Archbishop Wulfstan (1006), c. 182–4, Whitelock et al. [eds] 1981:295–6). Burial was a particular source of contention. Gregory the Great had written to Ianuarius, bishop of Cagliari, about excessive burial charges in Sardinia as early as 598 (Gregory the Great, *Epistulae*, VIII.35; see Rowell 1977:25), while in England in 1086 William I adjudicated a property dispute between two churches in Sussex, including rights to burial dues (*sepultura*). When he came to the latter, the king commanded

not only that the relevant payments be handed over, but also that the bodies wrongly interred at one church should be exhumed and taken away for proper burial at the other (Bates [ed.] 1998:no. 146). Monetary payment was an integral part of medieval pastoral care.

The priests who vied ‘like greedy ravens’ (*swa swa grædige hremmas*) for the cash of the recently bereaved, and those who were forced to cart decomposing corpses about the Sussex countryside, are a reminder that the Christian Church of the early Middle Ages was a highly atomised entity. Individual priests, bishops and monasteries competed with one another for resources as well as for spiritual primacy — and the two were often inseparable. Clerics of the period tended to think in terms of the dues and wealth of their own community or institution, rather than ‘the Church’ as a whole. ‘The Church’ as a single institution was more prominent in admonitions to the laity, reminding them to pay tithes and other renders (as for example in Lothar I’s *Capitulare missorum* of 832, c. 9, Boretius [ed.] 1897:no. 202, 64); from the perspective of monks and clergy themselves, the questions were how income was to be divided among individual churches (sometimes only resolvable through intense rivalry and competition), and how their existing resources should be protected and structured. In particular, monasteries had a strong tradition of keeping careful records of their property and income, applying the same ideals that ordered and structured existence within the walls to dealings with the outside world (Devroey 2006:591–600; Feller 2009; Toneatto 2010).

The most elaborate manifestations of this principle are the polyptychs of Carolingian and post-Carolingian Francia — detailed enumerations of landed property and what was expected from its inhabitants, sometimes extending down to the names of entire peasant families (Davis 1987). Conducting a survey on this scale was no mean feat. It required marshalling a great deal of information — all for a document which would be outdated before long, as tenants died, renders were adjusted and properties were acquired, sold, leased or otherwise modified. But the principle was not simply practical. Knowing how much wealth a monastery had was of course enormously valuable, yet so too was stamping an impression of how that wealth was to be structured onto the monks, tenants and intermediaries. To craft a polyptych was to cement the status quo. The weight of divine responsibility which adhered to land, money and their management was manifested in a different way in late Anglo-Saxon England. Polyptychs as such were not commonly produced, but specific details on individual estates, expenses or agents’ responsibilities were entered solemnly into gospelbooks, liturgical volumes and other codices (for a list of such documents, see Dumville 1992:119–27). Again, recording the information was only part of the aim: placing it on record in the sight of God, as a guarantee of the good faith of tenants and reeves, was just as important (cf. Sabapathy 2014:55–60; Foot 2012).

Backlash against the intermingling of money and religion was tellingly sporadic. Simony was condemned in the Council of Chalcedon in 451, and in subsequent programmatic councils and admonitions, but accusations were rare and prompted by ecclesiastical politics as well as a sense of moral and spiritual propriety (Meier-Welcker 1952–3). In the mid-eleventh century, as is well known, simony surged to the forefront of debate, especially in the papal reform circle (Münsch 2006; McCready 2011:66–111; West 2015). Humbert of Moyenmoutier (d. 1061) took aim in his *Contra simoniacos* at what he saw as rampant simony. His diatribe portrayed candidates for ecclesiastical office competing like merchants at auction (Thaner [ed.] 1891). The cure of souls was reduced to a commodity like any other. The handovers of money which offended Humbert were nothing new, and were probably closer to gifts made after appointment than purchases as such, but presenting them as corrupted into commercial transactions was a highly effective rhetorical strategy.

The rise to prominence of simony in the eleventh century was thus tied to an ideological stance adopted by a group of clerics based in Rome. Their perspective was by no means shared by, let alone thoroughly imposed on, clergy across Europe, although the new concern with simony did gradually result in greater scrutiny of payments, especially in the context of ecclesiastical office. A rising tide of commerce, monetisation and urbanisation in the eleventh century contributed to the fervour of denunciations of simony as well as to a resurgence in conscious rejection of secular life (Naismith 2015). But these economic changes were more a trickle than a flood. The effect was to accentuate and sharpen developments which had been simmering already for centuries.

Religion and monetary mentalities

Money and religion had been tightly connected long before the eleventh century, and would be so right through the Middle Ages (and beyond). The nature of their bond presents a challenge to inherited views of the associations of money, for (simony aside) there are few qualms about expressing devotion in monetary terms. At Chester-le-Street in the tenth century, for example, a cleric named Aldred sought to gain entry to the prestigious monastic community, heir of St Cuthbert's monastery at Lindisfarne. He proved his devotion to the brethren by glossing in Old English the entirety of the Lindisfarne Gospels (London, British Library, Cotton MS Nero D.IV, f. 259r: for text, translation and discussion, see Brown 2003:92–104). In a colophon, Aldred explained his motivations for glossing each gospel. He glossed Matthew for the sake of God and St Cuthbert, and Mark for the bishop. But Aldred said he glossed Luke for the community and also for an advance on a payment of eight oras of silver with which to pay his entry fee, and John for the good of his own soul and in return for four oras of silver to give to God and St Cuthbert.

Aldred's note is just one especially vivid instance of money figuring prominently in religious action and writing. In the era between late antiquity and the twelfth century, money and religion mixed relatively freely. Indeed, the anthropologist Webb Keane has pointed out that the abstracted view of money as a polluting element in society, prevalent in an influential strand of modern historical and sociological literature, itself derives from a specific cultural-religious setting, based in early modern Protestantism (Keane 2008:37–8). Other societies in the modern world and in earlier times simply did not always share the perception that monetary interactions and non-commercial exchange (such as gifts) constitute separate, impermeable 'hostile worlds' which risk tainting one another if mixed (cf. Zelizer 1994:6–12; Parry & Bloch 1989). This concern about the dangerous interplay of money and gift can be traced through some of the most important contributions to understanding of the phenomenon, including the seminal work of Marcel Mauss in the 1920s (Mauss 1990:65, 76; for surveys of literature, see Davies & Fouracre 2010, especially the introduction and conclusion; Naismith 2012:252–64).

In general terms, the early Middle Ages differed on two counts. First, although there was a sharp sense of different kinds of exchange which should not intrude on one another, as with simony, there was less anxiety about the pernicious reach and influence of commerce. Even the Bible itself was rife with commercial metaphors for central spiritual concepts (Georgianna 1990:87–93; Naismith 2015:19–20). This did not necessarily make Christianity commercial. Jacques Le Goff has in fact argued quite the opposite: that the virtue of *caritas* (charity) structured medieval acts of exchange and fostered an ideal of giving and co-operation which contrasts with the emergence of capitalist thought in modern times (Le Goff

2012:142–50). Le Goff bases his case primarily on literature from the central Middle Ages and later, but the concept is a helpful one in approaching the earlier period (albeit deserving of considerably more elaboration than is possible here). The second significant difference which separates early medieval from modern notions of money and its use follows in many respects from the first: money was not straightforwardly the shadow of commerce. It changed hands commonly and without objection in the context of gift-giving, including in a religious setting. All the same, the suitability of coin was not taken for granted.

An illustration of the ambiguities which could arise comes from ninth-century western Germany. Einhard (d. 840), the biographer of Charlemagne, had arranged for relics of two Roman martyrs (Peter and Marcellinus) to be brought north. A local man named Willibert fell ill soon after their arrival at Michelstadt in Hesse. Desperate to win supernatural support against his affliction, he dispersed his property to various holy places, but with no effect. One of his servants then reminded Willibert that he had given nothing to the martyrs lately arrived from Rome. By this point all that remained to him was a single pig. Willibert commanded that the pig be sold and its price given to the martyrs, following what looked like his imminent death. But as soon as he made this command he began to recover. Ascribing his rapid resurgence to the intervention of Peter and Marcellinus, Willibert followed through on his vow by selling the pig and taking the forty silver pieces he got in return to Michelstadt.

What Einhard's story shows very clearly is the importance of context. The giving of money needed to be distinguished from the other types of exchange in which it could be used. Willibert was not buying the favour of God and His saints; he was donating a sum of money with a story behind it, as a concrete demonstration of his devotion and a show of support for the earthly servants of the saints. A few throwaway comments towards the beginning of Einhard's account betray how difficult it could be to make this distinction. Willibert was one among many visitors who approached the temporary shrine of the saints at Michelstadt. Einhard saw him offer the forty coins as if in gift (*quasi pro dono*), and approached to query who Willibert was and what he hoped to achieve by the presentation of such an offering (*a nobis fuisset interrogatus, quis esset, quique sibi vellet huiusce muneris oblatio*) (Einhard, *Translatio et miracula sanctorum Marcellini et Petri*, III.3; Dutton [trans.] 2008:93–4). Revealingly, Einhard switches here from the *dona* which other pilgrims offered to an accusation that Willibert was proffering *munera*: generally translated as 'gift', but with a hint of impropriety or bribery in the Carolingian age (Nelson 2010).

Whether it was the nature or the scale of the gift that troubled Einhard is unfortunately not made clear. But Willibert could not just place a pile of cash on the shrine of the saints without raising eyebrows. In such cases, the gift really was in the giving. Donors had to signpost the nature of what they handed over, or else they were at risk of their genuine gift being misconstrued (cf. Buc 1997). Three principal means of transforming money into a gift can be pinpointed: the act of donation itself, the way in which money was presented and the exact form of money which was given.

Rites of monetary donation

The first of these mechanisms was naturally the most obvious and prevalent. A giver present in person could partake in recognised forms and gestures of giving, such as placing a donation on an altar; he or she could also explain the meaning of any token to witnesses or questioners, should the question arise. Numerous texts like Einhard's describe acts of donation involving money in more or less detail, and these may be complemented by images

showing similar acts. In Figure 1 from early-twelfth-century Catalonia, for example, the three *magi* present dishes full of coins to Christ and Mary. Assessment of such sources is a challenge. On the one hand, there are widespread similarities in the postures adopted by donors in donation images: they might kneel or incline towards the recipient, handing over their offering or gesturing towards it (Beuckers 2002). It is entirely believable that these images do relate to how donors and recipients positioned themselves when making an offering; representations of giving may well have fed into how one actually gave a gift, especially in a public setting. But the common ground of donation images reflects shared artistic traditions going back to the late Roman period, and the emergence (especially in the ninth century and after) of a widespread but contextually specific repertoire for how to represent donations. In other words, it is unclear how much depictions of giving owed to artistic tradition and how much to contemporary, real-life practices (Körntgen 2001:324–434; Schleif 2012).



Fig. 1: Apse painting of the adoration of the magi from Santa Maria, Taüll, Catalonia, Spain (c. 1123), showing an offering of silver coins in dishes (Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona; author's photograph).

Textual descriptions of giving are prone to much the same difficulty (Jussen 2003; Davies & Fouracre 2010). All relevant accounts are preserved in compositions by authors with an agenda that led them to include such a description. A donation which was fitting, proper and carried out successfully helped cast the donor in a good light; an improper donation, or one which was tainted in some respect, could undermine those responsible. As perceptively explored by Philippe Buc (Buc 2001), rituals preserved in their written (and artistic) form are constructs: modern readers run up against the problem of distinguishing artifice in sources from the events of the early Middle Ages, which could of course be interpreted in as many different ways as there were participants or observers (MacLean 2006; Pössel 2009). Ultimately individual cases are inseparable from the context of their source, but the general

importance and prominence of donations and other ‘ritual’ acts in writing and art leaves little doubt that they did take place often, and that their cues were understood by contemporaries.

Dressed to impress: the forms of monetary donation

It is for this reason that the second and third ways of examining monetary donations loom rather larger, at least in the present context. The presentational form of a monetary donation could help establish its meaning for all concerned. It was, to use a modern analogy, the difference between a giant novelty cheque and a manila envelope filled with used notes. Often, therefore, when gifts of money were described in writing they were carefully stage-managed. Wills include several examples of specified forms of donation because the testator did not expect to be present for the act itself and needed to leave instruction. A vivid example occurs in the will of an Anglo-Saxon noblewoman named Wynflæd in the later tenth century, who asked that half a pound of silver coins should be given to a recipient in a specific cup (Whitelock [ed.] 1930:10–15 (no. 3); cf. Figure 1). In a similar way, the will of Bertram, bishop of Le Mans (d. 623), specifies that bequests of cash to individual recipients should be put in bags with labels naming the appropriate person (Weidemann [ed.] 1986:45–6). This is very close to the way in which late Roman and Byzantine emperors distributed monetary largesse, with ceremonial surrounding the actual handover of sacks of coin that recipients then had to drag or stagger away with (Liudprand of Cremona, *Antapodosis*, VI.10; Squatriti [trans.] 2007:200–2).

But arguably the most fascinating example of stage-managed ceremonial presentation of money in an ecclesiastical setting is one which can be identified archaeologically (Naismith and Tinti forthcoming; see also Naismith forthcoming). The so-called Forum hoard was discovered on the site of the House of the Vestal Virgins in Rome on 8 November 1883. Excavations at this time were proceeding so fast that little record survives of the early medieval building beneath which the hoard was found. The hoard itself, fortunately, has been preserved intact in the Medagliere of the Museo Nazionale Romano at the Palazzo Massimo alle Terme. It contained at least 830 coins, all but six of which had been made in England some 800 miles away. The most remarkable feature of the hoard is a pair of so-called hooked tags: fasteners which would once have held closed the bag containing the coins (Fig. 2). These hooked tags are made of solid silver (thus representing a considerable investment in themselves) and carry an inscription in niello: +DOMNO MARINO PAPAE, ‘for the lord pope Marinus’. What this appears to be is a parcel of money intended for donation to the pope by an Anglo-Saxon visitor to Rome in the tenth century.



Fig. 2: Silver and niello hooked tags from the Forum hoard (Rome, dep. 944×946), inscribed +DOMNO MA / RINO PPAE ('for the lord pope, Marinus') (with kind permission of the Medagliere of the Museo Nazionale Romano).

Further details of the hoard fill in details of the story. The date suggested by the latest datable coin in the hoard — issued in the reign of Edmund, king of the English (939–46), after his takeover of York in 944 — matches up with the pontificate of Pope Marinus II (11 November 942–May 946). Moreover, the origins of the more recent elements of the find give some clue to its origin, and possibly even the identity of the donor. The hoard includes issues from across England, but coins by London moneyers are especially prominent. The Forum hoard predates London's period of massive expansion in the late tenth century, meaning that its heavy representation in this find is unusually distinctive (Naismith 2013). It is enormously rare for a hoard to have a plausible association with a specific historical person or event, but these and other features of the quite exceptional Forum hoard allow an equally exceptional suggestion of who may have brought it to Rome: Theodred, bishop of London (d. 951×953). He is known to have made a visit to Italy in the years after 942, which matches the date of the hoard. No certainty is possible, but as a wealthy and well-connected bishop, Theodred would have had the means and, motive as well as the opportunity to come to Rome and present the Forum hoard to Marinus.

The 'gift-wrapping' of the Forum hoard indicates that it was intended to serve as a donation — although its eventual fate, buried in the heart of the ancient Roman Forum, hints that the gift either never made it to the pope, or was deposited in the ground very soon after being handed over. The normal expectation with such gifts was that they would be spent, or melted down and siphoned into new, probably ecclesiastical, uses: metallurgical analyses of papal coins from this period imply that the influx of gold and silver into Rome was not simply being added to the currency of the city (Naismith et al. 2015).

Intriguingly, the inscription refers only to the recipient; a highly unusual feature among early medieval donation inscriptions, which raises the possibility that the donor him or herself intended to be present when handing over the gift. Theodred may have had in mind the audiences with the pope that other bishops of the period enjoyed when they came to Rome: Sigeric, archbishop of Canterbury (990–4), mentioned pausing for lunch with Pope John XV at the Lateran during his visit in 990 (Ortenberg 1990:221–3), and the *vita* of Ulrich, bishop of Augsburg (923–73), states that Pope John XIII and the secular master of Rome, Alberic, welcomed him to the city (Gerhard of Augsburg, *Vita S. Uodalrici*, I.14 and 21, Berschin & Häse [ed. and trans.] 1993:214–17, 244–5). The bishop may have had both his own and his diocese's benefit in mind with this donation. Traditionally the Forum hoard has been identified as a tranche of Peter's Pence, although this was just beginning to emerge as a regular and institutionalised element of Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical infrastructure in the mid-tenth century (Loyn 1992:241–58; Naismith & Tinti forthcoming), and there is also extensive evidence for individual donations on this scale.

Money for donation

The Forum hoard is a unique survivor. No other treasure from early medieval Europe can be definitively identified as an (intended) donation, though of course many finds may have fulfilled this role, or included coins which at some stage had done so. One potential indicator of this might lie in which coins were actually presented. As in modern times, people often kept track of what sums of money came from which origin, and might treat them differently as a result, subverting the notionally universal quality of money (Zelizer 1994).

With the exception of a single unusual gold piece (a *solidus* of the Byzantine emperor Theophilus (829–42), by far the oldest in the hoard), there is no sign that the Forum hoard's contents were purpose-made, or unusual in any respect except their intended final use. Without the inscribed fasteners, it would be impossible to detect what background the hoard had. Some coins among the pennies could have had a specific story behind them, just like Godfrey of Viterbo's thirty pieces of silver or Willibert's donation to the Roman martyrs. A parallel seems to be attested in a brief charter from eleventh-century Le Mans. This records how a knight, Walter of Joué-en-Charnie, had abstracted a penny (*denarius*) from the income due to another friend of the monastery of St Victor, and when he had been convicted of this infraction laid the same coin (*ipsum denarium*) on the monastery's altar (Charles & Menjot d'Elbenne [eds] 1886, col. 235, no. 398). Treatment of general-purpose money in this individualised way in a religious gift was thus possible, but is normally impossible to detect among surviving specimens.

More amenable to identification are occasional examples of money which was made specifically with ecclesiastical donation in mind. Examples veer towards the extremes of the early medieval currency system. At one end are pieces of exceptionally high value: gold coins and large silver coins. Gold had been the principal metal for currency in the immediately post-Roman centuries, but between the late seventh and ninth centuries it was replaced by silver coins in Western Europe. Thereafter, gold was reserved for high-status transactions (Grierson & Blackburn 1986:326–31; Blackburn 2007). It was made into coins on an *ad hoc* basis, and even in coined form retained a close link with gold bullion. Foreign gold pieces were also widely used. One of the stained glass windows in Chartres, situated in the west façade, shows the adoration of the magi; following the text in Pseudo-Matthew

16:1–2, each of the three proffers a gold coin to Christ. Removal and restoration of the window, situated some ten metres above ground level, in 1975 allowed Françoise Perrot to discern that the gold coins were depicted in careful detail; enough to show that they were supposed to represent Islamic Spanish dinars of the late eleventh or early twelfth century, widely known and copied in twelfth-century Europe (Perrot & Dhénin 1985; Williams 1993:117–18) (Fig. 3). This depiction of contemporary gold pieces in the most sacred of donative contexts exemplifies one likely role of such coins. A famous English imitation of an early Abbasid gold dinar, minted in the name of Offa, king of the Mercians (757–96), first surfaced in Rome and may have been found there, perhaps brought to Italy as a result of the promise of 365 gold pieces per annum which Offa made to the pope in the 780s (Naismith 2012:113–14). The gold coins of Louis the Pious (814–40) all carried on the reverse the words *MVNVS DIVINVM*, ‘divine gift’, most likely referring to the similarity between the shape and size of the coins and the host used in the liturgy. This implies that the distribution of the coins may have taken place in a liturgical context (Morrison 1961; on arguments for dating see Grierson & Blackburn 1986:329–30). Other gold pieces minted in later times in England, France and Germany tended to follow the pattern of contemporary silver, but could have continued to fulfil a donative role. Such is also likely to have been the case for the even rarer large silver pieces. These are only known from two sources: Wessex under Alfred the Great (871–99), where silver coins were minted weighing over 10 grams and with the word *ELIMO[sina]* (‘alms’) inscribed on the reverse (Dolley 1954); and Denmark in the time of Sven Estridsen (1047–76), where a rare group of ‘double pennies’ was produced, modelled (like some other issues of the reign, especially from Lund) on Byzantine coins. The exact context of this last group remains obscure.

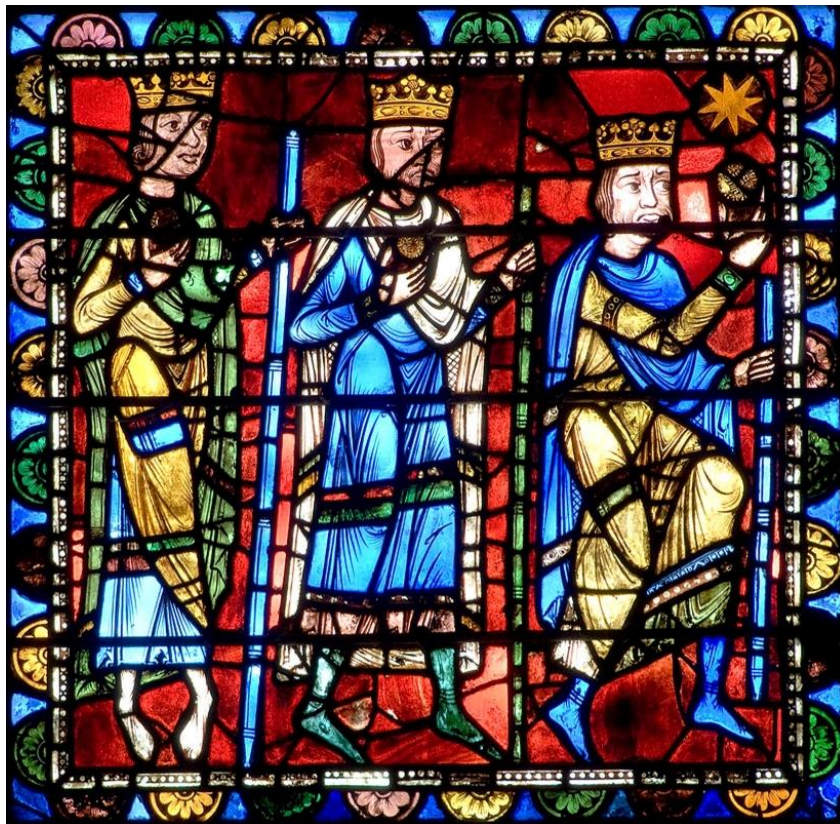


Fig. 3: The three magi offer gold pieces to Christ and Mary, the gold coins being modelled on twelfth-century Islamic dinars: Chartres cathedral, west façade (with kind permission of Stuart Whatling).

Coins such as these were probably made on behalf of the elite with specific donative contexts (very often ecclesiastical) in mind. At the opposite end of the scale, coins of lower value fulfilled a different purpose: facilitating almsgiving to the poor. These include rare Carolingian *denarii* made with the word ELIMOSINA inscribed on them (Morrison & Grunthal 1967:no. 53), and perhaps a group of pennies similar in appearance to the large ELIMO[sina] coins of Alfred mentioned above. Well-known almsgivers such as Robert II the Pious, king of France (996–1031), were celebrated for always having purses of pennies at hand to meet the needs of any they might come across, in church or elsewhere: in the words of Robert’s biographer, Helgaud of Fleury, the king ‘would eagerly hasten and move towards [paupers and lepers], and with his own hand give them a sum of pennies and with his own lips plant kisses on their hands’ (*ad hos avida mente properans, manu propria dabat denariorum summam et ore proprio figens eorum manibus oscula*: Helgaud of Fleury, *Epitoma vitae regis Rotberti pii*, c. 27, Bautier & Labory [eds and trans.] 1965:126–7). Other low-value coins such as obols or cut fractions may have functioned in a similar way in an ecclesiastical setting, though there is now nothing specifically to mark them out.

There is also some evidence that very small-scale monetary distributions may have been sub-numismatic; that is to say, lower in value than the regular denominations of precious metal currency. Even a silver penny or halfpenny had relatively high buying power. For these purposes, minute pieces of silver could also have been used. The venerable Bede at one point described the saintly king Oswald (634–42) breaking up a silver dish ‘into tiny fragments’ (*minutatim*) for distribution to assembled paupers ‘as alms’ (*aliquid elimosynae*) (Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, III.6, Colgrave & Mynors [eds] 1969:230–1). Aldred, the glossator of the Lindisfarne Gospels mentioned above, also indicated that small objects might have been used in such a context in the tenth century. When he reached the famous passage on the ‘widow’s mites’ — the smallest denomination in first-century Judaea, which a poor widow gave as a donation to the temple — in Mark 12:42, Aldred glossed the Latin *duo minuta quod est quadrans* with the Old English *tuoge stycas, þ[æt] is feorðung penn[inges]* (‘two *stycas*, that is a quarter of a penny’) (Skeat 1871:100). This passage has had a long and pernicious influence on understanding of numismatics and monetary terminology (beginning with Nicolson 1696–9, I, 107, who first applied the term *stycas* to the debased Northumbrian coins minted a century before Aldred’s time), for there is no indication that *stycas* related to coins at all: the word meant simply ‘small piece’ of something. It hence approximated Latin *minuta* quite effectively, and could in other contexts be used to gloss *frustum* (‘crumb’) (Bosworth & Toller 1972 s.v. *stycce*). Indeed, Aldred might even have been inspired by the passage in Bede just discussed, or others like it, as well as current practice.

Conclusion

The loose and relaxed role of money in the earlier Middle Ages owed something to its relative scarcity (at least in the form of coin) at this time. It is difficult to fear the pernicious effect of something which played a limited — sometimes very limited — economic role (Naismith forthcoming). Equally, gift-giving in an ecclesiastical context was probably not far removed from more ceremonial forms of secular giving (such as those described in *Beowulf*: see Naismith 2016), though secular gifts — save for gifts of land recorded in charters — are inevitably more obscure as the bulk of surviving evidence relates to the Church. Money could be found widely in both secular and ecclesiastical donative ceremonies, and moved seamlessly between the two: alms were given with the expectation of being repurposed, probably through the buying of food or other essential commodities.

The expanding quantity, complexity and effect of money gradually sharpened awareness of the impact of money, and quickened markedly in pace during the thirteenth century and after (Bolton 2012; Spufford 1988). But there were limits to the latitude given to money in religious settings already in the early Middle Ages. Above all, the universal quality of money had to be reined in and targeted. Coins could be used for anything, which was part of their attraction, albeit only with proper contextualisation and explanation. It was human action and perception which had the capacity to transform the stuff of worldly business into the currency of salvation. Monetary gifts were perfectly sincere and legitimate — but their nature had to be shown through any and all means available.

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