

The Story of an Irish Saint Portrayed on a German Jeton

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This short article is a follow-up on the recent purchase of a humble jeton whose design has as its pattern one of the most widely used coin images in eastern Germany in the Middle Ages.

For those who do not know what jetons are, they are coin-like pieces usually manufactured from copper, latten or brass and they were used, because of the difficulty using Roman numerals, throughout Europe from the 12th to 16th century to calculate accounts and are sometimes referred to as casting counters. The name jeton derives from the French word *jeter* - 'to throw or cast', since the jetons were placed 'cast' on checked cloths 'exchequer' or on lined tables or boards and moved in the same manner as beads on an abacus. Thus, accounts were cast in what became known as exchequers or counting houses in palaces, abbeys and homes of merchants. A checked cloth and a bag of jetons were the medieval pocket calculator.



The Irish Exchequer in the 15th century
Facsimiles of Irish Manuscripts, vol. III, pl. xxxvii
(www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)

The first large scale production of jetons appears to have begun in the French royal mints and later in the Royal Mint in England where their general sale to the populus generated revenue for the mints and therefore to the Crown. As demand increased, volume production spread to areas which had good sources of raw material with skilled workers and metal working facilities. Tournai in northern France and Nuremberg in Germany became the centres of jeton mass production. By the beginning of the 16th century Nuremberg had a virtual monopoly on the production of 'stock jetons' manufactured to specific designs to appeal to the various markets throughout Europe.

One of these markets was Würzburg in Bavaria - a neighbouring city to Nuremberg, which was also in a financial union with it. What would be more natural than to produce, for the fine merchants of Würzburg, a jeton or rechenpfennig, which they would be handling countless times a day, and which bore an image of their Patron Saint St. Kilian.

Saint Killian was one of the legendry Irish missionaries responsible for spreading Christianity throughout Northern Europe in the Dark Ages. He was born in County Cavan around AD 640 and spent his early formative years studying at various religious establishments in Ireland. Along with several companions he eventually set off for Rome to offer himself as a missionary. He along with his companions Colmán and Totnan received their Missionary Faculties from Pope Conon to preach in



Franconia. He finally established a base in Würzburg in Eastern Franconia. After a period, he converted Duke Gozbert to Christianity, but not his wife Geilana. The Duke's wife had been the widow of Gozbert's brother and Kilian persuaded him that such a marriage was unlawful in the eyes of the Church and that he should divorce her. On learning of this, during the Duke's absence, Geilana had the three missionaries beheaded in the town square and the bodies buried.

Eventually the bodies were unearthed and the Cathedral of Würzburg was built on the site of their martyrdom, their remains then interred in the vaults. The three bejewelled skulls were encased in a glass reliquary and to this day are paraded through the city on the Saint's day 8th of July.



Relic of St. Kilian, Colmán and Totnan, St. Kilian's Cathedral, Würzburg
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Kilian)

St. Kilian is usually portrayed wearing a mitre and holding a crozier and a sword - the instrument of his martyrdom. The sword is the distinguishing feature of this image which is used on statues, stained glass windows and was used on the coinage of the Bishops of Würzburg from the early 12th century through to the 18th century. Needless to say, it was also the image on the obverse of our jeton.



Late Medieval Nuremberg jeton portraying St. Kilian on the obverse
(NSI-NB Members' collections)