What's in a Name? The Bezant in Late Medieval and Early Modern England

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Abstract
Bezants – the gold coins of the Byzantine empire – were a part of the currency of England in the 12th and early 13th century. After the coins themselves disappeared, the word itself remained in literary and (presumably) verbal currency in Middle English texts and this paper will explore its context and significance in these. It then resumed its status as a physical object in early modern England as a type of presentation coin to be used by the monarch on ceremonial occasions.

Coins last a long time, not only as active participants in currency, or as artefacts in the ground, to be discovered, interrogated and displayed centuries after their initial manufacture and use. They also survive as words and names, as ideas and symbols, presumably continuous in usage, if sometimes hidden from attention as their stories evolved. One such survivor is the bezant, but the bezant as an object and term used specifically in England, from the 12th to the 18th centuries, as its purpose and role morphed in an intriguing way, while always retaining a sort of essential quality as something both valuable and in some way even sacred.

In the 12th and early 13th centuries the gold coinage of the Byzantine Empire was a familiar part of currency across much of Western Europe. References to it utilised the Latin term *bisantius*, or a vernacular derivation thereof[1]. Information about it is particularly prominent in English sources, remote from the empire itself, a consequence of England's unusually developed and preserved administrative record keeping. English records depict bezants being referenced and used in a range of contexts and functions and a recurrent, if not necessary, feature is their use in what might be seen as ceremonial contexts, where the use of a gold coin gave extra resonance even to a relatively low-value transaction: an annual due or a quitclaim payment, for example[2]. The bezant payment was a glamorous

1 The use of the term *bisantius* can be traced back to at least the tenth century in Italy; Niermeyer 1984: 99, though it does not seem to be familiar in England until the early twelfth century. Latham 1980: 61 has 1125 as its earliest example. Quite how and why this word became the default term for Byzantine gold coinage in the Latin world does not seem to have been explored or explained.

2 See Cook 1999b.

way of acknowledging a feudal or tenurial relationship or a transferral of rights or ownership relatively cheaply, but with an aura of extra significance bestowed by its nature as a golden and relatively splendid object. One might quote as an example of many such cases an occasion in September-October 1198 in Norfolk, in an arrangement between Adam fitz Robert and John fitz William over forty acres of land in Tibeham. As part of the settlement Adam's elder brother Roger had to make a formal surrender of his and his heirs' claims to the land in question: he came into court *(venit in curia*) and quitclaimed the said land to John in return for one bezant, which was given to him (*quod ei dedit*)[3].

In passing, it can be noted that this sort of semi-symbolic usage of the bezant was not a purely English phenomenon. Evidence from the Norman Rolls suggests it was prevalent in north-eastern France and it can also be encountered in the German world. When Count Siboto II of Falkenstein founded the abbey of Weyam in 1133, placing it under the jurisdiction of the archbishop of Salzburg, it was stipulated that if any of the archbishop's successors dared to use Weyarn for any purpose other than that which Siboto II had intended, the closest living member of the count's family had the right to redeem the foundation by placing a bezant upon the altar of St. Rupert in the cathedral of Salzburg[4].

At a much grander level, bezants and other gold coins were regularly used by the king to make his offerings in religious ceremonies and it is this latter role that would have an extensive afterlife. So, in 1179 the custodians accounting for the lands of the Honour of Arundel in Sussex were allowed first 40s. for 20 bezants released to Hugo de Tusculano, and another 14s., this time for 7 bezants offered by King Henry II himself during the Pentecost service[5]. In the 1230s and 40s evidence of the use of the bezant as a royal offering piece becomes very clear, building on the occasional earlier mentions in the Pipe Rolls. Henry III was enthusiastic about using gold coins to give as offering pieces during important church festivals. The Fine, Liberate and Close Rolls all record numbers of such: for example, in the Liberate Rolls for 1237 14s. 8d. was paid for 8 bezants bought for the king's use, a rate of 22d. a bezant[6]. In 1238, 40 bezants were bought for £.4 to use at Winchester at Christmas[7].

In the 1240s and early 1250s Henry III sought aggressively to accumulate gold in his treasury, most likely sweeping up most of England's bezant stock in the process[8]. There is next to no trace of bezants in the sources where they had previously occurred in the second half of the 13th century. Instead, new foreign coins took over their former role, in the shape of, initially Florentine florins and

3 Dodwell 1950: 81, no. 188.
4 Freed 1984: 14.
5 *Pipe Roll for the twenty-fifth year of Henry II 1178-79*: 38.
6 *Calendar of the Liberate Rolls Henry III, vol. 1, A.D. 1226-1240*: 225.
7 *Calendar of the Liberate Rolls Henry III, vol. 1, A.D. 1226-1240*: 256.
8 See Carpenter 1986 and Carpenter 1987.

then French *écus*[9]. This was not, however, the end of the story of the bezant in England. As an object it was, at least for a while, no longer a factor, but it remained useful as a word and as a concept, something glittering, valuable and worthy of being offered to God.

'Bezants bright'

Over the course of the 13th century the term bezant disappeared from the sort of administrative, legal and financial records in which it had previously been such a feature. However, it remained a word in relatively common use across a range of written genres in Middle English: religious, historical and literary. The University of Michigan's online *Middle English Compendium* includes at least 44 different texts in which the term bezant is used[10]. Only one of these, from the dialogue *Virtues and Vices* of 1225, a reference to *gildenene besantes* (golden bezants), originates at a time when actual bezants might have been available in England[11]. All the others range in date across the 14th and 15th centuries, from 1325 to 1500, with the majority (over 30) from 1400 or later, this more likely reflecting the greater quantity of texts that were written and survive in that period, than resulting from any expansion in the word's familiarity.

These references can be categorised in a number of ways. In religious texts the term is used as the default Middle English word for a range of coins and monetary items from the Vulgate, the Latin Bible, not all of them originally gold coins: *aureus*, *talentum*, *argenteum*, *dracma* and *mina*. This is made explicit in glossaries and word-lists such as the *Promptorium Parvulorum* (1440), *Catholicon Anglicum* (1483) and the *Medulla Grammatice* (1425)[12]. This practice can be seen applied in the early Wycliffite English bible translations from the 1380s, for example, as in this translation of Matthew 25.20: «Lord, thou bitokist me fyue talentis or besauntis», where the gloss is explicitly part of the text, as also occurs in its rendering of Luke 15.8: «What womman hauynge ten dragmes ether besauntis»[13]. 'Bezant' is positioned as the familiar term, to be used to translate relatively obscure biblical coin names. Other religious texts that quote and allude to such references also use bezant as the standard English translation, as with an early example from 1325, «He bydalf his besaunt vnder eorþe», from *The Southern Passion*[14]. The huge religious poem *Cursor Mundi*, written in Northumbria in

9 See Cook 1999a

10 Middle English Compendium (umich.edu) [accessed on 30/07/2024]

11 Holthausen 1888, 1921; reprint 1967: 159.

12 Mayhew 1908; reprint 1987: 33; Herrtage, Wheatley 1881; reprint 1987: 29; McCarren, Ritter 5 August 2020.

13 Forshall, Madden 1850 or Lindberg 1959-97, at Ezek.45.12, 1 Esd.2.69 (both for minas), Matth.25.20 (for talent) and Luke 15.8 (for drachmas)

14 Brown 1927; reprint 1987: 620.

the early 15th century, retold world history from the Creation to Doomsday, references Joseph being sold into slavery for «tuenti besands»[15]; In other texts 'bezant' is used to denote a mental or spiritual gift, as here: «Þe besaunt of grace is takyn fro hym þat hydeth it in slowthe», in *Jacob's Well* of c. 1450, a treatise on the cleansing of a man's conscience[16], and again «She multipliynge euery daye wiþ a besy labour þe besaunte þat was taken to hir», from *Three Women of Liège* of similar date[17].

Some late medieval texts preserve the use of the term from its original context. In about 1460 an English translation was made of the Register of Osney Abbey, preserving the bezant references in the 12th and early 13th century charters it included (e.g., «They ofte.to offer oone Besaunte of goolde»)[18]. Similarly, the word is also found in some early English language history writing, where it might well be a straightforward continuation of the source material. «Viftene þousend besans he sende hom» (fifteen thousand bezants he sent home), is a comment in the *Metrical Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester*, from the 1320s, relating to events of the First Crusade[19]. The c. 1453 Middle English translation of the Norman-French *Brut* chronicle describes the reception in London given to Henry V after the Battle of Agincourt:

> And when he come into Chepe, pe Condites ranne wyne. And on Þe gret condit were xij Apposteles, 20 syngyng "Benedic, Anima mea, Domino!" and xij kynges knelyng, castyng doune oblays, and welcomet hym home. And Þe cros in Chepe was riolly arrayet like a Castell with toures pight full of baners, and Þer-in Angeles syngyng' Nowell nowell!' gyvyng besandes of gold to Þe Kyng[20].

This is a tantalising reference – what were these bezants?

A rare reference to the original meaning of bezant comes from Thomas Wey's *Itineraries* of c.1470, commenting on Venetian Candia: «At Cande ye schal haue v. torneys and sum tyme vj., as the sovereyne wyl sett hytt. There they haue besavntys clepyd pepper; a pepper ys worth xxxij torneys», taking notice of the late medieval perperon, a monetary unit that was the last descendant of the bezant in its glory years[21].

Bezants appear with some frequency in romance texts, where it's newer, generic status as meaning broadly a valuable golden coin, proved a useful one. One of the earliest, the *Romance of Richard Coeur de Lion* (derived from an

15 Morris 1874-78; vol. 1, line 246. See line 1365, for a more metaphorical use of the term.

16 Brandeis 1900; reprint 1973: 114.

17 Brown 2008: 148. See also Greet 1927; reprint 1987: 370, of *c.* 1443: «Þei schulde not execute into goostly wynnyng þe hool summe of þe besauntis whiche þou hast to hem betaken».

18 Clark 1907 and 1913; 119 and 173.

19 Wright 1887: 604, line 8467.

20 Brie 1908; reprint 1987: 558.

21 Bandinel 1857.

Anglo-French text, written c. 1300 but subsequently much amended and expanded), may sit at the borders of history and romance. The reference «Þe spye he gaff an hundrid besauntes» is not actually out of the question for Richard I's reign[22].

Several 15th-century texts, such as the *Prose Alexander* of c.1400 ('The grete lordes.tuke fourty thowsandez of besandez')[23] and Henry Lovelich's *History of the Grail* of c.1450 ('It hath me Cost..More thanne xv thowsend besaunz')[24] reference gold bezants in the hundreds and thousands and echo perhaps some memory of Henry III's bezant store[25]. Probably the most familiar Middle English text of all, Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1470) has such a reference: «A ryche cerclet of golde, worth a thousand besanntis»[26]. Other still familiar late medieval English writers and poets John Langland and John Gower also use the word at least once[27].

In the literary context 'bezant' is often paired with a descriptive term: they are most frequently 'gold' or 'bright', sometimes both. Referencing bezants explicitly as gold is common: beginning in the earliest reference quoted here, the *gildenene besantes* of *Virtues and Vices* of 1225 (see note 11), along with the Osney register's *Besaunte of goolde* and the *Brut*'s *besandes of gold*. Other such references occur in the English *Romaunt of the Rose* (1425), sometimes ascribed to Geoffrey Chaucer («Though he have of gold many besaunt»)[28] and the devotional work by Robert of Brunne, *Handlyng synne* (original version 1303): «Thou hast besauntes of golde redy»[29].

The second common associated term was 'bright', in some version of *bezauns briht* – bright bezants. A religious poem of c.1390 known as *Tarry not till tomorrow* seems to be the earliest appearance of this usage: «Ȝif þou bragge for þi Bezauns briht»[30]. A range of other texts use a similar formulation, as for example in *The Romance of Sir Degrevant*: (c.1440): «Hir bed was of asure… With gold of Sypirs was dight, Brad besantes full bryghte»[31]. Variations of the phrase are also found in the devotional poem *The Pricke of Conscience* of c.1425 (bryght besandes), the alliterative *Morte Arthur* of c.1440 («besauntez and oþer bryghte stonys») and the *Castle of Perseverance* of c.1450, the earliest surviving full-length

22 Weber 1810: line 6589.
23 Westlake 1913; reprint 1971: 14.
24 Furnivall 1874, 1875; reprint as one vol. 1973: 80.
25 See also Zupitza 1883-91; line 4856: «An hundred besaunce y ȝif þer-to», written in c.1330.
26 Vinaver 1944-47, vol. 1: 175.
27 Kane 1960: 7; Macaulay 1900-1; vol. 1: 455 («As we rede that he spedde, The which his lordes besant hedde And therupon gat non encres»).
28 Kaluza 1891: line 5592.
29 Furnivall 1901, 1903; reprint as one vol. 1973: line 6944.
30 Brown 1924: 194.
31 Casson 1949; reprint 1970: line 1499.

English-language play («Þi bak schal be betyn with besawntis bryth»)[32]. One work, *Wynnere and Wastoure*, uses both of the standard qualifiers: «A caban was rerede, Alle raylede with rede the rofe and the sydes, With Ynglysse besantes full brighte, betyn of golde»[33]. Note these are, somehow, specifically English bezants.

'Bezant' was also employed as a comparative, to indicate how bright, valuable and desirable something was, as in this 13th century Middle English lyric from Cheshire[34]:

> I haue to a semly that i bi sete send mine sonde selliche sete.
> Oat is brithure in bur len basote ant bete yif that burde haues broken. best is to bete.
> godli greythet vnder gere. wid gomen i the grete geynes noth for a gab grimeli to grete
> le laic of that leuedy me is loth lete. hire loue is ful lefly in lond as I Lete».
>
> (To a beautiful lady on whom I have set my heart I have sent my gift, splendidly mounted. It is brighter in bower than a bezant, and better; if that woman has broken [it], it is best to repair [matters])

In the French-language allegory *Le Roman de la Rose*, the bezant similarly appeared, to indicate the splendour of the apparel of the figure of Richesce, Wealth, whose belt featured golden studs:

> Li clou furent d'or esmere,
> qui furent el tesu dore;
> si estoient gros et pesant,
> en chascun ot bien un besant»
>
> (The studs that were on the cloth of gold were of purified gold; they were so large and heavy, each one was worth a full bezant [lines 1081-84]).

The Middle English translation, as noted sometimes ascribed to Chaucer, echoes this usage: «The barres were of gold ful fyn. In everich was a besaunt wight of gold»[35]. This is also an example of 'bezant' being used to describe an ornament or decorative item, an approach found in several texts, often linked with brooches. The alliterative Morte Arthur (c.1440) used the term in a similar way: «With rebanes of golde, Bruchez and besauntez and oþer bryghte stonys»[36]. In *Le Morte Arthur* (c.1500) King Arthur sits «Rychely crownyd With

32 Hanna, Wood 2013: 245; Krishna 1976: 128; Eccles 1969: 95.
33 Blandeau 2013.
34 Pickering 1992: 165.
35 Kaluza 1891: line 1106.
36 See note 31.

many a besaunte, broche, And be»[37]. These types of usage set up the development of bezant as a heraldic term for gold disc.

In the English *Song of Roland* of c.1500 bezants and brooches are paired somewhat differently virtually as a poetic synonym for coins and jewels: «He that saithe I am treytor and tok of þe hethyn.broche or bessant, eny harm to done», though in this context, «broche or bessant» might just mean jewellery or coin[38]. In the English translation of Ralph Higden's *Polychronicon* (1387), there is a similar scenario of 'bezant' standing for coin alongside other valuable items: «In anoþer place he dede besaundes, broches, and rynges»[39].

However, and significantly, bezant references were sometimes found in a specific context, its use as an offering piece. In this capacity it features in the early 14th century *The Seven Sages of Rome*: «He scholde brenge a besaund to offring»[40]. Similarly in the c. 1400 *King Alexander*, Alexander himself 'ȝaf þe bisshoppe, to gode hans,/ Riche beiȝes, besauntz, and pans'[41]. Already quoted above is the *English Register of Osney Abbey* of around 1460 records 'The prelates in þe chapiter of Seynte John of Colchester to come they ofte to offer oone Besaunte of goolde þere into þe hande of þe president', preserving perhaps a former custom from the days of actual bezants. In *King Ponthus* (c. 1450), the king's defeated rivals «be made tributorye, and euery hede pays a besaunt of gold»[42].

Thus, the disappearance of actual bezant coins in the 13th century did not terminate the role of the bezant in England. Throughout the 14th and 15th centuries it remained a familiar notional object at least among the literate classes, a gold coin, precious, shimmering and bright. The texts that use it range across the regions and dialect groups of England and in at least one case Scotland[43]. It was the routine Middle English term to be used for more obscure coin names when translation was required. It was used in epic and romance to indicate actual money payments, but also for more representational exchanges, symbolic offerings in ceremonial contexts. In the 16th century this latter aspect would come to dominate and the bezant would furthermore come to regain its former status as a physical object, in the shape of the 'king's bezant'.

37 Bruce 1903; reprint 1988: 96.
38 Herrtage 1880; reprint 1973: line 411.
39 Waldron 2004: 19.
40 Campbell 1907: 88.
41 Smithers 1952; reprint 1961: line 3103
42 Mather 1897: 95
43 See Amours 1892 and 1897: line 367 («Hir belle was of plonkete… Botonede with besantes»).

'The king doth offer the besant'

As noted above, English kings in the 12th and 13th centuries were accustomed to make ceremonial religious offerings on holy days in the form of gold coins and in particular of bezants. That great princes should if at all possible offer in gold was an ancient practice and bezants were the most accessible form this could take at that time. At some point in the 16th century the English king would again be offering a gold bezant on such occasions. What is so far missing is clear evidence that the term 'bezant' had remained in use at court in this context, despite the disappearance of the coins themselves. Its survival is a plausible scenario, but explicit evidence would be necessary to assert it definitively and it is perfectly possible that this evidence exists in source material relating to the royal household and is waiting to be noticed. An alternative scenario would be the adoption in the 16th century of the term from its general usage in the later medieval period as outlined above.

It is perhaps worth noting that a similar possible trajectory of usage can also be seen in France, where the bezant also developed a specific context. This was during the French coronation ritual. Coins played one very specific role in the coronation ritual of the kings of France. The earliest evidence comes from the thirteenth-century texts known as *Ordines* which give details of the ceremony. It is at this time that the French coronation *ordines* become distinctive and different from the relatively generic coronation formulas of the early medieval period. Two specific aspects define this difference: the role of the 'Twelve Peers' of France and the establishment of the offering made by the king, and indeed the queen when she was being crowned, either alongside the king or in her own ceremony. This offering occurred relatively late in the ceremony, after the coronation rites themselves, during the *offertorium*. The form of offering is made clear in all three of the *ordines* that appear to date from the reign of Louis IX: the *Ordo* of Reims, the *Ordo* of 1250 and the Last Capetian *Ordo*[44].

The offering consisted of bread, a silver flask or vessel of wine and thirteen gold coins, seemingly a commemoration of the Last Supper, with bread, wine and the participants (Christ and the Twelve Disciples). The earliest of the texts, the *Ordo* of Reims of *c.* 1230, specifies *XIIIe aureos*, translated in the French versions of the text as *deniers d'or*, with one manuscript of the Latin version adding *bisancios* over the word *aureos*[45]. This is echoed in the *Ordo* of 1250[46]. The Last Capetian *Ordo* comes from late in Louis IX's reign and was probably first used for the coronation of Philip III. It would be hugely influential in all subsequent French coronation rituals, which used it directly or, from the late 14th century, adapted it. The established description of the royal offerings here is «*tredecim*

44 The texts of these and other medieval *ordines* is published in Jackson 1995, vol 2.

45 Jackson 1995: 333 and 340.

46 Jackson 1995: 363.

bisantes aureos (*XIII bisans d'or*)» and it makes explicit the participation of the queen (*Et regina similter*)[47]. This terminology survives in the *Ordo* of Charles V (1364) and the *Ordo* of Louis XI (1461)[48].

The *Ordo* of Charles VIII (1484) clarifies how this term was translated into practice since it was, obviously, long since Byzantine gold coins had been available: «treze escus d'or pour besons, selon les anciens livres»[49]. How long the contemporary gold écus of the French kings had been used as substitutes is not clear, but probably from the early 14th century, if not earlier. From 1547 they had shifted to being specially-made coins, similar in design to the largesse jettons scattered among the crowd[50].

In England, the bezant had no part to play in the coronation, but it still came to be a feature of the ruler's encounter with God. For some of the 16th century the existence of something known as the 'royal' or 'king's bezant' can be found in a range of sources. The earliest considered here is a book of guidance for the royal household probably compiled and added to by John Norris, a gentleman usher under Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary I, perhaps soon after Mary's death in 1558. He had joined Henry VIII's household in around 1536 and died as late as 1577[51]. Not published at the time, it remained in manuscript until the 21st century, but it nevertheless appears to have lain behind the accounts of royal ceremony that were used by many later authors. Norris describes in detail the form of these ceremonies, as they were performed during his court life. The ceremonial norms are set as if a king, prince and cardinal were present, seemingly referring back to Henry VII's reign, the last time when this was an option.

It should be emphasized that ceremonies such as these were not private devotions. Fundamentally, the two routine occasions for early modern rulers to present themselves publicly to their subjects in a formal way were public dining and religious attendance. So, at the English court the monarch's visit to the Chapel Royal on Sundays and major feast-days was a high-profile and fundamental part of court and public ceremonial, as it had been for centuries.

According to Norris's guidance, one of the important responsibilities of a gentleman usher in attendance on the king was to:

> have allwaie in a redynes with him the kynges offeringe as shall appertayne for that daie, which is commonly for Sundayes and holy daies a noble in gowlde, for the king offereth but only golde on Sundayies and holy daies. The which golde shall be taken to the greatest estate there being presente which shall kisse it and delyver it to the kinge when he hath kissed the patente of the chalice knelinge one his knees which will receive it of him and offer it.

47 Jackson 1995: 407-447.

48 Jackson 1995: 508 and 551.

49 Jackson 1995: 610-11.

50 See Jackson 1986: 22 and 49-53.

51 Edited, published and discussed in Kisby 2003.

The guidance is, to a considerable degree, a compilation and not wholly straightforward – details for Twelfth Night and Candlemas are given twice, in slightly different forms, for example. The coin referenced for offerings throughout is the noble of 6s. 8d., a coin that has ceased to be issued in 1464. It was replaced by a new coin, the angel, also worth 6s. 8d. and conceivably these were coins used in these ceremonies under the early Tudors, since 'noble' had instead become a term for the sum of 6s. 8d. (80 pennies), rather than a coin name. After 1526, the angel was revalued upwards and a new coin, known as the George noble, was introduced to be worth 6s. 8d., though it was produced in small numbers and only briefly – perhaps specifically to provide a stock for ceremonial use. Whatever the answer to this interpretation issue, it would seem that specific contemporary coins are in use. However, just once in the guidance, a different term appears. On Palm Sunday the king «doth offer the besant, which is delivered by a gentleman usher to the noblest personage that is present. And he to give it to the king»[52].

This might mean that the term was the standard one used in the royal household for the king's offering. However, note this is 'the besant', not 'a besant', which would appear to imply a specific item. It is possible, therefore, that the 'besant' here is a specific and maybe relatively new item, part of a slow shift in the early modern period to replace currency coins with purpose-made objects, with the term 'bezant' shifting from a name that gave a special status to ordinary things, to a special thing in itself, just as occurred in the French coronation ceremony. It is also possible that the use of the specially-made bezant and normal coins coexisted, used in different contexts, as will be shown below.

The next source on the bezant is a retrospective one, the result of the 17th-century antiquary Elias Ashmole's investigations into the history of the Order of the Garter. This provides an account of the bezant's role in the Garter ceremonial and he is able to quote sources for Elizabeth I's bezant «to be of £.7 value», which clearly shows her bezant to be an individual purpose-made object, a singleton item[53]. The king and/or the queen's bezants were each unique things, one-off items made for repeated use. As will be detailed, they became large, elaborately-engraved golden discs offered at the appropriate time during major public religious services attended by the monarch. After the service the bezant would be redeemed by payment of the equivalent value in ordinary money, the bezant itself returning to the custody of the officials of the royal household until the next such occasion for its deployment, as a reference to «the *Kings Offring* of the *Bezant* not yet redeemed» makes clear[54]. The most explicit statement of this procedure occurred, as so often, when it was in doubt, which is where Elias

52 Kisby 2003: 27.

53 Ashmole 1693.

54 Ashmole 1693: 585.

Ashmole's Garter investigations become relevant, as these revealed just such a controversy.

> In Queen *Elizabeth*'s Reign, it appears the *Bezant* was *Offered* by her, and redeemed of course (so also at sundry times since) and noted (*an.* 2. *Eliz.*) to be of 7 *l.* value. But at the Installation of the Duke of *York* at *Windesor, an.* 11. *Iac. R.* there was a question proposed to the *Dean* and *Canons*, whether if the *Soveraign* should offer his *Bezant*, it might be redeemed or not? Their answer then was, that whatsoever was there offered, became the *Dean* and *Canons* without redemption, whereupon the *Soveraign* waved offring his *Bezant*, and offered both *Gold* and *Silver*[55].

So, it would seem that Elizabeth had a purpose-made bezant worth £.7 from at least the second year of her reign, which suggests one was made for her personally, but also suggests it was no novelty, but the continuation of an established practice and that her siblings Edward VI and Mary I and father Henry VIII may well have each had their own bezant, as her successor James I certainly did. The confusion Ashmole records came about because of Elizabeth's propensity to hold Garter events in London, rather than out at Windsor. Ashmole discovered a note that seemed to clarify this:

> And besides, concerning this thing, there is an Entry made of a passage (upon the *Register* of the *Order*) which hapned *an.* 6. *Car.* 1. *That whereas in other places* (besides *Windesor) the* Soveraign *is wont to offer a certain golden piece (vulgarly called a Bezant) to be redeemed afterwards, at a certain price*; *The* Usher *of the* Black Rod *having sometime been admonished, that in these services there is no redemption to be made, never presents the* Bezant *at* Windesor *to the* Soveraign, *but* Gold *and* Silver *of English money*[56].

Much more is known about the bezant of James I from a number of sources. The most important is the great antiquarian William Camden's *Remains concerning Britain* of 1605. In this Camden made a brief but broad sweep across the role of the bezant in English and European history, drawing on references in Anglo-Saxon charters and later medieval texts, before focussing on the ceremonial bezant of the royal court:

> a great piece of gold, valued at fifteen pound, which the king offereth upon high festival days… which anciently was a piece of gold coyned by the emperours of Constantinople, but afterwards there were two purposely made for the King and Queen, with the resemblance of the Trinity, inscribed 'In honorem sanctae Trinitatis' and on the other side the picture of the Virgin Mary, with 'In honorem sanctae Mariae Virginis'[57].

55 Ashmole 1693: 582.
56 Ashmole 1693: 582.
57 Camden 1870:198-199.

Camden goes on to say that these two bezants were used until the first year of James I's reign, when two more were made, to replace these older versions. It is certainly the case that James I ordered the creation of two new bezants for himself and his queen, so there seems little reason to doubt the solidity of Camden's knowledge. In the mint warden's accounts for 1605, eighteen months or so after the king's accession, payments are recorded to the mint engraver, Charles Anthony, of £.47 7s. for preparing a «fayre bezaunte» or offering piece of gold[58]. The significantly large payment would appear to suggest the creation of a large and spectacular object. Anthony was paid again in 1611 for providing a «bezaunte» for the queen, with a sizable sum (£.38) again involved[59].

One occasion when the king and queen were each recorded as offering their bezants was around the time of the baptism of Princess Mary in 1605. Offerings were made by the godparents to the bishop of Chichester, as Almoner, during the baptism and then on 19 May the Queen was churched: 'being come before the altar, shee made low reverence and offred her besant'[60]. The scale of the bezant as an item can be seen by the simultaneous creation of medals of the more usual type. Alongside Charles Anthony's payment for the bezant in 1605 was another of £.4 15s. 2d. for making a portrait medal in gold, to be given out by the king (noticeably a much smaller sum than for the bezant).

Camden described the two new bezants in detail:

> the one for himself having on the one side the picture of a king kneeling before an altar, with four crowns before him, implying his four kingdoms, and in the circumscription, 'Quid retribuam, etc', on the other side a lamb lying by a lion, with 'Cor contritum etc' And in another for the Queen, a crow protected by a cherubin, over that an eye, and Deus in a cloud, with 'Teget ala summus'; on the reverse a queen kneeling before an altar, with this circumscription, 'Piis precibus, fervente fide, humili obsequio'.

James I's 'bezant' is an object that has, partially, survived, in the shape of a silver impression of the obverse now in the British Museum: see Fig. 1, *infra*. This surviving side indeed depicts not just 'a king', but a portrait of James himself, kneeling before an altar with the four crowns of his kingdoms (England, Scotland, France and Ireland) before him and the legend from the Psalms: «What reward shall I give unto the Lord: for all the benefits that he hath done unto me?».

58 Symonds 1912: 225.
59 Symonds 1912: 226.
60 Nichols 1828: 514.

Fig. **1**. Silver impression of the James I's 'bezant' (British Museum, registration number M.6919, diameter: 68mm).

It therefore seems reasonable to assume the accuracy of Camden's account of the two implicitly long-standing bezants, with the Trinity and Virgin Mary as their main designs, worth, according to Camden, £.15 each, though this does not match the reported £.7 value of Elizabeth I's bezant.

Camden's description of the two 'his and hers' bezants is presented as though these were themselves long-established items. There would have been no occasion for making or using such a pair of bezants in the reigns of the unmarried Edward VI and Elizabeth I. They may have been legacies of Henry VII or Henry VIII's reigns, or perhaps the bezants which Camden either saw or had described were created for the last time a king and queen functioned together before James I's accession: the reign of Philip and Mary. The emphasis on the Virgin Mary may support this possibility. If these had been unearthed for the use of James and Queen Anne of Denmark, their religiously-unreconstructed imagery may not have been to the taste of the new king, hence the decision to create new examples.

After Camden, other 17th-century authors revisited the bezant as an aspect of royal ceremony particularly, it seems, in the aftermath of times of uncertainty and change. In 1669, nearly a decade into the Restoration and about the time Elias Ashmole was commissioned by Charles II to make his investigations into the Order of the Garter, Edward Chamberlayne published his *The present state of*

England together with divers reflections upon the antient state thereof, a work that emphasised continuity and the retention of ancient practice.

> Twelve dayes in the year, being high and principal Festivals, His Majesty after Divine Service, attended with his principal Nobility, adorned with their Collars of Esses, in a grave solemn manner at the Altar offers a sum of Gold to God, in signum specialis dominii, that by his Grace he is King, and holdeth all of him.…Those 12 dayes are first Christmass, Easter, Whitsunday, and All Saints, called Houshold-dayes, upon which the Besant or Gold to be offered, is delivered to the King by the Lord Steward or some other of the Principal Officers: then New-years-day and Twelf-day, upon the later of which Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrhe, in several Purses are offered by the King: Lastly, Candlemas, Anuntiation, Ascention, Trinity Sunday, St. John Baptist, and Michaelmass day, when only Gold is offered[61].

In 1681 Thomas de Laune published *The Present State of London*.., where he similarly described royal offerings, adding more historical information: «this gold is called the *Bisantine*, which anciently was a piece of gold coyned by the emperours of Constantinople, in Latin *Bizantium»,* then referencing James I's bezant and describing it, obviously based on Camden[62]. Then in 1691 Guy Miege published his *The new state of England under Their Majesties K. William and Q. Mary in three parts*, a work that was part of the attempt to bed down the new and in many eyes illegal regime of William and Mary a few years after the Glorious Revolution.

> Upon Christmas, Easter, and Whitsunday, the King and. Queen do usually receive the Holy Sacrament, only with some of the Royal Family, and two or three of the principal Bishops.
> Those are three Days of twelve in the Year, on which Their Majesties, attended with the principal Nobility adorned with their Collars of the Garter, together with some of the Heralds in their rich Coats, make in a grave so|demn manner their Offering of Gold at the Altar, which by the Dean of the Chappel is distributed afterwards among the Poor. The same is a Sum of Gold, to this day called the *Besant,* or the *Bizantine,* from *Bizantium* the old Name of Constantinople, where the piece of Gold was coined which anciently was Offered by the Kings of England. The Gold to be offered is delivered to the King and Queen by the Lord Steward, or some other of the principal Officers; and it is Offered to God by Their Majesties, as an Acknowledgement that by his Grace They hold their Kingdoms of him.
>
> The other Days of the Year on which they make the same Offering, are All-Saints, New-Years Day, Candlemas, Annunciation, Ascension Day, S. John the Baptist, and Michaelmas Day, when only Gold is offered[63].

61 Chamberlayne 1669: 238.
62 de Laune 1681: 101.
63 Miege 1591: 172.

These later texts do not however suggest that the bezant was still an actual object – Miege explicitly says that it is not ('a Sum of Gold, to this day called the *Besant*'), so it would seem that the later Stuarts ceased the Tudor and early Stuarts' creation of a special offering piece.

This text is, so far, the latest account I have found of the persistence of the term bezant in English royal ceremonial usage. It is probable that the offering of the bezant was retained under the next monarch, Queen Anne, who maintained, and in some cases restored, the traditional ceremonies of Tudor and Stuart England, but it seems likely that the practice ceased under the Hanoverians in the 18th century – not perhaps the royal offerings, some of which continue to be made in gold to this day, but the referencing of the ancient bezant. The bezant had gone from England once again.

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