

Liège Charity Tokens

James Martin, NI #2657

Church-related tokens are known from as early as the late 16th century and were used for various functions. These may have been charity tokens distributed by the church to regulate food or other goods given to the poor - particularly on feast days. They could also be attendance or communion tokens, or used to regulate access to certain church functions. Often those tokens are rather generic, are of simple design, and express a pious sentiment. Here, with this St. Lambert Cathedral token, we have certain design elements that promise a more interesting story (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Low Countries - Prince-Bishopric of Liège, St. Lambert Charity Token, 1686. Eklund 85. (Enlarged 1.5x)

The exact nature of this ecclesiastical token is obscure today, but it is believed to be related to St. Lambert's feast day, and may, therefore, have been used to control entrance and access to the feast. The obverse features a rather iconic skull and crossed bones design below the word ANNIVERSARIUM and the date 1686. The reverse has the words ECCLESI LEODI (Church of Liège) along the top and bottom perimeter, and in the field a larger set of crossed femur bones with flames above and below. The symbology alone was enough to whet my appetite to know more, thinking that it might be related to the Jolly Roger of pirate fame - a romantic notion that proved to be just that. The 'skull and cross bones' can be seen on some Roman and early Christian tombs. The Knights Templar used it around the 13th century and, yes, the pirates on the Spanish Main used variations of it in their heyday. More recently the Nazi SS Death's Heads Units (Schutzstaffel SS-Totenkopfverbände), responsible for running concentration and extermination camps, used the Totenkopf symbol on their caps and collar tabs. Currently, the Skull and Bones Society at Yale University, with many members of the rich and famous, add intrigue to their secret society with the use of this macabre and sinister emblem. While the skull and crossed bones symbol always serves to remind us of our own mortality, here, I believe, it is ultimately used to celebrate the anniversary of the relocation of St. Lambert's remains from Maastricht to Liège and the building of the Cathedral to house them.

The token's reverse legend, ECCLESI LEODI, fixes this token to the Church of Liège (eastern Belgium today) where Saint-Lambert (c.640 – c.705 A.D.) has been the patron saint since his tragic death. The one-thousandth anniversary of Pepin, King of the

Franks, allowing Lambert to return to his episcopal see at Maastricht was celebrated around 1687. St. Lambert served as the Bishop of Maastricht and later, Liège, where he is still celebrated as a martyr and patron saint, having defended the fidelity of marriage and not succumbed to Merovingian politics. Though initially buried at Maastricht, his successor, St. Hubert, had his relics removed and enshrined at Liège. St. Hubert had been sent to Rome on a pilgrimage by St. Lambert; while there, St. Lambert was martyred and Hubert was designated by the Pope as the successor bishop. Upon his return, St. Hubert built a chapel at Liège and had St. Lambert's remains interred there. The diocese seat was moved there, the chapel then became the cathedral, and the city soon grew in size and stature. While the details are historically sketchy, we do know that St. Lambert's main claim to fame, beyond the miracles he performed, was that he admonished the Merovingian Duke Pepin II (Pepin of Herstal) for infidelity with a noblewoman named Alpaida. This illicit union was responsible for the birth of Charles Martel ("The Hammer") who became Pepin's successor, finishing his work to unite all the Frankish kingdoms and becoming the first King of the Franks. Naturally, this public humiliation and admonishment were frowned upon by Pepin and Alpaida, among others, and they had St. Lambert and two of his relatives murdered (c.705 - 709 A.D.). Charles Martel (c.688 – 22 October 741 A.D.), among his other accomplishments, gained a very consequential victory against an Umayyad invasion of Aquitaine at the Battle of Tours, at a time when the Umayyad Caliphate controlled most of the Iberian Peninsula. Upon his death, the Frankish Kingdom was split between his two sons, Carloman and Pepin (the Short, aka, the Younger). Charles Martel laid the foundations for his son Pepin's rise to the Frankish throne in 751, and his grandson Charlemagne's imperial acclamation in 800.

This copper token is referenced in the booklet drawn from two *Numismatist* articles by O.P. Eklund entitled "Charity Tokens of the Netherlands," 1948, as EK# 85. There are several varieties documented, some with dates, some without, beginning from around 1635 to perhaps 1705. On some, the skull faces forward and on others, the 3/4 facing skull can be to the left or right. Others depict the skull centered on top of the crossed femur bones. I'm not sure that Eklund was able to document all of the varieties. A complete variety collection would be difficult to assemble but would present a very skully display...

References

Eklund, Ole P. "Charity Tokens of the Netherlands" *The Numismatist*, Vol. 60, No. 12 (Dec. 1947) 867-876.

Eklund, Ole P. "Charity Tokens of the Netherlands" *The Numismatist*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (Jan. 1948) 21-2.