THE DESIGN OF EDWARD III'S SILVER COINAGE

By D. F. ALLEN

Few members of this Society will ever have imagined that the design of the English medieval groat and half-groat was anything but English. It certainly came as a surprise to me when I recently found what seems conclusive proof that it was copied from Flanders. We are accustomed to think that in the Middle Ages it was our coins which were copied on the other side of the Channel, but on this occasion we must recognize that it is we who did the copying.

The story starts with the International Numismatic Congress held in London in 1936. Professor Victor Tourneur read a paper before the Congress in the course of which he assigned some fourteenth-century demi-gros of Antwerp and Brussels, which closely resemble those of Edward III, to a date between 1338 and 1340. I do not remember that anyone challenged Professor Tourneur’s theory at that meeting, but as soon as his speech was published in the Transactions of the Congress British numismatists were not slow to notice that he had attributed a “copy” to a date ten years or more before the first issue of the coin it was copying. Professor Tourneur, who was aware of what he was proposing, had in fact challenged British numismatists to find an English half-groat struck before 1338.

This challenge did not go unanswered. The “Editors” of the British Numismatic Journal included a short anonymous notice in their next number which pointed out that something must be wrong, since the English mint accounts proved beyond all possible doubt when the first groats and half-groats of Edward III were struck, namely, in 1351. The “Editors”, who, it can safely be revealed, consisted principally of Mr. Blunt, now our President, therefore invited Professor Tourneur to re-examine the evidence. Professor Tourneur was not shaken and said so firmly in reply.

Since the coins which Professor Tourneur was discussing are preserved in the Cabinet des Médailles at Brussels, I took the opportunity of a recent visit to the Belgian capital to re-examine the evidence for myself. I came to the satisfactory conclusion that both Professor Tourneur and Mr. Blunt were right, so far as they went. The solution lies in another direction.

It is a pity that in his original article Professor Tourneur paid particular attention to the relatively common demi-gros of Antwerp and Brussels, which do not bear on them any name or other characteristic by which they can be easily or accurately dated, when there exists a very similar but precisely datable type. Professor Tourneur mentioned these remarkable coins, of which I found two specimens in

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Brussels,¹ but only en passant. The following is a description of the coins, both of which are reproduced below:

*Obv.* +MONETA·NR·NAMVRDEN*. Normal Edward III half-groat type with crowned head facing in treasure of eight arches with trefoils at the junctions. Bust more definitely truncated than on English coins and with costume clearly indicated. Star on breast.

*Rev.* +I: REX·BCHM·AD·GOD·GILL·GO·SIG/RVM/GIS/. Cross and pellets of normal English half-groat, but cross does not intersect outer circle.

The two coins weigh 26 and 27 grains respectively.

There is no doubt whatever that this type, struck at Namur, is the outcome of a monetary alliance between three rulers of the Low Countries, John the Blind, Count of Luxembourg, who died on the field of Crécy in 1346, Adolph de la Marck, who ceased to be Bishop of Liège in 1345, and William I, Count of Namur, who did not enter upon his heritage until 1337. Thus there is an absolute limit of 1337 to 1345 for the issue of the coin. 1345 is still six years before the date on which Edward III’s half-groat was first struck in London.

There is no perceptible difference in style, type, weight, fabric, lettering, or any other of the ponderables or imponderables of numismatics between the coins of this monetary alliance and the anonymous coins of Antwerp and Brussels which Professor Tourneur has described. The Nostra in the legend of the Antwerp coins reflects the language of the Namur coins and it is, I suppose, possible that this refers to an extension of the alliance to cover Antwerp and perhaps Brussels too.² Everything suggests that the coins of Antwerp and Brussels are contemporary with those of Namur and thus also antedate Edward III’s half-groat.

¹ Bernays and Vamierus, *Histoire num. du Comté puis Duché de Luxembourg*, Brussels, 1910, p. 172. Three specimens are mentioned as being in the Brussels collection and are stated to be the only ones known. I was only able to trace two specimens there, which probably came from the same obverse but different reverse dies.

² The coins of Antwerp are easily the commonest of the group. There are specimens of both the Antwerp and the Brussels types in the British Museum, but they are not yet available for study. There are five specimens of the Antwerp and two of the Brussels coins in the Belgian Cabinet des Médailles. Some of the Antwerp coins appear to be of poor silver.
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It is worth examining the design of the coins in detail with this in mind. While there is superficially a very close resemblance between the coins and the English half-groat, there are nevertheless differences. There is no feature about them which could not have been copied from one or other of the contemporary coins of France or Flanders, some of which themselves were copies of the English sterling. Indeed, to anyone who is familiar with the minute differences in expression between the faces on the various imitations of the sterling, it will be noticeable that the face on the half-groats has more in common with that on, say, the sterlings of John the Blind at Luxembourg than it has with that on the half-groats of Edward III. Further, the bust wears a shirt and has a star on the breast, common features on the sterlings of Flanders, and unknown on the early groats or half-groats of Edward III. The reverse consists of an English sterling enclosed in an outer circle containing a familiar French and feudal coin legend. It is not the same as the reverse of the English half-groat, where the cross cuts the outer legend as well as the inner.

Although the coins of the three mints are very similar in appearance, there is a surprising range in their weights. They vary between 26 and 34 grains, and the quality of the silver is uneven. I am not familiar enough with Flemish numismatics to go fully into this subject. At the time of their issue the correct weight of the English sterling was 22½ grains, so that, if the coins were intended to represent 1½ unworn English sterlings, their correct weight should have been 33½ grains or a fraction less than the heaviest of them. The Namur coins, which are in very fine condition, weigh 27 and 28 grains respectively; if they were intended to represent 1½ English sterlings, then the weight of the sterling must have been taken as about 18 grains. This was the actual weight adopted shortly afterwards for Edward III’s sterling and may therefore represent the official view as to the average weight of the sterling then current in England. If the coins were intended to represent double sterlings, then they must have been based on extremely light continental varieties. The English half-groat, when first struck, weighed 36 grains.

Although much of the design is built up from elements which were the common stock-in-trade at that time of all European die sinkers, it would not be improbable if these Flemish demi-gros borrowed their main motifs from the English sterling, because their weight was intended to be related to that of the English sterling. In any case they owe nothing to the long-forgotten groat of Edward I. The only other denomination of the same monetary alliance is a gros of an entirely different system, the gros tournois; the type is a reproduction of the normal types of that coin with a Flemish lion in place of the usual castle. It looks as if the monetary alliance, lying at the cross-roads, decided to strike one coin on the English and one on the French system.

1 Bernays and Vamierus, loc. cit.
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It is interesting to compare the coins of this group with a slightly earlier gros of Cambrai. Nicholas de Fontayne, Bishop from 1248 to 1273, struck a gros, the obverse of which depicts a bishop's head somewhat on the lines of an English sterling, while the reverse represents an English Long-Cross penny enclosed in an outer circle with a religious legend. The weight seems to have been double the sterling. Similarly Archbishop Waleran of Cologne, 1332-49, ordered a gros in 1342, the obverse of which was approximately of English type with modifications suitable to an archbishop, but contained within a treasure. Mr. Blunt kindly drew my attention to this coin. His specimen weighs 58½ grains, or nearly three English sterlings. Such instances can be multiplied; e.g. Louis IV of Bavaria, 1313-47, struck a double sterling at Aix-la-Chapelle, the weight of which agrees closely with the Flanders group.

I am too ignorant of the intricate history of Flanders at this period to propose a precise historical occasion for the coinage of these Flemish demi-gros, but it is clear that the date hitherto suggested for the series by all Belgian numismatists, namely, 1338-40, is based on the assumption that the coins copy an already existing English coin of Edward III, and must therefore be associated with Edward III’s visit to Flanders between those years. If the coins are not copies, this argument falls to the ground. Since the three associated seigneurs were at one time or another allied against the English side in the sparring for position before the outbreak of the Hundred Years War, Edward’s presence on the Continent is most unlikely to have influenced them in the choice of coin types. The selection probably owed more to economic than political influences.

If we are to seek a connexion between the coins and Edward’s visit to Flanders, then it is rather to be found in the fact that Edward or his advisers saw the use which was being made there of the already traditional English coin bust and decided to adopt it when, some ten years later, he introduced his new coinage. That is a possible explanation, but I think it is still more likely that the design is to be attributed to one of the workers brought to England to prepare the new coinage, who had himself perhaps taken part in the coinage of the monetary alliance or of Brussels or Antwerp. Is the Henry de Brisele who was associated with John de Chichester as joint Master of the Mint in London for the purpose of striking this coinage in 1351 really a Henry of Brussels?

If this note brings home to some English numismatists the international character of their subject, and the complete interdependence of the coinage of neighbouring countries, it will have served its pur-

1 Illustrated, for instance, in Dieudonné, Manuel de Num. Francaise, Tome IV, Paris, 1936, Pl. iv, 12.
2 Jesse, Quellenbuch zur Münz- und Geldgeschichte des Mittelalters, p. 80, no. 201.
4 The previous discussions are summarized in Prof. V. Tourneur, loc. cit., and full references given.
pose. We obtain a limited and indeed distorted picture if we study English coins in complete detachment from their European context. Even if in an instance such as this the consequence is a slight prick to our national vanity, there is no doubt that the principal direction in which progress can now be made in the study of the medieval English coins is in their relationships overseas.