THE ATTRIBUTION OF THE THISTLE-HEAD AND MULLET GROATS

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Since there still appear to be doubts concerning the period of issue of the above coinage of base groats, half-groats, and pence, an attempt is here made to collate the published details on the subject, so as to show that the issue does not belong to the early years of James V, but to the period of about 1470 in the reign of James III.

A description of the pieces is as follows:

Groat (Fig. 1) Obv. Bust three-quarters right, crowned in surcoat and armour, surrounded by a tressure of eight or nine arcs; JACOBUS DEI GRA REX SCOTORUM or similar; crown of five lis. Rev. Floriate cross fourchee, with thistle heads and mullets of six points in alternate angles; large or small mullets; VIL LAE DINB URG or similar; mm. usually a plain cross, sometimes fleury. Stops always single or double saltires. Half-groat (Fig. 2) almost exactly as groat; one with crown of three lis. Penny (Fig. 3) Obv. Crowned bust facing. Rev. Foliated cross fourchee, with slipped trefoils, sometimes approaching quatrefoils, in angles. The cross fourchee connects the pennies with the higher values. The half-groats and pennies are very rare.

Early writers on the Scottish coinage all seem to have placed the coins under discussion to James V, but no proof is ever advanced and I have been able to find nothing more helpful than statements such as: "These coins are generally considered as the first coinage of this prince, and I believe correctly, for the open crown and the absence of the numeral, would render it far more likely they were struck in the early than in the later part of this reign (James V)...." But Lindsay,¹

¹ Coinage of Scotland, p. 44.
who is the author of this statement, assumes without any given reason that the coins do belong to James V, and indeed if they do, then the early years of the reign are the most likely; and yet Lindsay admits that they are "wholly unnoticed by the acts of this reign". Snelling doubted the James V attribution, suggesting that if they could be so early as James III they would fit the mention of an "alayt grot" in 1471, but he says this with some misgiving as if he was departing from a time-honoured attribution. Burns, however, took up Snelling's suggestion and produced numerous reasons in support of giving them to James III. He was followed by Richardson in 1900, but this cannot necessarily be considered as an independent acceptance of the attribution, for Richardson in his catalogue followed Burns in every detail. About the same time Grueber rejected Burns's evidence in favour of the traditional attribution, and writing on the Perth hoard of 1920, the late Sir George Macdonald concluded that Grueber's giving the coins to James V was correct. This is the attribution now held almost universally, but there seems to be some uncertainty about the matter at the British Museum, where, however, the coins are placed under James V, following Grueber and Macdonald. Burns did not live to argue his point, but these pages are written with a view to vindicating his theory.

Perhaps the attribution to James V found favour in the first place because the bust on the groat and half-groat is not facing, and the profile was not introduced until after 1500 in the English series. Grueber suggests that the single legendary circle on the reverse is against an early issue. But the bust on the groat and half-groat is not strictly profile, and the intentionally distinctive reverse type precludes an inner legendary circle. There is very much more in the evidence of the coins themselves which points to James III. The Perth hoard of 1920 might well have provided a very sound case for James V had there been any other evidence pointing that way, for there were none of the thistle-head and mullet groats contained therein. Sir George Macdonald, who described this find, pointed out that there was a total of fifty-six groats of James III of various coinages and "we are accordingly entitled to assume that here we are confronted by a really representative series".

In 1484 and the succeeding years there are several references in contemporary documents to a new heavy coinage struck at ten groats to the Scottish ounce and each current for 14d.; there are four varieties of groats which agree with these regulations of weight, and which almost certainly belong to the last years of James III and the first of James IV. But in this hoard there are no groats of James III later than those with mullets of five points on the reverse, issued about 1482–4, and the only groats of James IV are of the five-pointed mullet

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1 *The Coinage of Scotland*, ii. 113.
variety with the numeral; which issue was probably not struck for a few years after James IV's accession in 1488. It is almost certain that the heavy issues referred to fit the period of 1484 and the next decade; if not, then it is singular that we have several references to groats of their weight and none considered to belong to that period, and that we have a large series of groats which could not have been struck earlier and so must belong to the later years of James IV, and yet which are completely unnoted in any Acts, and which have none of the characteristics of the coins which certainly belong to the later years of James IV and the earlier of James V. These pieces must therefore belong to the period immediately following the introduction of a heavy coinage in 1484. But when we find none of these heavy groats in the Perth hoard—and the variety with the bust three-quarters to the left, though scarce, is perhaps the commonest of the period—then we are led to doubt the infallibility of that hoard; and especially when we find that the English groats cease with Edward IV who died in 1483, and that therefore there is an unlikely interval between the main bulk of the issues, both Scottish and English, and the very few groats of James IV of perhaps ten, and at least five or six, years later. This would seem to show either that the Perth hoard did not contain a representative series of groats, or that, since the coins were dispersed almost immediately on discovery, those recovered and examined did not include all the types originally present. The thistle-head and mullet issue is not, admittedly, proposed to belong to the period of the interval, but its absence is easily accounted for. When the new heavy coinage was introduced in 1484 it was modelled on sound principles, and although the value of the groat was raised from 12d. to 14d., the weight also was increased; the base groats which are the subject of this article, if they are correctly given to the years immediately succeeding 1471, had been in circulation for the best part of ten years, and the majority of the examples which have come down to us are not in the best condition and clearly show their baser quality. In a recoinage which was undertaken to put the country's currency on a better footing the base groats would be the first to be called in and it is not unreasonable to suppose that they very soon went out of circulation; and their absence from this hoard would be easily understood. There appear therefore to be no grounds for placing the coins to James V except the somewhat vague tradition, which so far as I have been able to discover is completely unsupported by any positive evidence whatsoever.

But there are real objections to the attribution to James V. It is beyond doubt that a large series of unicorns belongs to the first ten years or so of James V, and almost equally certain that the placks with a mullet in the centre of the reverse are the "Queen's placks" and belong to the period of 1514. Moreover, in a document of 1521, detailing the coins in which a payment of that year was made, several varieties of gold are listed, together with 75s. 6d. worth of "Queen's placks" and £65. 3s. in "placks and pennies", but there is no mention
of any silver coin, and it would appear that there was practically none in circulation. Had the base groats been issued recently, it is permissible to assume that some would have been included in the payment mentioned, especially as many must have been issued if the number existing today is any indication of the size of the original coinage. It would surely be strange if in such a large payment billon coins were to provide nearly £70 and base silver coins of recent issue to be completely absent. The above objections, together with the fact that the coins are unmentioned in the Regulations of James V, more than offset any conclusions drawn from the doubtful contents of the Perth hoard. On the other hand, there is abundant indication that the coins not only do not fit the reign of James V, but definitely do belong to a precise period in the reign of James III.

The evidence of the coins themselves is as much against James V as is that of the documents. The later unicorns of James IV have Roman lettering, as do the placks of his last issue with the numeral 4 and the groats (possibly patterns) which also display this numeral. Roman lettering, it will be seen, had thus been adopted for coins of all metals in the last years of James IV. Never again in the Scottish series does the old English style recur. It would be surprising to find that although the placks and unicorns had Roman lettering, nevertheless the die-sinkers of the coins of the thistle-head and mullet issue reverted not only to the exact lettering of a period of forty years before, but even to the ornamentation of that exact period also. There is hardly the slightest resemblance of any of the smaller details of the coins under discussion to those of the placks and unicorns which certainly belong to James V's first coinage.

It is almost impossible, in the light of the evidence quoted above, to assign the thistle-head and mullet groats to James V. Only to his predecessor, James III, can such a coinage be assigned, as was done by Burns; otherwise we must seriously upset the whole accepted arrangement of the other issues of the series, an arrangement about which there seems little doubt.

The positive evidence for giving the coins to James III is very strong. We are unfortunate not to possess any of the moneyers' accounts from June 1468 to March 1473, which covers the period suggested for the issue. However, an important part of an Act of Parliament of the 6th of May 1471 states: "And as anentis the new alayt grot of viid it is ordanit be our souerane lorde that fra hinfurtht it sail hav cours for vid and the half grot of the samyn for iiid, and the conyeing and the course thareof to be contynuit quhill the continuation of the next parlyament." The placks, which were supposed by Lindsay to be the pieces referred to, could hardly have been intended, because relatively with the crown groat current for 12d. and raised to 14d., the plack held only a value of about 4d.; nor is there any reason why the plack should here be called the "alayt grot" where elsewhere we always find the pieces called "plakkis". Acts which have author-

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1 Burns, op. cit., ii. 112.
ized coinages are sometimes found to have been disregarded or at least departed from, but this could not be the case with the Act quoted, for it reduced the value of coins of a type which had been already struck, and which were ordered to be continued. There can be no doubt that the "alayt grot . . . and the half grot of the samyn" were issued; and it would indeed be surprising if none had survived to the present day. Their withdrawal from circulation would well account for their non-presence in a hoard of the next reign, but it is difficult to believe that practically every one was melted down, and of the few which were not melted not a single specimen is known to us today. It also seems unconvincing that when there is one series of groats and half-groats, and one series only, in the whole Scottish coinage, which fits the description of 1471 by its metal and weight, that series, although also fitting the period of the Act in its exact correspondence with other contemporary coins in the minutiae of ornamentation and lettering, should nevertheless be attributed to another period forty years later in the documents of which it finds no mention and to the coins of which it has not the slightest resemblance in workmanship.

The crown groats of James III were struck at eight to the ounce and were current at 12d.; they were struck from silver 11.1 deniers fine, or 92.5 per cent. pure silver. The average weight of the alloyed groats is about 32 gr., but many show considerable wear or damage and it is not unreasonable to suppose that they were struck at fourteen to the ounce, which would give their weight as 33.65 gr. Troy.

If 96d. were coined from the ounce in crown groats of 92.5 per cent. silver, then the silver content of the 84d. coined from the ounce in base groats at 6d. each would be nearly 81 per cent., if the silver in each was equally valued. An analysed example contained nearly 77 per cent. silver, which is near enough for us to suppose that the deficiency was fortuitous and can be explained when it is realized that so long as the standard and weight of a large sum was sufficient, the individual coin might easily differ to the extent of 4 per cent. In any case, it is a remarkable coincidence that, besides the thistle-head and mullet issue, no coins are known to fit the Act; but that these thistle-head and mullet coins, of rather hazy attribution, correspond almost exactly to the requirements of the "alayt grot", and as such are out of place anywhere else.

Burns⁴ quotes two finds of coins in support of his theory. Although in each case the finds were not large, it is at least unlikely that Burns would have used their evidence if he had not been sure that their report was accurate. The first contained thistle-head and mullet groats with billon pennies of James III, the second with groats of James III with six-pointed and five-pointed mullets on the reverse. This evidence seems to be of greater value than that of the Perth hoard, having the advantage of positive against negative. Why should coins undoubtedly

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of James III be associated with a few groats of James V, with a gap of twenty or thirty years not even yielding a specimen of the common James IV plack?

The internal evidence of the coins themselves is quite as much for the period 1471-4 as it is against some vague time at the beginning of the reign of James V. Their Old English lettering places them before the end of James IV's reign; but a very distinct change in the style of lettering was gradually effected during the reign of James III. It is significant that the lettering in these base groats is exactly that in vogue during the first years of the 1470's. On the earlier coins of James III the A and T (Fig. 4a and b) have flat tops and the G (Fig. 4c) is somewhat as a 6 with a shortened top stroke; such lettering is found on the first variety of the six-pointed mullet groats. The billon placks, which were issued about 1471-3, the groats of the second variety with six-pointed mullets which are also of about this time, and the corresponding issue of gold riders all have the flat-topped T, the new A (Fig. 4f) with a peaked top and the full and curly G (Fig. 4d) which are the features of the base thistle-head and mullet groats. The later coins of James III, and all of James IV, until the introduction of Roman lettering towards the end of the reign, have a similar A, the T also with a peaked top (Fig. 4g), and a G (Fig. 4e) somewhat as on the six-pointed mullet groats of the first variety but with a flatter top.

The crown on the base groats consists of five lis on a jewelled band, exactly as on the five-pointed mullet groats of James III. A very similar crown is also found on the second variety of the black farthings which are tentatively dated to about 1470-5. In the double saltire stops the base groats under consideration show their connexion with the two varieties of the six-pointed mullet groats; saltire stops are also found on the black farthings mentioned. If any further details need be cited to show the similarity of the base groats to the coins of the middle years of James III, perhaps the neat trefoils on the cusps of the base groats and the six-pointed mullet coins could be quoted; or the fact that the mint-mark cross fleury occurs on one pair of dies of the base thistle-head and mullet groats, a type of cross which was introduced as the regular mark on the five-pointed mullet groats of James III and fell out of use not very long after the accession of James IV.

To summarize, it will be seen that these base groats, half-groats, and pennies of the thistle-head and mullet issue can not only be shown to be out of place under James V, being unmentioned by any Acts or other documents, corresponding in no way with the lettering, style, or
execution of the placks and unicorns of that period, and being absent in finds which contain these coins; but they can be positively proved to belong to James III, and then to a fixed period of about 1471-4, since they conform almost exactly to the coinage of alloyed groats mentioned in 1471, display all the smaller points of lettering and ornamentation which are peculiar to the accepted coins of that time, and have been present in finds which otherwise contain coins of James III only. Can all this be outweighed by an irrational tradition supported by the dubious and negative evidence of one uncertain hoard?