

# THE FIRST GOLD COINAGE OF MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS

JOAN E. L. MURRAY

THE main purpose of this note is to draw attention to a contemporary record which includes information about the early Mary gold pieces, and to correct the standard weight of the twenty-shilling piece.

The Register of the Privy Seal contains 'Ane Lettir of Tak' dated 1 March 1547, setting forth the conditions under which the mint was farmed to Sir William Hamilton of Sanquhar and his partners for one year.<sup>1</sup> As regards the gold, they were given power 'to stryke and prent ane ducat of gold of the fynes of xxiii caractis fyne and of the wecht of thre penny wecht of the avale of xx s. money of the realme of Scotland; and als to stryke and prent ane croun of the sone of fynes of xxi caractis and ane half, nyne of thame makand the unce wecht, of the price of xxii s. the pece'.

The Mary gold crowns, like those of her father, James V, are now generally called by the contemporary popular name of abbey crown, the mint then being in the abbey close to Holyrood. The design is so clearly based on that of the French *écu au soleil* that numismatists used the designation *écu* for these coins until the publication of the Hopetoun manuscript giving the name abbey crown. The initial-mark, however, has usually been described as a wavy star, whereas it is now clear that it copied the representation of the sun on the French crowns. (The emperor, too, had a *zonnekroon* struck in the Netherlands.) During its issue, the Scottish crown of the sun had the same currency value as the French one, although struck in less fine gold. The earliest case that I have found of the Scottish pieces being distinguished in use is a letter of reversion dated 15 March 1552, which lists 15 abbey crowns and 118 crowns of the sun (and also 16 unicorns) at the same value, 23s.<sup>2</sup> The previous value of 22s. is recorded as early as September 1539,<sup>3</sup> and the increase from 20s. may have coincided with the introduction of ducats in that year. Certainly abbey crowns at 22s. and ducats at 40s. represented nearly the same price for the gold content, at 0.384 and 0.387 shillings respectively per Scottish grain of pure gold. The Scottish Troy ounce, weighing 471.16 English Troy grains, was divided into 24 pennyweights of 24 grains.

It is clear that the two types of gold coin were not consecutive issues but parallel ones (at least in intent), like the angel gold and crown gold in England. The choice may have been dictated by the fineness of the gold bullion available, or the wide circulation of the French crowns may have caused the Scottish version to be preferred to the twenty-shilling piece, which is a very rare coin, from only one obverse die.

<sup>1</sup> *Registrum secreti sigilli regum Scotorum: the Register of the Privy Seal of Scotland*, iii, no. 2181, p. 347. I have modernized the date here and elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> *Calendar of Writs preserved at Yester House* (Scottish

Record Society, 1930), no. 638, p. 183.

<sup>3</sup> *Compota thesaurariorum regum Scotorum: Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, vii. 206. (Fifty-two crowns of the sun, making £57. 4s.)

Scottish alluvial gold had provided the bulk of the bullion for James V ducats, but this source was apparently much less productive in 1543 to 1553. The tacksmen in 1547 were granted a monopoly of purchasing 'gold of the mine', and were also authorized to buy for bullion any other gold and silver, including coins; but doubtless it was the coinage of billon bawbees which provided most of the mint profit at this time. Records show that about forty pounds of gold plate from the royal treasury were coined in 1543 to 1546,<sup>4</sup> but there is no such documentary evidence for gold struck during Hamilton of Sanquhar's tack nor the succeeding one.

Ducat as the official name for the Mary twenty-shilling piece fits in with this being of the same fineness as the forty-shilling ducats ('bonnet pieces') of James V. The weight given in the 1547 record is, however, clearly erroneous: three pennyweight was in fact the standard weight of the James V two-thirds ducat, and the error may have arisen by copying from the specifications of James's ducat coinage. There can be little doubt that the true standard weight of the twenty-shilling piece was half that of the James V ducat, i.e.  $2\frac{1}{4}$  pennyweight Scots, or 44.17 grains. The weights of known specimens are given in the list below. From the specimens known to him, Burns assumed a standard of eleven to the ounce (as for James V groats), i.e. 42.83 grains.<sup>5</sup> It will be seen, however, that most of the undoubted coins are heavier than this, while two are more than 44.17 grains and exceed Burns's figure by more than the likely remedy: for the gold coinages nearest the date for which this is known, the remedy of weight was two Scottish grains, i.e. about 1.7 grains, in 1527 and half this in 1555.<sup>6</sup>

#### *List of twenty-shilling pieces*

In the following list, NMAS denotes the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland. Brackets round the number indicate a suspected forgery. I am much indebted to my husband for most of the work on old catalogues, used here, as well as for very helpful discussion; and to the various museum authorities for access to their coins, provision of weights, and other assistance.

#### A. Duplicates of Burns 1, fig. 809

1. 43.5 gr. British Museum. (I. H. Stewart, *The Scottish Coinage*, fig. 168.)
2. 44.7 gr. Hunterian Museum.
3. 44.5 gr. NMAS, ex Advocates. (A. B. Richardson, *Catalogue of the Scottish Coins . . .*, fig. 112.)
4. 43 gr. NMAS, Coats collection (Burns 1); ex Carfrae.
5. 43.3 or 43.5 gr. Hird (Glendining, 6 Mar. 1974, lot 80. 'Without the usual cast appearance') and 'Dundee' (Bowers and Ruddy, with Spink, Los Angeles, 19 Feb. 1976, lot 114).
6. 40.9 gr. Royal Scottish Museum; ex Pollexfen. Burns noted this specimen, on p. 285, so the pedigree can be stated as Martin, Coats, 'Nobleman', and Pollexfen.
7. — Murdoch (Sotheby, 11/13 May 1903, lot 203, pl. v. 'Slightly filed around edge it having been set') and Huth (Sotheby, 4/7 Apr. 1927, lot 651).

Lord Grantley's piece (Glendining, 29 Nov. 1943, lot 156) was described as Burns fig. 810, but so was no. 6 above, in Pollexfen's sale catalogue (Sotheby, 26/28 June 1900, lot 339): the description 'has been mounted' suggests that it may be the same as no. 7. A similar piece was discussed in a letter from

<sup>4</sup> R. W. Cochran-Patrick, *Records of the Coinage of Scotland*, i. 80.

<sup>5</sup> E. Burns, *The Coinage of Scotland*, ii. 284.

<sup>6</sup> Cochran-Patrick, *op. cit.*, pp. 63 and 89.

G. Sim to R. W. Cochran-Patrick, in 1872. 'Your "Ecce Ancilla" . . . [Mr. Carfrae and I] are of opinion that it is decidedly genuine . . . Your coin is something short of 41 grains . . . a thin margin has been drilled off from the surface all round the edge of the reverse to prepare the coin for being set in some sort of frame or ring.'<sup>7</sup> This piece, which by its weight was not the specimen in the Cochran-Patrick sale (no. 9 below), was almost certainly no. 7, which shows this treatment of the reverse.

B. Duplicates of Burns 2, fig. 810

- |                |                                                                                                     |
|----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 8. 43 gr.      | NMAS, Coats collection (Burns 2, fig. 810); ex Carfrae.                                             |
| (9). 43½ gr.   | Cochran-Patrick (Sotheby, 30 Mar. 1936, lot 59) and Lockett (Glendining, 18/19 June 1957, lot 305). |
| (10). 41.7 gr. | Ashmolean Museum, Hird donation.                                                                    |
| (11). —        | NMAS, ticketed as false (weight about normal).                                                      |

*Jons forgeries and the doubtful twenty-shilling pieces*

Forgeries of twenty-shilling pieces are among those attributed to Jons of Dunfermline, whose pieces were struck, his dies being made from impressions of genuine coins, presumably with some touching up at times.<sup>8</sup> His forgeries first appeared about 1861. Webster communicated to the *Numismatic Chronicle* of 1862 a description of a half-ryal of 1555 and a twenty-shilling piece, which were of very bad gold. For the latter, he said that the obverse lettering was bad, but his details do not rule out the use of a copy of the true die. On the reverse, 'the letters in *Domini* are too straggling'—which agrees with Burns 2—'and the surface and edge of the coin are as defective as in the half ryal'.<sup>9</sup> Wingate, too, said that the quality of the metal of the gold pieces made by Jons was very inferior, but mentioned one exception (a half-ryal), and I have little doubt that there were others of which the gold was sufficiently good for them to be accepted by collectors—including the twenty-shilling pieces 9, 10, and 11. The gold of 10 and 11 seems to be reasonably good. The same is presumably true of 9, which I have not been able to inspect; it was not actually condemned in the Lockett catalogue, although described as having 'the usual cast appearance'. The sum realized, £42, seems to reflect bidders' doubt about the authenticity.

Of the twenty-shilling pieces listed above, 1, 2, 3, and 6 were recorded before Jons forgeries appeared, and there was also a specimen in the Cuff sale, in 1854, which was presumably another of the first group of listed pieces. I do not know of any suspicions being cast on pieces of this first group, with the same reverse die as Burns 1, and it is unlikely that Jons made more than one reverse die. As for 9, 10, and 11, however, detailed study of these in conjunction with 8 (Burns 2) has convinced me of their falsity. I am confident that Burns 2 is genuine, and was the original of these forgeries; and doubtless Burns and Carfrae, who were very much aware of the Jons forgeries, had their own good reasons for accepting it.

The true coin, Burns 2, shows considerable double-striking, affecting the area of the date on the obverse and of the cinquefoil on the reverse. The other three all show identical residual traces of this double-striking, which can only be explained by these features being on the false dies. There is no question of double-punching

<sup>7</sup> I am very grateful to Hunter of Hunterston for access to this correspondence of his great-grandfather, R. W. Cochran-Patrick.

<sup>8</sup> J. Wingate, *Illustrations of the Coinage of Scotland*, pp. 93 and 143-4; Burns, op. cit. i. 9.

<sup>9</sup> *NC* 1862, 151.

in making the original obverse die, which was used also for coins 1 to 7. On the false pieces, the inner circle is slightly thickened between M of *Scotorum* and 1 of the date, and has a short, thin, beaded line branching off clockwise and outwards at the end of this thickened part, and a similar branch inwards and anti-clockwise from under the 4. The double-striking of the numerals has, however, been tidied up, perhaps on the first copy of Burns 2, before the false die was made. The resulting 4 is distinctly incorrect, in that its diagonal line meets the horizontal one a little too far to the right, leaving a horizontal projection: the 5 is likewise somewhat misshapen. On the reverses, the residual effect of the double-striking is most easily seen on the cinquefoil, but it is also present at the bottom left of the shared upright of the MR monogram: here too some of the double-struck area of the true coin has been tidied up.

On forgeries of this type, one can also expect other imperfections of the original coin, due to wear, buckling, or knocks, to show up on the copies. These may sometimes betray a forgery, even without comparison with the original. Thus a James IV crown, now in a forgery tray at Messrs. Spink, reproduces the buckling of Richardson fig. 91: this must have been on both false dies, which were then used with a different die-axis, so that the varying thickness of the 'coin' was enough to condemn it. Conversely, the exact opposition of ridge and hollow on the two faces of the twenty-shilling piece Burns 2 provides confirmation of its genuineness. In making the false dies from this, the forger appears to have effected some reduction of the buckling, particularly in the field. Nevertheless, the false pieces still show a raised area at the top right of the shield, and a hollow below this, and also a raised area on the loop of the R of the monogram on the reverse. On 10 and 11 there is no correspondence between raised areas and hollows on the opposite faces, while it is impossible to check this from the photographs of 9 because the piece is so well rounded.

Some further comments apply to the false pieces individually.

No. 9. On this piece only, the tops of C, I, and L of *ANCILLA* show double-striking. Wingate wrote that 'in many instances . . . double striking . . . so characteristic of the genuine coin, has been reproduced in a very artistic manner', suggesting that this was intentional. It now appears that the forger took some pains to reduce the double-striking of the copied coin, and it may be simply that he saw no reason to discard any copy because of accidental double-striking, knowing how common this was with true hammered coins.

No. 10. When I inquired about the weight of this piece, the late Mr. D. J. A. Thompson added the following: 'The provenance of this piece is curious, it is said to have come from the Dick Institute at Kilmarnock and to have passed through a fire there in 1909; this accounts for the curious surface and deep red colour of the coin, though I have heard the opinion expressed that the coin is not genuine. On the whole I should be inclined to pass it.'<sup>10</sup> There are indeed coinciding weak areas on both sides, which are not on the Coats coin nor on no. 9, but these may be a result of the fire. My determination of the specific gravity, by weighing in air and suspended in toluene, is not conclusive, but does suggest that the gold is not better than 22 carats, instead of the correct 23 carats. My result doubtless errs on the low side, but comparison with the results for abbey crowns (which are not much heavier)

<sup>10</sup> Letter dated January 1968.



shows that the errors should not account for the discrepancy. These specific-gravity determinations were made under the same conditions, on the same day.

	<i>Measured s.g.</i>	<i>Expected</i>
Twenty-shilling piece no. 10	17.4	18.7 (23 carats)
Abbey crowns (mean of 10, mostly James V)	17.3	17.8 (21½ carats)

The expected values quoted here are on the assumption of the alloying metal being silver alone. For sovereign gold of 22 carats, in accordance with the 1829 trial plate, i.e. with about equal silver and copper, the specific gravity should be about 17.8, and this might have been used by Jons.

*No. 11.* This was ticketted as false by A. B. Richardson and naturally omitted from his catalogue of the NMAS collection. It is of somewhat redder gold than the three genuine pieces in that museum. A few irregularities of surface, other than those common to the three false pieces described here, appear to have been present on the blank.

Another letter to R. W. Cochran-Patrick (also in the Hunterston collection) doubtless refers to the acquisition of this specimen. On 21 January 1874, E. Burns wrote that 'the only presentable forgeries at Chapman's Sale were the Ancilla and the Half Ryal of 1555, both of which Mr. Carfrae secured for the Museum. The other coins could not have deceived anyone and were of no assistance for numismatic purposes.'