

# An Unusual Counterfeit Base Shilling of Edward VI

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The increasingly debased silver coinage of Edward VI fell prey to the activities of contemporary counterfeiters from the outset. Contemporary copies of most initial marks and dates can be found cast or struck from false dies showing quite a range of skill and accuracy, especially in the legends. Certain die combinations including copies characteristic of the Dublin mint issues have survived in relatively large numbers<sup>(1)</sup>. This suggests there were some very prolific workshops. Counterfeiting doesn't happen by accident, and if it is to be worthwhile, you have to be working on an industrial scale.

The majority of the counterfeits originally consisted of a brass or copper core with a silver plating of varying quality and thickness, some a simple silver wash others much heavier plate. A smaller number of pieces appear to be a more homogeneous base metal. A few centuries in the ground means that the metal surfaces are far from ideal for analysis.

The piece below is unlike any other counterfeit Edward VI shilling I have seen and is still not fully solved<sup>(2)</sup>.



- Obv. Crowned bust of Edward VI facing right.  
EDVWARD VI D G AGL FRANCO [ ] REX [ ]  
Rev. Ornately garnished shield, N R at sides  
[ ] GOR DOMINI FORTITVDINEM D [ ] X [ ]

At 32 mm maximum, 5.176 g, an XRF metal analysis revealed:

- Obv. Ag  $62.2 \pm 0.45$  %, Cu  $29.75 \pm 0.19$  %  
Rev. Ag  $66.7 \pm 0.44$  %, Cu  $24.36 \pm 0.18$  %

Plus the usual suspects of something base that has been in the ground and still has surface dirt; Pb, Si, Sb, Zn, Au, Bi, Fe, P, typically 0.1 – 1.0 %<sup>(3,4)</sup>.

The piece is overstruck on a base silver European coin, the reverse of which has a cross potent and a large fleur on each limb. A quick email provided the solution to the undertype<sup>(5)</sup> as a French Henry II, Gros de six blancs, issued after 25<sup>th</sup> March 1550, also known as a Gros de Nesles (Duplessy 994<sup>(6)</sup>, Ciani 1301<sup>(7)</sup>). It should weigh 5.969g and whilst Ciani is silent on the silver fineness, Duplessy<sup>(6)</sup> and Lafaurie<sup>(8)</sup> state 0.319 fine.

The silver content was certainly a surprise. Has the surface been deliberately treated to increase the fineness during the original manufacture in France? But by a factor of almost exactly 2 is very suspicious. Searching the internet for images suggests that these coins are higher silver content than the catalogues state. The surfaces aren't dull enough to be 0.319 silver which would normally be described as billon.

Just to check, another specimen of a Gros de Nesle from 1550 was acquired and measured; 28 mm, 4.819 g

- Obv. Ag  $67.2 \pm 0.41$  %, Cu  $26.1 \pm 0.18$  %  
Rev. Ag  $68.0 \pm 0.42$  %, Cu  $24.9 \pm 0.17$  %

Again with the usual range of surface elements either in the metal or dirt. Slightly short of flan, worn and underweight, but confirming the silver content.



- Obv: Crowned H with three Fleurs de Lys in field  
HENRICVS II DEI G FRANCORV REX im cross
- Rev: Cross potent with large fleur on end of each limb  
SIT NOMEN DNI A BENEDICTVM im crown 1550 im crown, mm A at 6 o'clock

The presence of any silver in the undertype would make this counterfeiting activity significantly less profitable than when compared with the other metal options. Conversely, the use of readymade coins as blanks of a good size, colour and weight would allow them to circulate widely before detection.

The foreign coin could not circulate freely, though the larger merchants would trade bullion and the silversmiths would all have their tables and books of silver contents and exchange rates.

Thus someone in possession of a large quantity of these base coins could have a pair of dies made and create something that could easily slip into circulation. But was it worth the effort?

The official circulating shillings were 80 grains at 6 oz fine (5.184 g at 50 % silver) or 60 grains at 8 oz fine (3.888 g at 66 % silver). The counterfeit is essentially 5.176 g of 66 % silver, so its silver content is too high by about 16 %.

Converting an unusable foreign base coin into a circulating shilling certainly has its merits, but not when making a loss on the silver, which would be better converted to bullion. Whoever created this die and used it was very familiar with the circulation of base silver around this period, but the numbers don't add up.

I have not seen these dies anywhere else. The word FRANCO on the counterfeit is on the die, rather than a vestige of the undertype and I have yet to trace a coin of this period, genuine or counterfeit, that includes the word FORTITUDINEM. Where did the die engraver get the word from?

All suggestions gratefully received via the blog.

## Notes and References

- (1) J. Bispham. *The base silver shillings of Edward VI*. BNJ, 1985 pp 134-143.
- (2) Timeline Auction 23/05/2017, Lot 1223.
- (3) I am leaving these smaller numbers deliberately vague. The larger numbers e.g. Ag, Cu are acceptable and easily checked against metal standards. The use of XRF analysis on coins and interpreting the results requires great care. What the probe sees depends on the total history of the metal from its initial refining, smelting, rolling etc and subsequent chemical environment up to the day of the analysis. It is a surface measurement and may not be representative of the whole.
- (4) R. Bude. *Sceat Metallurgy; More than meets the probe*. Presented at the seventh international symposium in Early Medieval Coinage. Fitzwilliam Museum, 13<sup>th</sup> October 2018. This was an excellent presentation highlighting the issues underlying almost all of the published numismatic work using the XRF technique prior to about 2010. Hopefully, it will appear in print at some stage.
- (5) Many thanks to Team Withers who identified this in seconds! Also for checking the Duplessy, Ciani and Lafaurie catalogue entries.
- (6) J. Duplessy. *Les monnaies Françaises Royales de Hugues Capet à Louis XVI (987-1793)*, Paris/Maastricht, 2 volumes 1989, reprinted 1999.
- (7) L. Ciani. *Les Monnaies Royales Françaises de Hugues Capet à Louis XVI Avec indication de leur valeur actuelle*. Paris, 1926.
- (8) J. Lafaurie, *Les Monnaies de Rois de France*. Paris, 2 volumes, 1951-1956.

