

Caveat Emptor – Even with Slabbed Coins

By K. V. Eckardt

It is with a feeling of dismay when I noted the recent BNS Research Blog postings from Rob Page, D. I. Greenhalgh and A. G. Bliss regarding high quality fake Anglo Saxon and early post conquest hammered penny coins appearing in the market place. A great worry is that these fakes are so convincing that many numismatists could be fooled into thinking these are genuine coins, as apparently the only sure-fire way is to find a second example and a close comparison can be made. How many different ones are out there waiting to be identified?

Of course, fakes have been around for many years and it is inevitable that the skills of the fakers will have improved and will continue to do so over time and that the quality of their work will be ever more convincing.

In my area of interest, West Indies cut and countermarked coins, fakes go back to at least the mid-19th Century. The vast majority of these fakes use genuine host coins, so examination to determine genuineness must rely on the cut edge; the countermark and signs of artificial wear and toning. In some cases, the type of host coin or host coin date can provide additional useful diagnostic information.

The profit motivation is clear to see: At the turn of the last Century a Mexico 8 Reale coin could be purchased for a little more than 5 shillings. Applying a fake countermark and removing a square central plug turned the coin into a Guadeloupe 9 Livres (c.1811) that sold at auction for £13, a handsome return on investment. The profit motive has not diminished in subsequent years.

The buyer must certainly be aware even when buying encapsulated (slabbed) coins. Referring again to the West Indies series a recent example came to my attention. The coin I refer to is a Brazilian 960 Reis, a Spanish-American 8 Reale coin overstruck with full obv. and rev. 960 Reis dies (Fig. 1). The coin was then countermarked with a fake Danish West Indies 'crowned FR VII' stamp (c.1950/60's). The coin was encapsulated by one of the grading/authentication companies with no indication what-so-ever that the countermark was false. The coin was then consigned to a leading auction company in the U.S. and in the catalogue description the countermark was clearly described as a fantasy (in my opinion 'modern fake' or 'false' might have been a better choice of terms). I have no doubts that the buyer (the price realised was \$660.00) was aware that they were buying a fake countermark on a relatively common host coin. The worry is that at some point in the future will this coin come back

onto the marketplace either by auction, or via a dealer or a private sale? The question then is will the true nature of this fake be explained? The temptation 'could be' to make a huge profit as the coin is in a slab and as such the new, and perhaps less knowledgeable, buyer will have the assurance of genuineness provided by the Encapsulation/Authentication Service Company.

Sadly, the above example is not the only coin with a modern fake countermark or concoction that I have seen incorrectly authenticated by an Encapsulation Service company.

As an aside the same auction firm offered, in a different auction, a U.S. Large Cent with the same false D.W.I. countermark (Fig. 2). In this case the coin was not encapsulated, and again the auction catalogue description identified the countermark as a fantasy. Should this type of material be sold by auction or via dealers? Is there a degree of confusion to a potential buyer with the terms fantasy or modern fake or false? If coins of this nature are sold perhaps there should be a supplementary countermark applied: COPY or FALSE or some other word(s) such that the true nature of the coin is revealed.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

While a perfectly valid case can be made for encapsulating mint state coins and particular rarities I do believe, as I stated in the introduction of the Lyall Collection of Cut and Countermarked Coins (D.N.W. Catalogue 149, 25 September 2018): "In order to truly understand these highly interesting coins (in this case cut and countermarked) they must be physically handled". This applies to many specialised series of coins and the West Indies is but one example. Collectors of specialised coins must develop their own expertise and this can only occur through traditional ways. Many collectors will be bitterly disappointed when years later they learn their slabbed coin is in fact not genuine.

