

Observations on Die Sets and Die Sinker Errors

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It is generally accepted that in the 13th century, dies were issued to the mints as sets, in a ratio of at least 2:1, two reverse dies (trussell) to one obverse die (pile). The reason for the 2:1 ratio was the fact that the trussell would wear out much faster than the pile due to the repeated hammering of the striking process. A notable exception to this was the Episcopal mint at Bury where the ratio was 1:1.

The purpose of this note is to consider what may be a relatively rare occasion, namely, the identification of both of the components of the reverse die element of a particular die set. In this context, a set of dies is usually composed of one obverse die, known as the pile, and two (occasionally more than two) reverse dies, known as trussells. The reason for this is that the trussells would wear out and split very quickly under the repeated blows of the workman's hammer. The pile (obverse die) would be held in an anvil or a large block of wood.

The coins belong to the early issues of Nicholas of St. Albans (NICOLE) at the London mint, in the early part of Henry III's recoinage of 1247-48. This was the time of significant change in the format of the coinage with the first issues (class 1a) breaking with tradition and not featuring either the moneyer or the mint signature in the reverse legend. This was swiftly amended with the following class 1b, to include the mint signature of the three principal mints, namely London, Canterbury and more rarely, Bury St Edmunds. Within a few months and coinciding with the start of the recoinage proper, a new class 2 was introduced which reverted back to featuring both the moneyer and the mint signature on the reverse.

Figure 1 shows class 2 reverses of coins where the moneyer's name has been incorrectly depicted as HICOHE rather than HICOLE (it was common practice at this time for the letter N to be depicted as an H). Reverse die errors are quite frequent, but they tend to be relatively minor errors such as omissions or the reversal of letters. It is relatively uncommon for an entirely incorrect letter to be substituted in this manner.



Figure. 1

Recently, this coin (Fig.2, below) appeared on a metal-detecting related web page on social media, so is presumably a detector find. The reverse legend features exactly the same error, but a close inspection determined that it is not a reverse die duplicate of the coin in Figure 1. Given the very specific nature of the error involved and the fact that both coins show little wear, it is not an unreasonable assumption that these two dies were made by the same die cutter and perhaps more or less at the same time.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

Figure 3 is a coin from the author's collection, featuring the same reverse error only this time paired with a class 2a obverse. The reverse is a die duplicate of that depicted in Fig.2

In their Brussels hoard publication Churchill & Thomas listed two examples of this reverse reading:

- L111 – 2a obverse (five pellets to crown) – rev. die link with L116
- L116 – 2a obverse (three pellets to crown) – rev. die link with L111

Just to confuse matters, Churchill & Thomas also listed an example (L140) with a reverse reading of HIC/OHE/OHL/VND, paired with a 2b2 obverse. This could of course be a completely different reverse die featuring the 'OHE' error but it could equally be a misread VHD. Without seeing the coin in question, it is impossible to be more certain.

The fact that this reverse is associated with 1b and 2a obverses, as well as possibly a 2b2 obverse, means that we cannot be certain which obverse the set was originally issued with, but clearly once the dies had arrived at the mint, the concept of 'sets' was no longer relevant. It is more than likely that class 1b and class 2a obverses were in use at the same time. The likely scenario is that the change from a 1b style reverse to a class 2 reverse, featuring the moneyers name and mint signature happened at a time when a significant number of new, unused, 1b obverses was available. There was no reason why they should not be used, hence the relatively high number of known 1b / 2 mules.

This would also support the view that it was common practice at the end of a working day for the custodian of the dies to retrieve the reverse die, for secure storage overnight. It seems likely that the following day the die was delivered by the custodian and the hammer men at the mint would randomly pick out one of a number of dies for use that day.

Fig.1 - R. Page collection

Fig.2 - not attributed, happy to correct.

Fig.3 - M. Shott collection

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