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## On the countermarked ancient coins from the collection of Alphonso II d'Este (1533-1597)

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# On the Countermarked Ancient Coins from the Collection of Alphonso II d'Este (1533-1597)

By Hadrien J. Rambach

Since the seventeenth century, almost two dozen scholars have referred to these countermarks, with two conflicting theories: that the eagle is the sign of the Este family, or that the eagle is the sign of the Gonzaga family<sup>1</sup>. The question is more complex than it seems, because, for sure, these coins did belong to the Este family. Indeed, to fight in the 'War of the Mantuan Succession' (1628-1631), Duke Charles Gonzaga of Nevers (1609-1631) had to hire mercenaries. To finance this war, he pawned the Gonzaga coin collection to the Este, but was never able to buy it back<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, whether the countermark was commissioned by the Este or by the Gonzaga family, the countermarked coins belonged to the Este family by 1628. Therefore, the countermark does, for sure, indicate an Este provenance: the question is whether it was placed by the Gonzaga family (previous to 1628), or by the Este family (whether before or after the acquisition of the Gonzaga collection).

Luckily, a definite answer can be given: the countermarked coins belonged to the Este family before the merger of their collection with the Gonzaga's. Indeed, when Alfonso II d'Este died childless in 1597, his belongings were inherited by his cousin Ce-



Figs 1-2. *Aureus* struck in Rome in January-April 43 BC, in the name of moneyers Lucius Cestius and Gaius Norbanus Flaccus. Weight 7.97 grams. On the obverse, the draped bust of Sibyl. On the reverse, Cybele enthroned in a biga of lions. Private collection. Photo © J. Paul Getty Museum.

1 See Rambach 2017.

2 See Simonetta-Riva 1983, 334.



Fig. 3. Antonio Pisano, a.k.a. « Pisanello », *Bust of Leonello II d'Este*, around 1441, oil on canvas, 28 × 19 cm. Accademia Carrara (Bergamo), inv. 58MR00010, formerly in the Giovanni Morelli collection (1891). Photo © Accademia Carrara.

1614. It is believed that, out of 12,000 to 15,000 coins in the Este collection, some 1,500/2,000 were countermarked. This exceptional collection was initiated by Leonello d'Este (1407-1450), Marquis of Ferrara, patron of the medallist Pisanello, who had started to buy before 1430<sup>3</sup>, mostly bronze coins<sup>4</sup>. Ercole I d'Este (1431-1505), who owned 437 ancient gold coins in 1494<sup>5</sup>, had notably acquired coins from the collection of the late Pope Paul II (Pietro Barbo, 1417-1471). Then, his son Alfonso I d'Este (1476-1534) asked the painter Raphael his help to find “*antique medals, heads and figures*”<sup>6</sup>. A catalogue was established 1538/41 under the rule of Ercole II d'Este (1508-1559), by which time the collection contained 783 ancient gold coins<sup>7</sup>. Finally, the collection reached its peak under Alfonso II d'Este (1533-1597), who continued to acquire coins: for example, in 1568 he was offered the collection of Cardinal

sare d'Este (1561-1628). But Cesare was forced to give the town of Ferrara to the Pope and to move his court to Modena. This succession impoverished the family, and on 6 August 1614 in Florence the Duke was forced to pawn a group of jewels, a gold vase, and 710 gold coins. By August 1645, the coins had still not been redeemed, and the director of the *Monte di Pietà* suggested to melt them all. Luckily, at the suggestion of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Leopoldo de' Medici (1617-1675), the Duke of Modena bought the coins back on 4 June 1647 and exchanged 252 *aurei* with the Medici collection. These coins, which can be identified in the Florentine museum, are all countermarked, which indicates that they already bore the silver eagle by 1614.

This eagle, in silver when the coins are struck in gold or bronze, in gold when the coins are in silver, is therefore the sign that the coin belonged to the Dukes of Ferrara / Modena before

3 This pre-1430 date was given by Ciriaco d'Ancona in 1449: see MISSERE 1993, 33.

4 “*Nam idcirco frequentiores ex aere quam ex auro argentoque fuerunt*”. Quoted in Corradini 1991, 404.

5 See CORRADINI 1991, 405.

6 “*Medaglie, teste e figure antiche*”: from a letter addressed by Bishop Beltrame Costabili to the Duke, on 27 August 1516, in which he confirms that the artist is currently searching such items for him. Quoted in MISSERE 1993, 33.

7 MISSERE 1993.



Fig. 4. Ascribed to Prospero Spani « il Clemente », Bust of Leonello II d'Este, around 1560/70, marble, 96 x 57 cm. Auction in London, 6 July 2017, lot 76. Photo © Sotheby's.

(future Saint) Charles Borromeo (1538-1584)<sup>8</sup>, and in 1589 he considered acquiring the collection of the antiquarian Jacopo Strada (1507-1588)<sup>9</sup>.

The question remains to understand when and why these coins were countermarked. Some of the countermarked coins are great rarities, easy to identify in a Renaissance catalogue: the presence of some of them in the 1538/41 manuscript catalogue by Calcagnini of the Este collection<sup>10</sup>, but not of all of them, indicates that the apposition of the eagle must post-date the 1540s. The artist and scholar Enea Vico (1523-1567), who was in charge of acquisitions and wrote in 1563 about the collection, made no mention of the eagle countermark<sup>11</sup>: whilst this is no definite proof, it suggests that the mark was placed afterwards. A likely possibility is that the mark was placed when an exhibition

was prepared under the direction of Pirro Ligorio (c.1510-1583), who had arrived in Ferrara in 1568 and worked until 1574 at the Duke's *Antichario*, reorganising his collections within the library<sup>12</sup>.

So, the Este family placed the eagle countermark on some of their coins before 1614, and recovered 710 pawned countermarked *aurei* in 1647 (of which 252 are in the Florence museum)<sup>13</sup>. Some of the remaining coins were taken with him by Hercules III d'Este (1727-1803) when he fled to Venice and sold in 1796 to a local abbot (whose collection is now in the Milan museum). Some more coins had remained in Modena, and were confiscated by Napoleonic soldiers—France returned 560 bronze and 14 silver coins in 1815. How the rest of the collection was dispersed remains unclear, but few coins had remained within the family: the Este family had only 61

8 Letter preserved in Modena (ASMo, ASE, Cancellaria Ducale, Ambasciatori, Milano, b. 40), sent to the Duke on 7 January 1568 by Tommaso Zerbinati from Milan.

9 See Poggi 2001, 234, note 52.

10 Celio Calcagnini. *Aureorum Numismatum Illustrissimi Herculis Secundi, Ducis Ferrariae Quarti, Elenchus*. Modena, [s. d.] (between 1538 and 1541). Manuscrit. Biblioteca Estense Universitaria di Modena, Cod. Lat. 152 = a.T.6.16. Transcribed by Luigi Lodi and published in the *Documenti inediti per servire alla storia dei musei d'Italia*. Vol. II (1879), 100-155.

11 POGGI 2001, 195.

12 See Corradini 1987, 173-178; Poggi 2001, 195-196; Poggi 2005, 524.

13 See Catalli Fuda 2014 and Catalli 2017.

gold coins left by 1662<sup>14</sup>. The correspondence of Francesco Gottifredi (1595-1669) in the years 1650-1660 refers to great quantities of *aurei*, so it is a likely possibility that he was selling them on behalf of the Este family. A possibility is also that he bought them himself: a collector since around 1616<sup>15</sup>, he sold his own collection to Queen Christina of Sweden (1626-1689), who owned countermarked coins in 1661<sup>16</sup>.

To summarize, the coins countermarked with an eagle were the property of the Este family, formed since the 1420s in Ferrara and later Modena. The mark was likely done in the early 1570s, but for certain before 1614. A large number of coins were sold in the 1650s, with many pieces entering the collection of Queen Christina. Gold coins exchanged with the Grand-Duke of Tuscany in 1647 are preserved in the Florence museum; coins sold by the last Duke of Modena in 1796 are now in the Milan museum; bronze and silver coins that had been confiscated by the French armies were returned in the Modena museum in 1815; and the great majority of the coins are dispersed worldwide in museums and private collections, unidentifiable for the most part.

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14 ASMo, *Archivio per Materie, Galleria e Museo Estense, Inventario della Robba di Camerini fatto il dì 28 agosto tutto il dì 7 settembre 1662*. Noted in Missere 1993, 34, and in Poggi 1998, 215.

15 See MISSERE FONTANA 2009, 277, note 271.

16 Letter sent by Francesco Gottifredi to Cardinal Camillo Massimo on 14 March 1661 (letter preserved in Pesaro, Biblioteca Oliveriana, ms. no. 76, quoted in POGGI 2003, 99-100). Those coins were likely later acquired by Don Livio Odescalchi (1655-1713), who was said in 1721 to own many countermarked coins in a letter sent by Maffei on 28 July 1721 to Lodovico Antonio Muratori (quoted in POGGI 1998, 225-226).

17 I am grateful to Laurent Schmitt for letting me know in February 2018 that the Maison Platt auction on 28 November 1983 (the C. Herrenschmidt collection) contained several tens of countermarked coins (mostly bronze), but that they hadn't been described as such in the catalogue.

'un prezioso avanzo.' » In *Sovrane Passioni. Studi sul collezionismo Estense*. Milan, 1998. 215-237.

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<p><b>STEPHEN ALBUM RARE COINS</b></p>  <p><b>stevealbum.com</b></p>	<p><i>Numismatic Nugget</i></p> <p>The Heslop's Conder token (Middlesex 1/2 penny D&amp;H 336) is also a magic token, attributed as MT159 by Kuethe. The obverse depicts Joseph Clark who has been reputed to be the greatest contortionist who ever lived. Even though he was obese he still was able to some seemingly impossible poses.</p> <p>Submitted by Jud Petrie.</p>
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