

Powell Classification System for Crude Lead Tokens

INTRODUCTION

The Powell system for lead tokens is a high-level classification which aims to enable the ordinary numismatist, detectorist or archaeologist to get a handle on this vague and rather complicated series {indeed, a large number of often indeterminately-related subseries}, without descending into a level of categorisation which quickly becomes unwieldy. It aims for practical ease of description, rather than fine granularity; the latter, coveted by students of other series, is not usually viable for crude lead.

Classification here will be in terms of individual sides rather than whole pieces. This is unusual in the realm of numismatics, but unlike most series it is not always possible to say which is the obverse and which the reverse, or to form many opinions as to how obverses and reverses pair. For convention we will say that issuers' initials stake the first claim for a side to be considered an obverse, and that a definite design has higher claim than an indefinite one; in many cases the matter is decided very easily by the fact that the piece is uniface, or as near as makes no difference. Not that such concepts matter much with most lead tokens.

Due to the compound nature of some designs, coupled with the frequent difficulty in establishing exactly what a moderate and often unskilled artist intended, it is not possible to assign many pieces uniquely to one of only thirty-odd classifications; therefore, the concept of hybrids is inevitable. The alternative is to introduce a much finer granularity than is easily rememberable when out in the field, and I ask readers therefore to permit the idea of hybrids in the name of simplicity.

The term "type N face" seems mildly eccentric, so the term "piece" is variously used, according to context, to describe either the token as a whole or the particular face under discussion.

LIST OF TYPES

The list of types in the Powell classification system is as follows:

- 1 Petalled flower
- 2 Initials
- 3 Segments
- 4 Lis
- 5 Anchors
- 6 Ships
- 7 Hatching, or grid
- 8 Numerals
- 9 Irregular or compound geometrics
- 10 Heads and busts
- 11 Tavern or other drinking utensils
- 12 Quartered geometrics
- 13 Frameworks
- 14 Crosses
- 15 Religious
- 16 Arms, shields or heraldic designs
- 17 Trees, plants and their produce
- 18 Birds
- 19 Animals, including fish and insects
- 20 Merchant marks & other monograms
- 21 Trade equipment and produce, other than milling
- 22 Mill-related

23	Buildings
24	Obscure characters
25	Misc objects {royal and imperial}
26	Misc objects {celestial}
27	Misc objects {other}
28	Outer rim or grènetis/wreath series
29	Words or significant abbreviations
30	Pellets or other unaccompanied simple designs
31	Circular or elliptical geometric
32	People, other than heads
33	Body parts, other than heads
34	Halved geometrics
35	Toothcombs, or halfbeards

EXPLANATION

1. Petalled flower {type 1}: Apart possibly from initials, the commonest type. The number of petals varies between three and six, five or six being the most frequent. Occasional pieces, usually larger, have the petals superimposed on a second design.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- The intention of type 1 is to accommodate the ancient stock design where an array of petals reach to the rim. Where the head of an actual flower is shown rather than this formal and hypothetical one, and does not reach to the rim, this goes into type 17.

2. Initials {type 2}: Includes sides where the initials are dominant or equivalent in prominence with any ornamentation. Sides where small initials flank the main design will be classified according to that design. Items with both initials and numbers will be dealt with either here or under type 8, depending on which is predominant, although it is recognised that they are hybrids. Where there is no predominance, type 2 will take precedence because initials offer a clue to identity.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- Type 2 is normally unambiguous on British pieces, except for the initials IS; whereupon it is difficult to distinguish between a genuine pair of initials, type 2, and a retrograde numeral 12, type 8. The latter number occurs frequently on hop tokens.
- On Roman pieces, it is often not possible to distinguish between initials, abbreviation and full words, rendering distinction between types 2 and 29 difficult.
- On Roman pieces also, it is sometimes also not easy to determine whether one or more letters are a Roman numeral, rendering distinction between type 2 and 8 difficult.
- There is a combination IWC occasional seen, although it is not obvious that that is intended; it sometimes has stars in the field, and may have a religious significance. These are amongst the most difficult pieces to place and, depending on what is the most prominent feature, may be assigned to type 2, 24, 26 or 9.

3. Segments {type 3}: Includes any side consisting of three or more segments emanating from the centre, except that quartered designs:
 - a. classify under type 12 if they have any regular design other than crosses and pellets.
 - b. classify under type 14 if they are simple crosses or crosses with pellets in the centre of the quarters, i.e. pseudo-mediaeval pennies.
 - c. remain here if they are cartwheel type pieces with the pellets near the perimeter, i.e. are not intended to imitate the mediaeval penny.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- As stated above, it can be possible to distinguish type 3 from type 14. The choice should be made as far as possible by estimating the apparent intent to imitate the mediaeval penny, but there are cases where it is a close call.

4. Lis {type 4}: A wide family of lis designs, which include also those sides where the outer components of the lis curve out so far as to be occasionally mistaken for the initials CC, the second C retrograde. Include plumes and arrays of feathers, plus tridents and anything else forklike.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- On British pieces, the only ambiguity is the C-Retrograde-C discussed above, which borders on type 2. However, it is relatively unlikely that one will be retrograde and the other not.
- On Roman pieces, type 4 always takes the form of a solo trident, and is permitted a stem not usually found on British type 4s; if held by a person, type 32 takes precedence. If a trident and other inanimate objects appear together, type 27.
- If one or more lis, appears on a shield, should the side be type 4 or type 16? and, moreover, if that shield is also crowned, should it be type 4, 16 or 25?

5. Anchor {type 5}: Fairly non-controversial.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- None. Whilst the anchor may sometimes have some religious significance, such cannot be distinguished from maritime uses, pub names etc; in addition to which, the anchor is not commonly regarded as religious, so there is never intent to assign it to type 15.

6. Ship {type 6}: Likewise fairly non-controversial.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- Only when a design is so poorly drawn that one cannot fathom whether it was intended as a ship or an irregular geometric, type 9.

7. Hatching {type 7}: Includes those sides where the entire surface is hatched in an identical manner; where the hatching is quartered, it becomes type 12. Various granularities of grid may be observed.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- None.

8. Numerals {type 8}: Some of these are probably hop tokens, and a pseudo-weight has been seen. In addition to sides with low numbers indicating a specific value, those with dates and nothing else also come under this category.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- Only with type 2 {q.v}

9. Irregular or compound geometrics {type 9}: This type accommodates a large number of abstract designs which do not fit into either type 3 or type 12, other than those which have an obvious circular or elliptical theme, which are type 31. It also accommodates designs which are a compound of different simple geometric types.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- Only rarely, when poor but genuine cannot be distinguished from a doodle; e.g. type 6 {q.v}

10. Heads or busts {type 10}: Most of the English pieces are pseudo-coin designs which mimic the obverses of major series, e.g. Edward I pennies, although that is not invariably so. Extremely common on tesserae, where they can represent gods, personifications {of attributes}, emperors or private individuals. Whole bodies, rather than heads, are type 32, whilst other isolated body parts, e.g. hands or legs, go in type 27.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- None; fairly non-controversial.

11. Tavern or other drinking utensils {type 11}: Bottles, jugs etc. Bob Alvey allocated this number to bottles specifically, but I have extended the application. Could have been absorbed into type 27, but I chose to keep tavern tokens as a separate category. One feels that they should be adjacent to the 17th century series, but a Richard Gladdle catalogue of March 2000 shows one dated to the 1790s.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- None. Design fairly non-controversial, although usage can relate to either public house or the eucharist.

12. Quartered geometrics {type 12}: Any quartered design where the number of segments is necessarily four, except simple cartwheels, which are type 3 or 14 as previously discussed; this includes cases where the four quarters are two mirror-imaged pairs, which one might more correctly call halved geometrics. Pieces with four quarters containing alternate horizontal and vertical lines will also remain in type 12 for the moment, notwithstanding that they may depict millstones and should correctly reside in type 22.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- No problems other than the ambiguities raised with types 3,14 and 22 raised by the above.

Issues:

- Argument for reassigning type 12 millstone pieces to type 22.
- Argument for reassigning halved geometrics, which are rare, to a new type 34. They do not properly fit here.

13. Frameworks {type 13}: This accommodates a number of designs which border between the abstract and the real, and which may actually represent objects, the nature of which cannot be determined. The design does not cover the whole side, or at least not without significant variation; if it did, it would belong to type 9.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- The ladder does genuinely occur as an object on tesserae, albeit rarely, and some British type 13s might also be intended as such. This means that there is a potential ambiguity between type 13 and type 27.

14. Crosses {type 14}: Not necessarily religious, although it may be. The cross should not obviously be the single letter X; if it is, the piece belongs in type 2, if British, or type 8, if Roman; otherwise, any design, abstract or real, which:

- a. depicts two crossed lines or objects only as the major device, or
- b. indicates by the central positioning of any pellets within the quarters of a cross that it is meant to simulate the mediaeval penny.

Wide crosses, in which the arms are bands capable of displaying other design, go in type 12 {squared geometric} unless they are strong candidates for being mill piece, in which case they go to type 22. Quite frequent is a small dumpy piece, conical and hence much thicker than anything else in the series; one wonders, albeit without any proof, whether it might have been used as part of a game.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- Ambiguities with types 2,8,12 and 22 exist, some of them rarely encountered; that with type 3, where on occasion there can be some difficulty as to whether a cross rather than a cartwheel is intended, can be more difficult.
- On a Roman piece, a single X is assumed to be a number, i.e. type 8.

15. Religious {type 15}: Anything which depicts religious symbolism, e.g. a crozier, apart from simple crosses covered by type 14 above. Pieces which are known to have religious use but which depict non-type 15 designs should be categorized as if they were secular; the categorization refers to design, not use.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- Drinking vessels tend always to go in type 11, regardless of whether their usage is secular or religious; which, frequently, one cannot tell.
- There is frequent difficulty in determining whether an inanimate object with religious associations should be in type 27 rather than 15, especially when the religious connotation is quite obscure.
- A single star of David would be assigned to type 30 if unadorned and to type 9 if embellished, on the grounds that random design rather than Jewish origin is the more likely reason.
- Many ancient pieces depict full-length people in the act of sacrificing. These go in type 32 by preference, because the person is more prominent than the reason for the act.

Issues:

- Many objects which appear on tesserae should probably be reclassified from type 27 to type 15 or 32 because of their association with Rome's polytheistic philosophy; however, if you do not know of that connection, this is not obvious.

16. Arms, shields or heraldic designs {type 16}: Anything where the major type is a shield or other form of compound heraldic device; takes preference over the types pertaining to the particular subject matter, except that single royal symbols remain in type 25.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- Little ambiguity, except where occasionally part of the shield goes off the flan, in which case a judgment has to be made as to whether a shield is intended or whether the supposed remaining part of it is just a collection of geometric doodles.
- There can also be doubt as to whether the content on the shield is royal or not, causing doubt as to whether the piece goes in type 16 or 25.
- Shields with one or more lis on are debatably type 4 or 16; and, if crowned, 4, 16 or 25.

17. Trees, plants and their produce {type 17}: Anything botanical except national symbols, e.g. the rose covered by type 25, and the ancient petal design of type 1.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- Ambiguity usually only arises in the two cases, regarding types 1 and 25, mentioned above.
- Occasionally floral heads are encountered which are more decorative than the normal type 1; these go in type 17.

18. Birds {type 18}: Any birds except national symbols, e.g. the eagle covered by type 25.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- Usually fairly non-controversial, ambiguity only arising in rare cases where the creature cannot be recognized with certainty as a bird. Depending on the alternative conjectures, a would-be bird could be confused with a variety of other types, most noticeably type 32.

19. Animals, including fish and insects {type 19}: Self explanatory. Same proviso regarding national symbols as the last two types. Fish are rare on British pieces and insects virtually unknown; on tesserae, both are occasionally seen, the dolphin being the most common species.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- Very few ambiguities, except as with type 18 where poor condition prevents identification of the subject matter. It is common not to be able to distinguish which of a number of animals is intended, but in any case they are all type 19.

20. Merchant marks & other monograms {type 20}: These were frequently used by the more prominent tradesmen until at least the late 17th century.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- Usually fairly non-controversial; only an outside chance of confusing a merchant mark with a type 9 geometric doodle. The fact that merchant marks were usually well-executed helps keep the distinction clearer.

21. Trade equipment and produce, other than milling {type 21}: Accommodates sides containing the type of trade-related material which one might expect to find on the main series of 17th century tokens, with the one exception that anything related to milling goes in type 22.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- Symbols which take the form of trade guild arms, depicted on a shield, go in type 16.
- As with type 15, there could be difficulty in determining whether an inanimate object should be in type 27 rather than 21, especially when the trade connotation is quite obscure.
- If the produce takes a form which readily lends itself to another type, e.g. birds or animals on a butcher's token, it is likely to be indistinguishable as a trade piece and will be assigned to the type concerned.
- Some depictions cannot be clearly distinguished as to whether, for example, they are gloves and boots rather than hands and feet. The practice was to put these in type 27, but a new type 33 has now been created.

Issues:

- Should some more of the type 27s be reassigned here? Or is that dangerous, because we cannot be fully certain, especially in the days of tesserae, whether trade was indicated?

22. Mill-related {type 22}: Depictions of mills and designs likely to represent mill sails. Squared geometric designs which could be mill stones should probably go in here, but are being left in type 12 because of the uncertainty. One interesting possibility: could some of the petals of type 1, and/or the spoked wheels of type 3, represent crude attempts to render mill wheels or sails?

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- The possible confusion with type 12 {q.v}, whereby a quartered design may represent a millwheel, has already been mentioned.
- A type 3 cartwheel, if not extended to the edge, and with small notches at the end of each arm, may represent some sort of revolving machinery with water-buckets; in which case, a mill-wheel is assumed and the piece goes in type 22.
- The type 1 is assumed always to represent an ancient design rather than a mill wheel.

23. Buildings {type 23}: Any buildings other than mills, which go in type 22. A variety with three very thin towers is believed to be a late mediaeval tax token.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- Fairly non-controversial, although very rarely there might be confusion with an irregular geometric of type 9, if the intention of a minimally-skilled engraver was not obvious.

24. Obscure characters {type 24}: Any characters which are not obviously letters {type 2} or numbers {type 8}, although they may be crude attempts at one or the other.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- The only confusion arises from whether the characters can be identified or not; a decision one way would assign to type 2 or 8, a decision the other to type 24.

25. Miscellaneous Objects, Royal {type 25}: Symbols such as crowns, roses, eagles and the like. The late Elizabethan pieces with double-headed eagle on one side and crowned rose on the other, c.1570-1600, are a notable example, although they are not part of the run of crude agricultural pieces.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- The main confusion arises from whether the items depicted are interpreted as royal or not; a decision one way would assign to one of a variety of types {e.g. 4,16,17,18, 19}, a decision the other way to type 25.
- Crowned heads are assigned to type 10, i.e. that type takes preference.
- Shields with one or more lis on are debatably type 4 or 16; and, if crowned, 4, 16 or 25.

26. Miscellaneous Objects, Celestial {type 26}: This contains such items as the sun, moon, and stars; also globes, although these could be a reference to a tavern or playhouse of such a name, rather than to the heavens. There were two total eclipses of the sun visible from England in 1715 and 1724, and it is conjectured that these may have been the inspiration for the occasionally found crescent and stars type. That of 1715 was particularly spectacular, covering most of England in an approximately diagonal North-Eastern sweep; the northern boundary of totality passed through Lancashire and Yorkshire, and the southern through mid-Kent. That of 1724 described an East-South-Eastern path across the West and South of England, the northern boundary running somewhere along the line of Aberystwyth-Gloucester-Eastbourne; a larger number of the lead token areas, which are predominantly eastern, are likely to have escaped totality, although they would still nearly all have experienced a very great dimming of light.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- The only confusion arises on cartwheels with short limbs which may represent a radiant sun. If the cartwheel's spokes are significantly short of the rim and are not bounded by an outer circle, the piece is considered to be a type 26 rather than a type 3, especially if it depicts a central hub.

27. Miscellaneous Objects, Secular {type 27}: A catch-all for items which are clearly objects, whether identifiable or not, and which do not come into other categories such as 11 {tavern implements} or 16 {coats of arms}.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- A significant number of inanimate objects assigned to type 27 are probably components of commercial guild arms without a shield, in which case they overlap with type 16, or the equipment or produce of employment, in which case they overlap with type 21.

Issues:

- Isolated body parts such as hands, feet and genitals were originally put in here, rather than in 10 or 32, but have since been assigned their own new type 33. Gloves and shoes, where distinguishable from hands and feet, remain in type 21; if they cannot be distinguished, they are 33.
- Hearts are treated as body parts and have similarly been assigned from type 27 to 33.

28. Outer rim or grènetis/wreath series {type 28}: Certain series exist which have an outer rim with various types of filler, e.g. shading. These have previously been subclassified 28.nn, where nn indicates the classification of the subject matter of the inner part of the token according to the above schema; which would take in certain series, such as some of the very small ecclesiastical tokens of the mediaeval period, which the main classification does not so easily cover.

Issues:

- There is a strong argument for retaining type 28 as a way of saying “with outer shading or wreath”, whilst otherwise describing the piece as “type nn with/without grènetis/wreath”. The description “type 28.nn” is unwelcomely cumbersome.
- Suggest that this be resolved by describing such pieces generically as type 28, but individually as:
 - Type nn with wreath
 - Type nn with grenetis {of xxx type, if desired} - dropping the è for convenience.
 - Type nn with radial lines
 - Type nn with beaded rim {of xxx type is desired}
- Effectively, this means that the piece has dual membership.

29. Words or significant abbreviations {type 29}: Complete words or names are rare on British lead tokens, but not unknown; on Roman, they are quite common.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

- There can be some doubt on occasion, in the Roman series, as to whether a word or a set of initials is intended. If three letters are thought with reasonable probability to constitute an abbreviation, type 29 takes preference; otherwise type 2.
- Similarly, an abbreviation and a Roman numeral can be confused; if X is involved type 8 takes preference, otherwise the above rule applies.

30. Pellets or other unaccompanied simple designs {type 30}: Accommodates pieces which contain one or more of a single type of pellet or other simple geometric design, the latter not being identifiable as specific objects capable of going in type 27; as opposed to obscure blobs, which are

unclassified until identified.

31. Circular or elliptical geometric {type 31}: Either a set of concentric circles/ellipses, with or without a central hub, or a design consisting primarily of circles/ellipses and their fragments.
32. People {type 32}: Anyone standing, sitting, riding, walking, running or lying down; in other words, anything which shows the whole person, rather than a mere head or bust. The latter go in type 10, whilst other isolated body parts, e.g. hands or legs, go in type 33. Excessively common in the Roman series, and also in those mediaeval series, e.g. French, which depict patronal saints.

Occasional overlaps and hybrids:

 - Full length depictions of people riding animals are type 32 rather than type 18.
33. Body parts, other than heads {type 33}: An attempt to remove from type 27 {q.v} animate rather than inanimate objects, particularly parts of the human body, which do not obviously fit elsewhere. Hearts are included, despite the fact that they are fairly obviously symbolic.
34. Halved geometrics {type 34}: An attempt to remove from type 12 those designs which are based on halving rather than quartering of the main field.
35. Toothcombs or halfbeards {type 35}: An exclusively French type, borrowed from certain of their coinage, in which the lower half of the design consists of a series of parallel lines. The upper part can be various, but is often the components of a face, albeit often rather strangely rendered.

FEEDBACK

The Powell classification system for lead tokens has been in existence since late 2004 and, whilst it has not changed a great deal, is nevertheless still in a state of moderate evolution; therefore, fresh ideas are always welcome, as also are pictures or descriptions of any piece which tests the boundaries of the system as at present described. Readers are invited to submit ideas to the email address given at the top of the Leaden Token Telegraph {LTT} newsletter, currently found at “www.leadtokens.org.uk”; namely, `dmpowell{at}waitrose.com`.

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