

David Powell On His Classification System

Type 26: *Miscellaneous Objects, Celestial*

This type contains such items as the sun, moon, and stars; also globes {Fig.7}, 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 {Figs.4,5}. 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. The two pieces shown were found a few miles west of Oxford. Fig.6, although different, might just be along similar lines.

An occasional find is the whorl {Fig.8}, which I suspect is either the sun or a comet; especially when, as in the piece shown, a crescent moon is also present. The whorl pieces which I have seen to date are rather small, around 16-17mm, although lead rather than pewter. This suggests that they are of the middle period; Halley's comet, the most prominent, visited in 1456,1531,1607,1682 and 1759. Or am I just being imaginative?

Another likely reason for use of the sun was that the sun in splendour was the personal badge of certain mediaeval and early post-mediaeval monarchs; namely the Plantagenets, and Edward IV. I will conjecture that the piece represented by Figs 2 and 11 {rev & obv} is probably of Edward IV, and a pass or medallion rather than a token; his reign was just late enough for a piece of 100% lead. Cartwheels which have a highly accentuated hub {Fig 10} are common, and may well be of similar period; probably the hub, when so pronounced, should put them in type 26 rather than the normal type 3. Fig 10 looks more like the rustic token, as also Fig.9, which is another common rendering; often these look like a series of "M"s round a circle, but I think a sun is intended. I will guess that these are later, and it may be that some of the hub pieces are as well; for after all, kings, eclipses and comets apart, the sun was a common pub and trade symbol throughout the lead period!



Postscript:

I am grateful to Hugh Williams for the suggestion that astronomic events such as eclipses inspire coin types. He first suggested it in connection with the Hadrian denarius depicting a crescent and seven stars {Fig.3}, which is generally reckoned to date from around 128, and fed the latitude and longitude of Rome into an astronomy program which confirmed that the Pleiades {Seven Sisters} would have been visible there during a daytime eclipse in January 129. A similar reverse, with varying numbers of stars, also occurs on Roman provincial coins during the Severan period.

It is also interesting to conjecture whether the various astronomical events occurring during the later part of the reign of the Parthian king Phraates IV, and which inevitably get mentioned in any book concerned with exploring the date and circumstances of Christ's birth, have anything to do with the profusion of astronomical references which increasingly appear on his later coins {Fig.1}. Parthia {later Persia or Iran}, let it be remembered, is favourite for being the most likely origin of the three wise men....

There is also a Roman provincial piece of about the same period which depicts a ram {Aries} looking back over its shoulder at a star, which is assumed to have some similar, if undetermined significance. So, there is plenty of precedent, and those pieces which depict celestial matter might just be offering you a dating clue!

Examples of main 17th century tokens series illustrating celestial bodies are not particularly common, but herewith a few. As previously, they will usually relate to the names of premises:

Left: Victor Drew, Bell Yard, Fleet St, London {W.170}
 Centre: John Worthington, Wellingborough, Northants {W.178}
 Right: Cirencester, Gloucs, town farthing {W.44a}



Type 27: Miscellaneous Objects, Secular

This type is the depository for objects, usually inanimate, which are not covered elsewhere. They are inevitably rather a mixed bag, and not an overcommon type since the others usually suffice.

The most commonly-encountered type 27 is probably the heart, of which several are shown in Figs.1-4; two plain, one with a lis above {suggesting a slightly more up-market origin}, and one shot through with arrows. Suggestions welcome as to what it indicates; perhaps the answers are more than one. It could be the sign associated with someone's commercial premises; except that pub names today are a fairly good guide as to what commerce as a whole was calling its premises way back, and you can't imagine walking into a pub today called the "Heart". Leave the "e" out, however, and there are plenty of "White Harts" around. Perhaps they were issued by the landlords of places called "The White Hart", or the like, who didn't realise that a hart was an old-fashioned name for an animal? Just a theory.



Looking at some of the more recent paranumismatic categories, could they have been love tokens, pieces given by one to another as a keepsake, to remind them of their absent partner? Whist wasn't invented in those days, although cards were, and if not a card counter what was the meaning of the spade in Fig.5? nevertheless, hearts happily outnumber the other three suits by a very long way, so I think we can safely assume that the spade was merely a personal choice of design.

Bells we have already mentioned briefly under type 21; if bell founders' pieces they live there, but otherwise here. Fig.6 is the 1659 example shown before, with another {Fig.7} for comparison. The latter feels chunkier, and is of a different period, probably later. Could they have been passes for use by bell ringers, so that no-one got locked in the belfry at the close of the evening, with the bell master being required to collect a full set before he was allowed to lock up?

Fig.8 looks like a piece of one of those cast-iron fences which protect many of our public parks and playing fields, but doubtless it is not. You feel vaguely that it is meant to be heraldic, perhaps the top half of an adorned shield which was far too big for its flan. We will call Fig.9 a beehive, for lack of anything else better; it is surrounded by what might be some lettering, similarly enigmatic.



Of the four English pieces in the last batch, Figs.10-13, the first is the most obscure; an object, something like a chess pawn, in a circle. The reverse is a 2x2 array, like a window, similarly set, in high relief and with space to spare. Fig.11 feels early, anything from 15th-17th cent and probably more likely the former; an arrow and berries, but how do the two relate? Fig.12 might be a marine creature {type 19}, or a rendering of celestial movement {type 26}, but as neither suggestion is convincing we will leave it here. Only Fig.13, the crossed keys, is familiar; they appear on both seals and main series 17th century tokens, and have been discussed before. It feels of middling date; 16th cent, perhaps early 17th.



The last two pieces, Figs.14-15, are both Roman. Fig.14 depicts dolphin and trident; since the latter is more obvious than the former, type 27 takes preference over type 19. Fig.15 at last brings us nearer to home, or rather the home of he who issued it, by showing us for once a normal, everyday utensil; in this case, a wine or oil container, such as nearly every Roman would have owned. The letters AACS flanking likely indicated the issuers, and on the back we have the luxury of no less than a full word, which brings us on to type 29. Next month!

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Coming shortly in Leaden Tokens Telegraph.....

You will be aware that our journey through the 32 types is progressing rapidly and that we have not many to run; another couple of issues may see them out. So, where to go next? Top priority will continue to go to illustrating new pieces as people find them, to build up as good a data bank as we can for those who want to study them, and to share with as many as possible just what is out there. Your help by sending pieces/opinions in for publication or discussion will be appreciated, and “This Month’s Gallery” or “Readers’ Letters” will flourish accordingly. Further discussion of the 32-type classification system will no doubt be part of this. But beyond that, what else? Your own suggestions welcome {please mail in}, but I have the following in mind. Look out for:

“Talking Tesserae”

Expect, commencing November, a short series which looks specifically at Roman lead and how a distant series plugs into the 32-type classification system despite the fact that the latter was designed for the British series of a millennium and a half later. Very well, you will find. Those of you who live near Verulamium, Londinium or Camulodonum, or are interested in what gets found there, watch this space!

“CJ Corner”

Communion tokens may have a purpose very far removed from the hurly-burly of the agricultural and commercial worlds with which most crude leads are connected, but in the 18th cent especially their style, design, metallic content and diversity of manufacture has much in common. Remember, some of those early pewters were ecclesiastical. If you live in Scotland, you might wish to distinguish whether your latest lead detectorist find is ecclesiastical or commercial. We think they are fun, and worth an occasional mention for purposes of comparison.

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