

A new privy mark on a Robert II groat prefigured on false coins

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In 1853, Dr Aquilla Smith, a respected Irish physician and antiquary, published a find of fourteen Scottish coins from near Pettigoe, in the County of Fermanagh¹. The lot consisted of three groats of David II, one of which was false, nine groats of Robert II, all false, and two half-groats of Robert II. All the groats were of the type of the Edinburgh mint; the two genuine half-groats were of the Perth mint. The parcel of false and genuine coins is now in the collection of the National Museum of Ireland.

Two of the false Robert II groats displayed a large cross pattée behind the king's crown, a feature hitherto unrecorded on genuine coins. Their weights were given as 31½ and 31 grains respectively. A third coin weighing 34 grains had a larger than usual B as privy mark behind the crown. The purpose of the current note is to record what appears to be a genuine coin having the large cross privy mark.

The coins in Smith's report were deemed false on the basis of their layered composition, their light weight and an appearance tempered by file marks, streaked surfaces and less well defined lettering. These fabrications had been formed by the cliché method, by which thin sheets of silver were pressed over actual coins and soldered together. Smith was unaware of this method by which the 'metallic discs' gained their impress, resulting in copies that he assessed as being "well executed" and bearing "a very close resemblance to the dies of the genuine coins".

Smith commented: "The existence on the coins of Robert of two privy marks (the cross and large B), which have not been observed on his genuine groats², is remarkable. That similar marks were used by the authorised moneyers, and that the originals will be discovered, may be assumed, for it is not to be supposed that forgers who so closely imitated the types and varieties of the regal coins

¹ Aquilla Smith, 'On Scotch Coins and Counterfeits in Ireland', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy (1836-1869)*, Vol. 5 (1850-1853), 324-331; also published as 'Curious Forgeries of Scotch Coins', *The Numismatic Chronicle*, Vol. 16 (1853-1884), 23-29.

² An Edinburgh groat with the large B was subsequently catalogued by Edward Burns in *The Coinage of Scotland*, (1887) Vol. I, p. 273, no. 6, and illustrated in Vol. III, plate XXIV, fig. 327. The same obverse die has been used for a groat of the Dundee mint; see J. D. Bateson and N. J. Mayhew, *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles* 35 (1987) plate 21, fig 477.

would venture to adopt marks which were intended to distinguish the coinage of 1365³ from all other money already struck . . .”.

The clipped coin weighs 38.3 grains⁴. It bears none of the incriminating features that characterise the false coins in Smith’s report and is not otherwise distinguished from genuine groats of Robert II. If its surface area is extrapolated to that of an unclipped specimen, and assuming the hypothetical reconstruction has the same thickness, wear and metallic composition as the coin, it would weigh 54.7 grains⁵, well within the weight range of genuine whole coins⁶.



Clipped groat (Author’s collection) and false groat (Aquilla Smith’s no. 4.
Image courtesy and © National Museum of Ireland, NMIHC:2001.188)

³ Smith quotes the erroneous date given by earlier authors. The Act was passed in 1366. (see R. W. Cochran-Patrick, *Records of the Coinage of Scotland* (1876) Vol. I, cxii)

⁴ I have seen several Scottish groats from Irish sources similarly clipped. Circulating clipped English groats and their forged copies were a concern to the Anglo-Irish parliament in the fifteenth century; see M. Dolley and W. A. Seaby, ‘“Le Money Del Oraylly” (O’Reilly’s Money)’, *British Numismatic Journal*, (1967), Vol. XXXVI, 114-117 and plate XIV.

⁵ The dimensions of a uniformly round unclipped coin of the same issue has been used in this calculation: Reconstructed weight (grains) = $[R^2/r^2] \times 38.3$, where R is the radius of the unclipped coin, and r is the radius of the clipped coin.

⁶ The mean weight and standard deviation of the 17 Robert II groats catalogued in *SCBI* 35, is 55.9 ± 5.0 grains.

The false groat illustrated above, is the slightly heavier of the two fabrications bearing the large cross privy mark⁷. Both false coins have been reproduced from a genuine coin sharing identical dies with the clipped coin. This homogeneity of dies is exhibited by five of the other false groats which have their impress from a single coin.

It is not possible to determine from the material to hand whether the privy mark was added to an existing die or whether it formed an integral component of a singular die or set of dies. It is also not possible to determine whether the reverse die was linked to other obverses.

Scottish coins formed part of the currency of Ireland in the late fourteenth century⁸. It may be coincidental that the clipped coin was sourced from Ireland, but there seems a possibility that these groats with the very conspicuous cross privy mark may have been specifically intended to alert an Irish populace who were at risk of excommunication by the Church hierarchy if “the groat of the money of Scotland...be passed...save for the value of three pennies of silver of the money of England”⁹.

It is a measure of Aquilla Smith’s foresight that his prediction regarding the “discovery of the originals” has proven accurate, albeit after an interval of 165 years for groats bearing the cross privy mark¹⁰.

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⁷ Smith gives the weight of this coin as 31½ grains; NMI records it as 31.2 grains.

⁸ D. F. Allen, ‘An Irish find of forged Scottish coins’, *British Numismatic Journal* (1949) Vol. 26, 90-91.

⁹ Colm Gallagher, ‘Neglected documentary evidence for the currency of 14th cent. Scottish coins in N.E. Ireland’, *British Numismatic Journal* (1969) Vol. 36, 93-95.

¹⁰ It is remarkable that genuine groats bearing the cross privy mark appear to be represented by a single coin. Perhaps this notice will bring further specimens to light.