

King John's Pellets – Die-cutter Signatures, or something else?

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King John is an interesting character and has been described as the most evil monarch in Britain's history. Despite his poor reputation for his evil acts, including arranging for the murder in 1203 of his nephew, Arthur of Brittany, he was at least responsible for an attractive Irish penny. King John's REX coinage was first issued about the year 1208 and has been described by Dykes as "...arguably the most attractive of the denier coinages of the central middle ages". Dykes has published two papers on this coin series in the BNJ; the first in 2013 on the dating of these coins¹, and the second paper the following year on the symbolism of the coins². Neither paper mentions the pellets that are the subject of this brief article.

An example of King John's "Rex coinage". It is the reverse that we are interested in here, and specifically the field within the triangle which shows a central estoile of 5 curved rays, a large crescent moon below, and three stars in the apices of the triangle. Additionally, on this coin, we see a well-formed pellet between two of the rays.

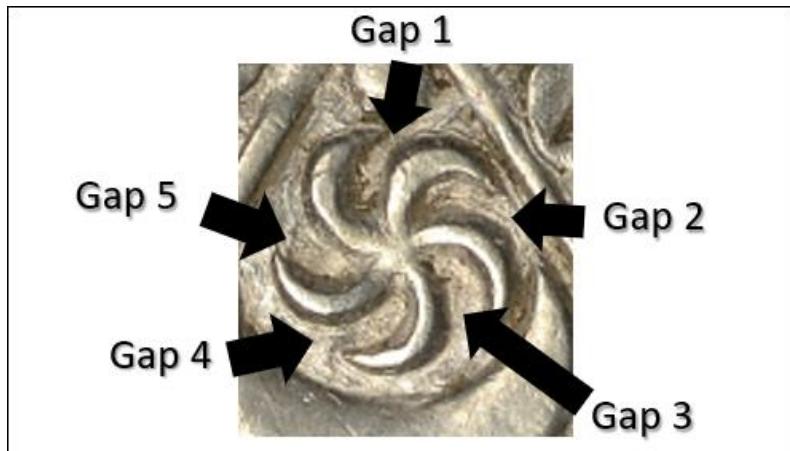


48 coin illustrations have been located online from a variety of sources including auction houses, dealers and the PAS. When looking within the reverse triangular field the following pellet types on coins of the moneyer ROBERD at the Dublin mint have been observed:

Code	Description	Number of coins
NONE	No pellets in the field	13
ATS	Pellet above the top star, with or without an extra pellet in Gap 4.	4
GAP2	Single pellet located in Gap 2	2
GAP3	Single pellet located in Gap 3	5
GAP4	Single pellet located in Gap 4	23
BELM	Pellet below the moon	1

¹ D.W. Dykes, ' King John's Irish Rex coinage revisited. Part I: the dating of the coinage', 83 (2013), 120-133

² D.W. Dykes, ' King John's Irish Rex coinage revisited. Part II: The symbolism of the coinage', 84 (2014), 90-100



Just over a quarter of the coin images examined showed no pellets in the triangular field. The other coins were dominated by those with a pellet in gap 4. In total these observations allow the identification of six different varieties, with four of them being relatively scarce. Keep in mind that the sample size of 48 Dublin coins is small, and a larger study would be required to firm up the relative abundances suggested here.

Pellets seen occasionally on the end of an estoile ray may have been placed there to extend the length of too short a ray and have not been treated as a separate variety here.

These pellet variations are probably also present on the coins from the other moneymen and mints. Coins of Roberd of Dublin are the commonest, and no attempt has been made in the current study to examine the scarcer coins of these other mints/moneymen. However, here are a couple of examples of pelleted coins from the moneymen Willem of Dublin and Willem of Limerick...



Above: Limerick penny, moneyer Willem, note pellet above the crescent moon.



Right: Dublin mint, Willem moneyer, note the pellet in gap 3.



As to the meaning and significance of these pellets, my initial opinion is that they could be the “signatures” of various different die makers. They alternatively could be related to the date the coin die was cut. To establish whether there is any chronologic significance in the different pellet types one would need an extensive die study to figure out the likely sequence of the coins, and then see if there was any relationship between pellet distribution and the interpreted sequence. Another suggestion that has been made is that the pellets are simply guide marks for the die cutter, and in this regard it is interesting to note that the pellet in gap 4 is approximately at the center of the triangle, though what the purpose of the other pellet positions was for is unclear.



Illustration of the six Dublin/Roberd types described in the article.

