The classification of single-cross sterlings of Alexander III

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The classification of the single-cross sterlings issued under Alexander's second coinage has taxed the ingenuity of eminent numismatists. Three classificatory systems have been published: those of Burns (1887)[1], Stewart (1955)[2] and Stewart and North (1990)[3]. A fourth, a very abbreviated adaptation of Stewart and North's magisterial contribution, is offered in Spink's catalogue (2020)[4].

The classification of Stewart and North is the most detailed, sophisticated and up-to-date arrangement, these authors having had the benefit of access to the Middridge hoard which contained a large number of single-cross sterlings of Alexander III[5]. It is, however, the detailed complexity of their classification that poses difficulties for any cataloguer having limited exposure to the series, problems perhaps foreshadowed by the authors themselves in stressing the blurring of boundaries and inconsistencies in some of their groupings. The authors freely acknowledged their drawing on former publications, and helpfully offered a table correlating their classification with the two earlier ones.

The practical application of the Stewart/North classification has been found difficult by experienced numismatists. Donal Bateson notes that the classification is "somewhat difficult" and "is a complicated system" [6]. A number of coin tickets that accompanied my own acquisitions have question marks adjacent to the suggested class. Publications since 1990 that have listed single-cross coins have included queried classificatory attributions[7], although credence must be given for worn or damaged coins.

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[1] Edward Burns, 'The Coinage of Scotland', Adam and Charles Black, Edinburgh, 1887, Vol. 1, pp 163-186.

[2] Ian Halley Stewart, 'The Scottish Coinage', Spink & Son Ltd, London, 1967, pp 20-22.

[3] B. H. I. H. Stewart and J. .J. North, 'Classification of the Single-Cross sterlings of Alexander III', *B.N.J.* (1990) 60, 37-64.

[4] 'Coins of Scotland, Ireland and the Islands and Anglo-Gallic coins', Spink, London. 4th edition, 2020.

[5] Ian Stewart, 'Scottish sterlings from the Middridge hoard' *B.N.J.* (1989) 59, 84-90.

[6] J. D. Bateson, 'Coinage in Scotland', Spink, London, 1997.

[7] See as examples, N. M. McQ. Holmes, 'A late thirteenth-century hoard from Caithness', *B.N.J.* (2013) 83, 249-251; N. M. McQ. Holmes, 'New finds of Scottish fourteenth century hoards' *B.N.J.* (2015) 85, 257-273.

Stewart and North had as their primary aim the sequencing of dies used in this coinage. A secondary goal was to give some idea of the 'shape' of the coinage over its duration. Integral to these tasks was the necessity of superseding the existing classifications to create an integration that noted design differences, suggested a temporal sequencing of these developments, and provided a foundation for attributing order and meaning to the coinage. The work of Stewart and North is a model of how detailed and meticulous observations of coins, underpinned by a depth of numismatic knowledge, can piece together history in the absence of historical records.

As in many fields of endeavour, a study that has a research focus does not always make for easy practical application. The very intention of creating 'shape' or form to the coinage, while satisfying research and aesthetic aims, may not necessarily reflect the degree of organisation of historic minting practices.

So what are these classificatory difficulties and what might assist the cataloguer?

In outline, the Stewart/North classification divides the coinage into eight classes. The forms of individual letters are an important distinguishing feature. The descending order given hereunder is their suggested chronological sequence of die production, beginning with Class A and ending with Class J, although Class B seems to have been concurrent with late Class A and early Class M, and Class R concurrent with Class M and Class E.

A – a youthful head with closely cropped hair, ALEXSANDER, unbarred A,
    closed C and closed E / SCOT:TORVM or rarely ESCOSSIE

B – prominent eye formed by pellet in centre of round or almond-shaped recess,
    initial cross potent or pattée / M in SCOTORVM has 'ı' bar, A is barred,
    S is 'wasp-wasted'

M – slightly larger head with bushy hair, straight sided letters, A is unbarred /
    M in SCOTORVM has 'v' bar. An early sub-class Ma has the same head as
    Class A. Other rare early coins (Class AM) have ALEXSANDER.

R – features of Classes M and E; characteristic loop-topped R - very rare variety

E – similar to Class M, fuller hair; concave sides to dumpy letters

D – similar to Class M but hair well swept back, initial cross potent, straight-sided letters, barred A / bulbous horizontally disposed middle of S, C with peaked waist.

H – poorly composed bust; clumsy lettering

J – John Baliol bust

In addition, there are two subdivisions in Class A based on reverse legend, five subdivisions in Class B (a, b, c, d, e) based on use of different hair punches, six in Class M (a, b1, b2, b3, c1, c2) based on subtle differences in crown, hair and lettering, two in Class E (1, 2) based on differing hair punches and other variable and minor differences, two in Class D (1, 2) and two in Class E (1, 2). Where obverse and reverse dies share the same class, the coin is designated a 'true' coin. Many coins have a reverse from a different class to that of the obverse, and so require additional notation. These coins are designated 'mules'. Full attribution of a coin requires specifying its class and subdivision, and the class of the reverse die in the case of a mule. The number of points displayed by the stars/mullets on the reverse is a further categorisation.

The shear magnitude of possible attributions is the first classificatory challenge. Stewart and North identify at least eighty observed combinations of the class, subdivision and point numbers, but considering their estimate of an original production of fifty million coins produced by thousands of dies, any corpus of extant coins can only be an approximate representation of the whole. Coins displaying hitherto unidentified features may therefore confront the cataloguer.

Classes A, B, H and J are sufficiently distinctive not to pose too many difficulties. Classes E and D, while in many ways similar to Class M can usually be differentiated from the many coins subsumed under M by their lettering, although even here the task is sometimes made difficult as the rendition of letters is not always uniform on a particular coin, and muling is common. Muling in Class A is exceedingly rare and only to an M reverse. Class B coins are quite commonly muled but only to M reverses. These two classes as well as Class Ma are also differentiated by only having 24 point reverses, suggesting an early issue before a heterogeneity of point numbers accompanied increased minting activity.

Class R is principally distinguished by the form of that letter, but shares features with other classes, principally Class E. Given the vagaries of letter forms across the spectrum of long-cross sterlings, and the occurrence of other odd singular letters on some coins, the decision to relegate those with a distinctive R as belonging to a separate class is debatable.

Stewart and North recognised the subtleties inherent in determining subtypes, and so provided three helps to identification: descriptions, line drawings and photographs. Their descriptions are meticulous and detailed, but the authors acknowledge that at times prose is defeated by the complexity of what they are endeavouring to describe, as in one instance relating to the hair punch determining Class Be, which "almost defies verbal description" [8]. The thirteen drawings of the various arrangements of the monarch's hair as manifest in six of the eight classes where this feature is a significant discriminator, are in some instances very similar, differentiation being rendered even more difficult by the variable condition of actual coins. The illustrations of the various letter forms for the same six classes are more readily identified on actual coins, although the lack of absolute consistency between classes makes for occasional difficulties. The thirty photographs illustrating well preserved coins are perhaps the most helpful aid to classification, although most extant coins have imperfections that may obscure subtleties. The authors applied their classification to coins held in the Ashmolean and Hunterian museums as illustrated in *SCBI 35*[9], and to coins illustrated in Burns[10]. These may further aid identification for the dedicated cataloguer.

Stewart and North did not shy away from the difficulties inherent in attempting to make sense of their material. Indeed, their determination to be accurate makes for an exhaustive analysis as many statements are necessarily hedged about with qualifiers, uncertainties and exceptions. This reality inevitably contributes to boundary confusion between various subdivisions.

Subtypes in Classes M, E, and D pose the greatest difficulties for the cataloguer. The coins are not only very similar but each of these classes is heavily muled. Muling and the isolated appearance of a looped-top R make the Class R a tentative attribution. In the absence of an intimate familiarity with large numbers of coins, the discernment of class and subclass must rely heavily on the Stewart/North illustrations. This is not always straight forward as a coin in hand

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[8] Stewart and North, (1990) p. 52
[9] J. D. Bateson and N. J. Mayhew, 'Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles 35', 1987.
[10] Edward Burns (1887) Vol. 3.

may appear similar to more than one illustrated type. A classification that relies on such comparisons is time-consuming and unwieldy in practice. It is also unreliable as the discernment of cataloguers will depend on the emphasis they place on the various subtle discriminators that characterise its subcategories.

Major changes to the established Stewart/North classification would be fraught with difficulties, and would negate the further research strategies the new classification suggested to its authors. There is, however, within its structure, scope for the pragmatist to engage a simpler nomenclature.

The Spink catalogue offers a simplified version of the Stewart/North classification[11]. The five subdivisions of Class B are omitted as are the three further subdivisions of Classes Mb and the two of Mc. Mules are subsumed under the class of the obverse, but there is the occasional dilemma, as for example, when an Ma obverse is coupled with an ESCOSSIE REX reverse. This is admittedly a very rare occurrence, but one which defies the Spink arrangement, as according to the catalogue descriptors the coin would fall within Spink's Class B (5051), whereas it should rightfully be classifies as Class Ma (5053). Stewart and North freely acknowledged that mules "are so plentiful and indiscriminate in this series as to add to the confusion rather than resolve it" [12].

A further simplification might be achieved by grouping Classes Mb and Mc, under a single M classification as these coins not only share similar obverses, but are muled across a spectrum of reverses. Coins having the loop-topped R may have an E type bust, and so can be subsumed under Class E, or under Class M where an R reverse has an M obverse. These arrangements could be assimilated into the existing Spink numbering system with some notational adjustments[13].

Collectors may be attracted to the simplicity of arranging their holdings according to the number of points displayed by the mullets/stars on the reverse. Enthusiasm for this categorization is aided by the belief that the sequence of

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[11] An indispensable text, but some qualification to this endorsement is necessary for the coins under review. The descriptor for the Class B coins (5051) as 'Varied portraits' ignores the distinguishing feature of the prominent eye. The alternative rendition of GRA given as G'RA (also stated in Stewart and North's paper) should read GR'A. The illustrations in the most recent edition are dark and lack contrast, and so do not readily aid attributions.

[12] Stewart and North, (1990) p. 38

[13] Coins subsumed under Class M could be referenced as 5054-5, and those under Class E as in the catalogue.

nine numbered points from 20 to 28 may represent different mints, with even suggestions as to the mints involved. Coins with 24 points characterise the earliest coins and have been assigned to the Berwick mint as this was the dominant mint towards the end of Alexander's voided cross coinage. Baliol's early coins exhibit a 22 points reverse on sterlings with the St Andrews mint signature suggesting that this may have been the association for the coins of Alexander.

Stewart's early emphatic support of the points/mints association[14] was tempered by the discovery of reverses bearing different numbers of points linked to obverses from identical dies[15]. I have a further example, two Mb2 coins with 24 and 25 points respectively linked to the same obverse die[16]. The rarity of coins bearing 21, 22 and 27 points "raise doubts whether each of them really represents the output of a separately established mint"[17]. At least sixteen mints were required for Alexander's voided cross sterlings, so a reduction to nine mints for the very much larger single-cross issues would have required a considerable re-organisation, and early planning if point numbers were to identify the nine mints. The abandonment of any possible correlation of point numbers and mints with the Baliol sterlings suggested to Stewart that these changes signified "no more than a typological detail of no importance"[18]. Such a volte-farce is remarkable if point numbers equated with specific mints. The points/mints correlation, is rightly driven by an 'effort after meaning', but suffers its unconscious power to prematurely fill a void occasioned by the absence of documentary evidence.

Amongst many unknowns is uncertainty as to the details of contemporary minting practices. It may be assumed that a single pile bearing the obverse die was inserted into the wooden block or anvil, but it is possible that the block bore more than one pile[19], rendering the production of mules more likely as worn or damaged obverse dies were replaced on the block. Even the term 'mules' is a loose appropriation for a term that is usually applied to the juxtaposition of coinages of a different issue and/or period. It is probable that some of the many reverse dies identified on muled coins were produced within a similar time

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[14] Stewart (1967) p. 21

[15] Stewart and North (1990) pp. 43-44

[16] The Mb2 obverse of these coins has an unusually large letter N ligated to a regular D, and is thus easily identified.

[17] Stewart and North (1990) p. 44

[18] Ian Stewart, 'Scottish Mints' in R. A. G. Carson (ed.), 'Mints, Dies and Currency', Methuen & Co., London, 1971, p. 222

[19] Dennis R. Cooper, 'The Art and Craft of Coinmaking', Spink & Son, 1988, p. 33, *Fig. 28*

frame to the obverses with which they were linked. The reverse dies, born on the trussel, had a much shorter life than obverse dies and so were necessarily produced in larger numbers. It is also possible that specific trussels may have been allocated to individual moneyers, perhaps as a quality control measure, their specificity signalled by minor differences in epigraphy or even point numbers. There are precedents in the former double-cross coinage of different moneyers working at the same mint, using the same obverse die[20].

A nuanced classification needs to be appropriate to its purpose. Numismatists seeking insights into the coinage will be drawn to the minutiae of the Stewart/North classification, and researchers will value its carefully crafted details. For many collectors arranging their coins according to easily distinguishable features will satisfy aesthetic considerations and approximate an historic sequence. In these circumstances, the simplifications mentioned above may suffice.

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[20] Burns, Vol. 1, p. 141.