

Vagaries and constants of epigraphy and design in the single-cross sterlings of Alexander III

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An outcome of endeavouring to classify a group of Alexandrian sterlings within the trammels of the Stewart and North classification¹, is the realization that some coins tax discriminatory powers because they share features of more than one class. Stewart and North were aware of such inconsistencies, but presumably felt comfortable in their attributions based on their grasp of the many epigraphic and design elements of the classes they delineated. Their classification derives from these features, and so it may be useful to note instances of anomalous epigraphy and oddities of design that both delight and encumber the classificatory process. Some design features, on the other hand, are remarkably constant suggesting intention and purpose.

Class B coins frequently have an unbarred A in GRA, a finding at variance with Stewart and North's statement that the A "is usually barred"². Rare coins (Class Be) may have a horn like extension to the upper limb of the G as described for Class R. The odd R which characterises this latter class, also occurs in REX on a D reverse of 25 points, muled to an Mc2 obverse³. Inconsistencies also occur quite frequently on Class E coins. The most identifiable feature of these coins is the concave shape assumed by the outer sides of the uprights of letters, but this feature is variable and not universally applied to all relevant letters. Some letters, especially the T in SCOTORVM, may assume a variety of shapes, including forms found in other classes.

Contraction marks abbreviating GRACIA vary in form and placement. Elongated comma, crescent, thin wedge occurring higher or lower following the R, characterise Class B coins⁴. The bar above the R, so frequent in later coins, does not appear to occur in this class, although a definitive pronouncement is probably unwise; its distribution as identified by Mackay⁵ required some

¹ 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.

² *Ibid* p. 45

³ See illustration p. 4.

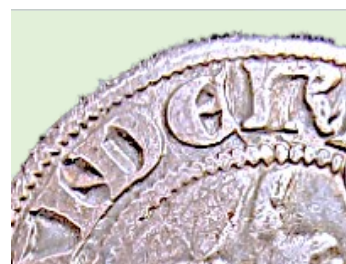
⁴ Kenneth Mackay, 'Abbreviated GRACE on Alexander III's Second Coinage', *N. Circ.* (Aug. 2006), CXIV, 4, p. 204

⁵ Mackay (2006)

adjustment in a later study⁶, as did the occurrences of muling. Thus these two variables, if indicative of geographical patterns of die-sinking, may not be as “compatible” with the points to mints allocation as initially suggested by Mackay⁷.

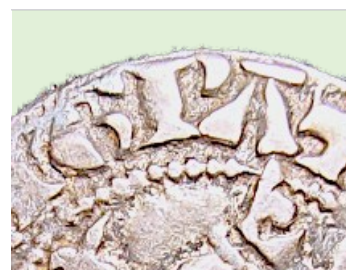
Atypical letters occur through all classes. Many of the following examples may be of no more significance than a reflection of a die sinker’s error, preference or whimsy. I have commented where the oddity seems significant. I suspect none of the following coins are unique. Images are included where the description requires illustration. I have added the point numbers of mullets/stars to the class notation⁸.

A2/24 - a widely spaced R on the obverse, resembling a lower case N, formed by a double strike of the letter puncheon



Ba/24 - a small X in ALEXANDER or in REX

Bb/M/24 - GRACIA abbreviated as GI'A. It is tempting to see the 'I' as an R with a missing foot. There is, however, no space for a 'missing foot'.



Bc/M/24 - a pellet on the bar of N. The pelleted N is featured on some Henry III sterlings.⁹

⁶ Kenneth M. Mackay, 'Abbreviated GRACE on Alexander III's Second Coinage: Supplement' *N. Circ.* (June, 2008) CXVI, 3, pp. 119-121

⁷ Mackay (2006), p. 205

⁸ This form of notation provides maximum information, and is adaptable to a simplified classification. Thus Mc2/D/24 could be rendered M/24.

⁹ I am grateful to Rob Page for advice.

Bc/M/24 - an odd T, its cross-bar formed by curved extensions.



Bc/M/24 - large lettering on one half of the reverse legend, viz. REX SCO TOR VM+ This must be intentional as it applies to all affected letters, the R and O rendered in both medium and large sizes on opposing sides of the cross.



Ma/24 - G resembles a C; the N is unbarred but with a tiny pellet above the gap.

Mb1/24 - obverse is punctuated with a stop and colon: +ALEXANDER•DEI:GRA

Mb2/24 - reverse has a horned extension to the upper limb of S, a closed C and an O formed by paralleled seriffed uprights.



Mb2/24 and **Mb/25** - the same large Ns in ALEXANDER¹⁰



¹⁰ These two coins share the same obverse die.

Mc2/26 - the D of DEI formed by two closely aligned uprights.

Mc2/D/24 - reversely barred N.¹¹

Mc2/D/25 – looped-top R as described for Class R on a D reverse.



E2/22 - the L with a triangular shaped back.

D1/E/26 - lacking the v-shaped bar in M.

J/24 - the S in SCOTORVM rendered horizontally.

Other unusual features are worthy of notice:

A **Ba/24** coin has a patriarchal cross at the end of the reverse legend (Fig. 1), and the obverse of a **D2/26** coin has tiny lines in the form of a saltire cross in front of the sceptre (Fig. 2), features of the die and not a graffito applied to the coin.

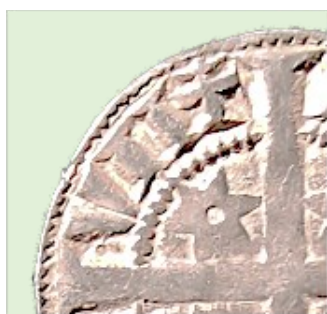


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Perhaps more intriguing in terms of meaning or purpose are those design elements that do have constancy. Twenty points and 22 points reverses all

¹¹ This coin is illustrated in my BNS blog “Atypical single-cross sterlings of Alexander III”, under ‘(e) Classificatory challenge’.

belong to Class E. Moreover, the pellets that are added to the reverses of some of the 20 points reverses have a constant pattern. A single pellet occupies the second (SCO) quadrant and two pellets the fourth (VM+). Stewart and North note that they are usually linked to an E1 obverse, but in the absence of any E2 example, I am inclined to add the E1 linkage to the constancies of this phenomenon.

In keeping with this pattern of uniformity, the two five pointed mullets of 22 points reverses are always in the second and fourth quadrants. The 26 points reverses maintain the diagonal arrangement, with seven pointed stars in the first (REX) and third (TOR) quadrants in all but a few rare coins where the stars occupy the second and fourth quadrants. The single mullet or star forming part of a 21, 23, 25 or 27 pointed reverse, is usually positioned in the fourth (VM+) quadrant, very rarely elsewhere.

There is general adherence to stable patterns across all single-cross coins. While the design arrangements of mullets and stars for the even numbered points coins impose an aesthetically pleasing symmetry, it is very probable that this arrangement, along with point numbers, and the pellet inclusions on some 20 point coins, had a contemporary significance. What that significance was has attracted research and discernment, particularly with regard to the possible association of point numbers and mints. Such an association could reflect a very limited perambulation of moneyers using assigned trussels. The instances of coins with different point numbers sharing the same obverse die could result from a moneyer transferring to a new mint and using his tools of trade from the former site.

