

A Pattern for King John's Irish Coinage

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This note discusses a penny with a regular Short Cross obverse combined with a previously unrecorded and unusual reverse. The coin is illustrated below and is described as follows:

Obv. †HƆNRICVS•R/ƆX, Short Cross coinage class VIa1

Rev. †IOHANNƆSOND, reverse design as the Short Cross coinage, all 3 Ns reverse barred, D formed with curved upright



The coin weighs 1.18g and was found in the parish of Polegate, East Sussex in 2000.

The obverse is typical of the regular Short Cross coinage and the only question is whether it is class Vc or VIa1. The X in REX which is diagnostic for determining this is not particularly clear, but it appears to be formed from the two strokes of class VIa1 and not the 4 wedges of class Vc. Fortunately, other features help to confirm that the obverse belongs to class VIa1. These features include: a smallish head, smaller pearls in the crown and the R in REX which has been squeezed against the hand holding the sceptre, a feature more frequently seen on coins of class VIa1 and VIa2, but less often on coins of class Vc. Class VIa1 commenced c.1210 and is only known for the London mint.

The reverse appears to be struck from a die that is made from punches similar to those used for the regular coinage, but it has a number of unusual features. The moneyer's name John is the commonest in the Short Cross series, occurring at 12 of the 20 English mints, but the name on the coins always reads either IOHAN or IOAN. The full latin inscription, IOHANNES is unknown in the English Short Cross series. The second feature is the use of reverse barred Ns, which is rare in the Short Cross series and not previously seen in class VIa1. The third feature is the letter D which is formed with a concave curved upright using the same punches as a reversed C. This feature only occurs on a few reverse dies of Class VIc1 but is otherwise a very rare feature in the English Short Cross series. Lastly, there are no stops either side of ON, something that is quite unusual before becoming normal practice in class VII.

Despite these unusual features the reverse die does not resemble the style of any of the series of contemporary imitations, produced in Westphalia in the first quarter of the thirteenth century. Furthermore, it would be unprecedented and difficult to contemplate how a Westphalian imitative reverse could be combined with an official English obverse. The coin's weight of just 1.18g is low. However, unlike hoard coins, single-find Short Cross pennies, are frequently found to be this light due to a combination of circulation, light clipping and corrosion in the ground.

The only English mint beginning with the letter D is Durham. The mint was the only one outside London which continued striking during the interdict, closing with coins of Class VIa2 in 1212. While the mint was open during the currency of class VIa1 and there might appear to be a missing gap between its known output of class Vc and VIa2, there are reasons against attributing this coin to Durham. Thanks to the work of Dr Martin Allen we have a detailed knowledge of the pattern of output of the Durham mint.¹ Durham was a one moneyer mint with the moneyer Pieres commencing in late Class IVb and continuing as the only moneyer until the mint closed in class VIIa1. Dr Allen's original die study in 1989 shows that a die linked set of 3 pairs of dies, 3 obverses and 3 reverses, were used by Pieres in class Vc and was followed by a similar set of 3 pairs of dies in class VIa2. This pattern continued at Durham until the 1489.² Despite the large numbers of new coins that have come to light since 1989, they have only reinforced the pattern of 3 sets of dies used at Durham. One new coin provides a link between obverse DU563 and reverse du573 to confirm the second set of 3 dies in class Vc, while another provided the missing third obverse die in the set of 3 dies of class VIIa1.

This strong and consistent pattern of die linkage suggests that if Durham had produced coins of class VIa1 they would most likely have been issued as a set of 3 pairs of dies. The survival rate of coins of this period is high and, although coins from one or two dies may await discovery, it seems unlikely that only one coin would survive from a set of 3 pairs of dies. Furthermore, there is no evidence to explain why a new moneyer Iohannes might have replaced Pieres at Durham in class Vc and only received a single pair of dies in VIa1, before Pieres was reinstated and receives the customary set of 3 pairs of dies in class VIa2. The most telling evidence against this being a Durham coin is of course its unusual reverse features, which are very different to all the reverse dies of Pieres in class Vc and VIa2. This is in total contrast to London, the only other mint striking class VIa, where we cannot differentiate between the reverses of class Vc, VIa1 and VIa2.

If the coin is neither a contemporary imitation nor a coin of Durham, it leaves the intriguing possibility that the reverse mint reading might represent Dublin. This could explain some of the coin's unusual features. The obverse of all the pennies and halfpennies of King John's REX coinage spell his name as IOHANNES. The form of the letter D, as a reversed C is also used throughout the REX coinage. The use of reverse barred Ns is seen on a few dies of the REX coinage, although the majority have normal barred Ns. Overall, the reverse lettering seems similar in style to that used for John's REX coinage. The reverse also names the same moneyer Iohan, representing John de Gray, bishop of Norwich and justiciar of Ireland, who occurs on the earliest REX pennies of Dublin. However, on these early REX coins the moneyer's name is shortened to IOHAN, which had the advantage of leaving space for the longer and unambiguous mint reading of DIVELI for Dublin. Another possible reason for the change might have been to ensure King John's name on the obverse was different and longer than his bishop's name on the reverse.

If this interpretation is correct, the remarkable pairing of a regular (presumably London) Short Cross obverse with a specially made pattern reverse for Dublin, means that an initial proposal for John's REX coinage was to extend the well-established English Short Cross coinage to a new mint at Dublin. We will never know if the pattern was ever shown to King John, but if it was, it is easy to imagine how totally unacceptable it would have been. While John never changed the English Short Cross coinage, which continued to be issued in his father's name, it would be a completely different matter for his new coinage for Ireland. Afterall, he had already issued the extensive local DOM coinage in his own name before becoming king and he now intended to exert his authority. Fortunately, the idea was quickly rejected and as a result King John's REX coinage provides us with one of the most iconic mediaeval coinages with its remarkable symbolism.

David Dykes dated the REX coinage as spanning from 1208/09 to 1211/12.³ In proposing these dates he undertook a thorough review of all the evidence Michael Dolley had cited for associating the start date of the REX coinage with the partial English recoinage of 1204/05. However, there appears to be two pieces of evidence that support a later dating than Dykes proposed.

The first concerns the interpretation of the entry in the Irish Pipe Roll of 14 John, i.e., exchequer year Michaelmas 1211 to Michaelmas 1212.⁴ The account refers to the fine of Robert of Bedford of 1 tun of wine because he refused the custody of the dies. It then goes on to state that it is in the bishop's cellar and he should answer for it. There seems no reason to doubt that Robert of Bedford is the moneyer Roberd, named on the vast

¹ Allen 1979, 52.

² Allen 2003, 26.

³ Dykes 2003, 128.

⁴ Davies & Quinn 1941, 15.

majority of coins of John's REX coinage. Dykes' interpretation was that that the fine relates to Robert giving up his office as keeper of the dies after several years in office starting around 1208/09. However, the wording "refusing custody of the dies" seems to fit better if the fine relates to Robert disagreeing over his initial appointment. The relatively low level of the fine, payment in wine and Robert's continued rise within in the king's administration in Ireland, eventually leading to his consecration as bishop of Lismore in 1218, all suggest the dispute was not too serious and was probably quickly resolved. If the fine relates to Robert's appointment and not his resignation, the Dublin coins that bear his name as moneyer would have been struck after King John's expedition to Ireland in 1210.

The second piece of evidence is from the Close Rolls and has been given wider publication in the online Magna Carta project.⁵ The record is a letter from King John dated 1st February 1215 to Henry the archbishop of Dublin, who had replaced John De Gray as justiciar for Ireland. Item 10 of the letter asks the archbishop to "Diligently hear the account of the keepers of the exchange and our mint, and let us know how they answer and how much profit we shall have thereby." Clearly King John was under the impression that his mint and exchange in Ireland were still operating and he expected to receive the profits. It suggests that John's REX coinage continued until at least February 1215 beyond the tenure of John de Gray as justiciar. Together with a revised starting date of 1210/11, this letter indicates the coinage had a duration of at least 4 years, which is reasonable in comparison to other Irish coinages. However, if the start date was 1208/09, the coinage would need to have spanned at least 6 years, which seems unreasonably long.

Perhaps the chroniclers were correct in associating John's new REX coinage with his expedition to Ireland in 1210. While the first dies, naming John de Gray as moneyer may have been produced in England in 1210, it seems the bulk of the coin production in Ireland started after the expedition, possibly in late 1210 or early 1211 and the coinage continued until at least early 1215. If the coin forming the basis of this article is a pattern for John's REX coinage, then the use of a class VIa1 obverse die fits well with it being made in 1210.

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⁵ Vincent and Flanagan, 2015.

