

The Last Galley Halfpenny

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Very much a surprise appearance on a recent English hammered coin page, found by a metal detectorist here in the UK, the coin may appear quite humble, but it is an extremely rare Soldino of Andrea Gritti, which is one of nine examples found here in England with this one being the best. Rarity aside, the tale it tells shines light on the demise of what was once one of the most lucrative trading missions of the late Medieval period in England.



The annual Venetian trading galley fleets had, at the opening of the 16th century, long been a staple of the English economy. In summertime the large fleet of ships from the Republic of Venice would dock in English ports, bringing a variety of luxuries from the furthest reaches of Venetian influence, and beyond (part of this fleet would also dock in Flanders to trade). These goods included spices, high quality glass, exquisitely decorated books, fine wines, silks, and other items which would sate the appetites of the elite members of English society. The desire to sample the luxuries which Venice could provide generated a constant demand from England, and so the annual galley fleets (the galleys being the oar powered ships that had plied the Mediterranean since antiquity) were always welcome in ports such as London, Sandwich, Dover, and Southampton.

For much of the 15th century the fleets brought their goods, and the first Tudor monarch, Henry VII, did his best to make them feel welcome, and often sided with the Venetians if there were any disputes while the galleys were docked at his country's ports. This favour is highlighted by the invitation which King Henry extended to the nobleman from the fleet of 1506 to dine with him at Richmond Palace. The warm reception of the Venetians is further shown by their importing of enormous numbers of small Soldini into England, where they would circulate as Halfpennies. Three distinct periods are noted: one in the period 1400-1416, another in the 1470s, and one in the very first years of the 16th century. While oftentimes these incursions were regarded as a pest by the English authorities, they handled the situation with delicacy, so as not to dissuade the Venetians from returning with galleys further laden with luxuries the following year.

However, the boom years appeared to end in the year 1509, when the Venetian galleys landed for the final time for many years. With the outbreak of the War of the League of Cambrai the Venetian government could not keep up the annual voyages, for fear of piracy from her enemies. And so, for several years, England went without Venetian luxuries and the port of Southampton, where the galleys had by then made their home port, found it hard to cope without the presence of the galleys. For the

interim the new King of England Henry VIII and his advisor Cardinal Wolsey ceaselessly petitioned the Venetian Ambassador in London for the return of the galley fleets. In time the war ended, and Venice, always eager to enrich herself through trade, could restart the voyages, and in 1518, after an absence of nine years, the galleys of Venice were again sculling up Southampton Water.

The long-awaited return of the galleys was met with fanfare in England, and the news swept through Southampton, where they made sure that all was ready to receive the galley men. The King himself was also excited, and the landmark occasion was marked by a visit from him. In May he visited not long after the ships had docked, and after dinner he and the entire court embarked upon the flagship of the galley fleet to examine the luxuries which they so eagerly wished to acquire. Henry VIII loved the visit, and was amazed by the variety of silks, glasses, and the food which had been especially prepared for him.

However, appearances were deceiving. After the departure of the King Cardinal Wolsey complained to the Venetian Ambassador that the goods brought by the fleet were of inferior quality compared to what had been brought at the start of the century. The Ambassador apologised, promising improvement, but the fleet of 1519 was equally disappointing. The next fleet left Venice in late 1521, but it was dogged by bad luck when part of the fleet was impounded by King Charles of Spain, and when the other ships arrived in Southampton Henry VIII had to intercede on their behalf to have the imprisoned ships freed. Despite this, King Henry's attitude to the Venetians was changing, with his attitude becoming increasingly brusque. He even attempted to persuade the Venetians to side with him in his war with France, putting veiled pressure on the galleys docked in Southampton. After an uncomfortable round of negotiations, the galleys in Southampton were allowed to leave in March 1523.

Another break was seen, and the fleets were gone from England for seven years, no doubt fearing a repeat of the shocking treatment they had previously received. The Venetians, however, could not give up without another effort, and in 1531 they stocked out another fleet to sail for England. This fleet docked in Southampton in September of that year but received a cold reception upon the receipt of more poor-quality goods aboard. This was the final straw, and Sir Thomas More, who acted as Henry VIII's representative, told the Venetian Ambassador that the Venetian fleets were no longer wanted in England. Tensions were also high within the fleet itself, with a mutiny breaking out on the 27 January 1532 over poor pay and rations for the crew. This overspilled into Southampton itself, causing much destruction. The fleet captain himself was attacked, and one of his officers was stoned. Thankfully a letter to the Ambassador in London led to Henry VIII sending the Duke of Norfolk to restore order. This final fleet would depart from Southampton in May 1532. Thus, the lucrative state-sponsored Venetian galley fleets were at an end, never to return to English ports.

The tiny silver Soldino illustrated was a witness to the tumultuous events of the final fleet and arrived in Southampton as part of her cargo. The coin was minted in the city of Venice under the mint master Piero Loredan (initials PL on the reverse) in 1525-1526. It marks the very last of the "Galley Halfpence", as they were known as in England, to arrive on English shores. It was lost, not far from where it had arrived, at Weyhill, Hampshire. It is a tangible reminder of the galley fleets, and one of the few physical traces of the Venetian mercantile presence here. The nine known examples, almost all of which were found relatively close to Southampton, represent what must have been a small parcel of these which arrived aboard the final fleet, which reflects the great rarity of them here in England. Despite them, and their story, being virtually unknown in this country, they are worthy of consideration, and I hope that my small essay highlights the immense importance which the galley fleets had in late Medieval England.

