

An Intriguing Sterling of John I of Brabant 1268-1294

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In 1983 Mayhew published his masterly study of the coinage issued in Northern Europe in the late 13th and early 14th centuries which imitated the Edwardian sterling. This, the first major publication on the subject written in English, carried references to the works of earlier authors many of which are rather inaccessible to present day collectors of these sterling imitations. This article describes a coin I obtained recently from Jean Elsen & ses Fils, Brussels, at their Auction 159, lot 589. The coin in question was issued by John 1st of Brabant struck in the last decade of the 13th century. The chaplet of roses on the head of the bust identifies the coin as a so-called crockard. Circulating widely in England, alongside the bare-headed pollards, these sterling imitations are no strangers to detectorists and are commonly found in hoards of this period.

Figures 1 and 2, shown with the kind permission of the auction house, refer to the coin which is now in my possession. Starting from the initial cross at 12 o'clock the obverse reads I LIMBVRGIE DVX with a colon before the I (for John) followed by a triple "colon" after it. The reverse reads DVX BRABANTIE. Already two unusual features should be mentioned, firstly the colon at the head of the legend rather than the triple pellet of the common type and secondly, and much more unusually, the rather ungrammatical placing at the end of the legend of the title DVX. Common coins of similar type read DVX LIMBVRGIE for Duke of Limburg.

Lot 589 - BRABANT, Duché, Jean Ier (1268-1294), AR esterlin à ...



Fig 1. John I of Brabant crockard. Author's collection. Image courtesy of Elsen.



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Description

BRABANT, Duché, Jean Ier (1268-1294), AR esterlin à tête, à partir de 1289. Au titre du Limbourg. D/ + :I^o LIMBVRGIE DVX B. de f., couronné de roses. R/ DVX-BRA-BAN-TIE Croix longue cantonnée de quatre groupes de trois globules. Ghysens p. 8, 5; W. 256; Mayhew 50 (aucun exemplaire retrouvé). 1,29 g. Très rare.

Condition: **presque Très Beau**

Fig 2. Elsen's catalogue description of the Coin. Image courtesy of Elsen.

This coin was known to Mayhew and catalogued as M50 in his *Sterling Imitations of the Edwardian Type*, published by the RNS 1983. He accurately describes the legend even down to the reversed bar on the N in the third quarter of the reverse. He intriguingly states that "I have not managed to locate this coin" and, therefore, he was unable to illustrate it. He does include a reference "de Witte, I, pl. IX, 256". A supplementary plate 45 shows a poor image

of a similar coin in the Dinant collection with the same legends but having saltire punctuations on the obverse.

After the apparently not unusual issue which arose when the HMRC had added Import VAT at 20% rather than the correct 5%, it was on receipt of the coin that my research began. The outcome of this encouraged my writing of this note. I had already read the description of the coin in Elsen's catalogue shown in Fig.2. This included the Mayhew reference with the comment in French "no example found". The de Witte reference W.256. and a reference to Ghysens p.8,5. were also given. It was these latter two references that prompted some internet searching. The de Witte reference also included in Mayhew's bibliography referred to A.de Witte, *Histoire Monétaire des Comptes de Louvain, Ducs de Brabant et Marquis du Sainte Empire Romain*, published in 1894. It would be normal at this stage that the trail would have halted pending a search in a large national, or well-stocked numismatic, library. Fortunately, the work had been digitised and was available on the Internet. Figures 3 and 4 show the outcome.

256. Tête de face ceinte d'une couronne de roses. + : I : LIMBURGIE DVX.

Rev. Croix longue et pattée cantonnée de 4 groupes de 3 globules posés 2 et 1, et coupant la légende : DVX-BRA-BAN-TIE.

A. Pds. = 1.31.

Collection de Witte.

DE COSTER, n° 179.

Pl. IX, n° 256.

257. Même pièce. Au droit la légende porte + N I N DVX N LIMBURGIE.

A. Pds. = 1.30.

Collection de Witte.

VAN DER CHULS, pl. V, n° 15.

Pl. X, n° 257.

Fig. 3 de Witte Coin #256

An extract from de Witte is shown in Figure 3. The obverse of coin #256 is nicely presented in Lombardic script although the colon at the start of the legend is represented as annulets rather than the pellets on the coin itself and on the engraving in Figure 4. Neither is the N on the reverse printed as reverse barred although again in the engraving, and on the coin itself, it clearly is of this form. The weight of my coin is 1.29g, within 1.5% of de Witte's 1.31g. I

have no access to the reference De Coster #179 apart from a publication of 1883 in the same name predating de Witte by 10 years. I then scrolled down to Plate IX where the coin was illustrated. The relevant extract of this is shown in Figure 4.



Fig.4 Coins # 255 and 256

Unfortunately, but not unexpectedly, the illustrations of the coins in de Witte's publication were engravings. Coin 255 has the common reading on the obverse, I DVX BRABANTIE. Coin 256 has the reading of my coin with the pellet punctuation before and after the I clearly shown. The reverse barred N mentioned above is obvious on the image of the reverse. Of course, only limited conclusions can be drawn from an engraving. The engraver would tend to ignore any imperfections on the flan and try to improve the look of any wear on the bust or legend. Close study of my coin in comparison with de Witte's would suggest that it is from the same obverse die as the coin in the engraving.

I hope this is not just wishful thinking but it does throw up the intriguing question as to whether I now own de Witte's coin. The whole of the Auction 159 consisted of a single collection, that of the late Harry Dewit. I contacted Elsen floating the idea that the coins of de Witte could have been passed through the family to a similar sounding Dewit. My contact at Elsen politely explained that these are extremely common surnames in Belgium and in any case no records of provenance, or even written tickets, had been associated with Dewit's collection.

My thoughts now turned to the reference to Ghyssens, p8,5. in the Elsen auction catalogue. Further enquiries to the auction house itself revealed that there was no new information to be gained from this reference. Ghyssens had used both de Witte's numbering and his plates in his 1983 publication. Despite the kind help of Bradley Hopper of Noonans who examined another of Ghyssens's publications personally no further leads seem to present themselves. All this has reinforced my opinion that this coin must be extremely rare. Mayhew could not

find an example to photograph. Ghyssens used de Witte's numbering and plates which would seem to indicate that he was in the same position. The auction house has commented to me that they have never sold another example. This all goes to show that the pleasure of ownership does not stop at the receipt of a coin itself. Associated research, purely independent of any financial considerations, is an equally satisfying part of our hobby.

If anyone out there, either a collector or museum curator can find another example of this coin I would be very interested in hearing from them via this blog. I also wish to thank Olivier at Jean Elsen, Brussels for his prompt responses to my queries which must have interrupted his busy schedule.

