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Troy and Troyes

The British Numismatic Society constitutionally operates "for the benefit of the public through the encouragement and promotion of numismatic science". I wonder therefore if there are any members who share my concerns about the current state of public understanding of the metrological aspect of numismatics? I ask because a great rift has appeared between the published British scholarly accounts of the history of English weight standards and what the general public is today being led to believe about that same thing.

What the Public is being Told

A. **Youtube**: For better or worse a great deal of historical understanding is being disseminated via Youtube these days. In a quick search of videos there, nine of the first ten suggest to viewers that the English Troy weight standard originated at a medieval market at the French town of Troyes.

B. **Wikipedia**: According to its founding principles Wikipedia articles should be "based on reliable, published sources" and "should be up to date". However not one of the three modern official accounts of the origin of Troy standards (Skinner 1967, Connor 1987 and Conner 2004)* is cited anywhere in the Wikipedia text.

C. **Google AI assistant**: instructed me that (9.35 am, 3/8/26) : "the Troy weight measurement system originated from trade fairs in Troyes, France".

British Scholarly Accounts of the Historical Origin of Troy Standards

I have consulted a good number of relevant accounts by prominent British scholars which have been published over the last 300+ years, including the works of: Greaves, Hooper, Arbuthnot, Folkes, Snelling, Ruding, Ridgeway, Petrie, Grierson, Skinner (1967), Connor (England 1987), and Connor (Scotland 2004). I have not found even one claiming Troy weight standards came from Troyes in France. I am curious to know if readers know of a publication I have overlooked?

How did the belief that Troy weight standards came from Troyes arise?

Regarding Troy weight, the Oxford English Dictionary tells us that "the received opinion is that it took its name from a weight used at the fair at Troyes in France". Unfortunately it does not indicate who we receive this opinion from. The opinion clearly predates 1823 as Connor (1987 p. 119) cites Gilbert (one time President of the Royal Society) rejecting it then.

The earliest surviving source of the opinion I have found is a very short passage in Adam Smith's 1776 "Wealth of Nations". At the time he was writing English Troy had long settled close to its modern standard (16oz = c. 497.6g) as had what would seem to be French Troyes if that is accounted as Paris weight (16oz = c. 489.5g). Thus the real Troy to Troyes ounce relationship was very close to 64:63. However Smith ignored this and conflated the two in an apparent bid to substantiate a single source at the Troyes fair. Smith was a Scot, and seems to have been writing these early section of his book whilst journeying in France. Quite possibly then the fact that Scotland had officially abandoned the English Troy standard in favour of a lower European standard in 1509 influenced his opinion. Equally possibly he had adopting some French theory he had stumbled across in his travels. I do not know and would welcome thoughts.

A Scholar in the USA

Although there seems to be no study by a British scholar citing the Troyes market as the source of English Troy weight, there is an influential Yale scholar who partially did that, as least as far as

etymology goes: Harold Miskimin in his 1967 article, "Two Reforms of Charlemagne?". Unfortunately the paper is deeply flawed. John Munro, who studied under Miskimin recorded a "painful dispute" concerning Miskimin's positions, concluding that "my own professor had made a major error". Munro's dispute took place around 1962 but his frank account of it was only delivered in 1998, after Miskimin's death, in a paper entitled "The Maze of Medieval Mint Metrology". Specifically relevant to current concerns, in 1967 Miskimin stated as a fact that the English word "troy is derived from the name of the French town", citing the Oxford English Dictionary. As pointed out above, OED says no such thing.

Metrological Preconception

Miskimin openly stated he came to the matter with a preconception: he was adopting the postulate that English and French gains were once the same, on the basis of "historical convenience, logic and internal consistency". His preconception was given flawed support by presenting evidence that is always selective and sometimes invented. However Miskimin is just a special case, preconception has dogged historical metrology for several centuries now. The two main camps in Britain have been those who assumed a Germanic tribal source for the Troy standard, (for instance Grierson), and those who assumed a Roman source for the Troy standard (for instance Connor in 1987). Recent archaeological evidence does give some support for a pre-Roman ancient Germanic tribal usage of the troy-apothecaries system, specifically for its **ounce structure**. However the strong evidence for an Oriental source for the **grain structure** of monetary-troy was already well known by 1727 (Arbuthnot) and greatly strengthened in 1967 (Skinner). The failure of both Grierson, Connor and so many others to take account of this evidence can really only be explained by them too holding to flawed preconceptions. They selectively ignored key facts.

It is interesting in this regard to look at the relatively recent work of Dr Nightingale**. Although Nightingale does not, as far as I have discovered, make any reference to the supposed weight of the Troyes fair, she does, like Miskimin give a French source for English Troy. Her preconception is that Henry II created monetary troy in France because he "would use a French standard of weight" for his "mainly French empire". This rests on the implied suggestion that he met with a pre-existing French Troyes 12 oz pound which was already at the modern French standard, thus c. 367.2g. Thus in 1158 he created the sterling penny, also at the modern English standard of c. 1.46g. This would dictate that exactly 252 pennies would be struck to a French Troyes pound. She suggests Henry treated that as a bullion pound, then deducted a 12d seigniorage so as to yield our English tower pound of 240 pennies at c. 350g.

Facts that this account ignores are many, including Skinner's verifiable claim that at 30 troy-wheat grains the sterling penny almost exactly represents half the 60 grain dirhem already created in Damascus around 699. That Grierson observed the target weight of Offa's reformed penny of 793 as 1.45g thus very close to a sterling pennyweight. That Ridgeway and Blunt both observed that Alfred the Great's London penny very exactly weighed a troy pennyweight. All things that happened long before Henry II. The facts Nightingale presented above are all correct but all fit a different narrative, as I will easily demonstrate.

The standard troy pound contained in the official set of Elizabeth I was 16 troy ounces at c. 497.6g. As noticed by 1727, that replicated the Islamic Ratl Kabir. Subsequent discoveries show that further replicates the earlier standard mina of Persia, maintained from the days of Darius and long before him, Sumer. Meanwhile the Attic pound was observably long fixed at close to 7/8 of that Persian standard, and the Roman ounce at 1/16th of Attic. Following Grierson we find Charlemagne's bullion pound to be Attic, thus 16 Roman ounces. 435g.. The modern French pound has long been understood to be 18 Roman ounces. The date when the French bullion pound was officially raised from Charlemagne's by two Roman ounces, c. 435g to c. 489.5g is shrouded in mystery, but it could well be by Henry II in 1158. However, if so it would not be a case of Henry adopting French standards Rather he would be reforming French standards to mimic pre-existing heavier English/Islamic/Persian standards.

This is easily explained via elementary mathematics.

French 16 ounce troyes equates to 16 ounce troy as 7/8 x 9/8 = 63/64.
12 ounces Troy is 256 sterling pennies, thus 12 ounces Troyes is 256 x 63/64 = 252 pennies

The core facts are all as Nightingale states. This factually superior narrative however turns her reality on its head. It indicates that England did not adopt French standards. Rather France mimicked English/Islamic/Persian standards.

Afterword

In this piece I have suggested a way in which the British Numismatic Society might seem to be failing in its constitution duty to the general public regarding core facts about the historical metrology, a matter at the heart of what English money was. I am grateful that this blog facility gives space to air my concerns about the matter.

This is my third offering here touching on the general matter, and the first two got no substantive response from anyone. This contrasts with my experiences with individuals from previous generations, for instance the two former honorary members of the British Numismatic Society I met with, Grierson and Lyon, both of whom intensively engaged with the topic. My regrettable conclusion is that elite academic British numismatic scholarship itself has stopped engaging with this core matter during my own lifetime.

* " "
by F G Skinner A Science Museum survey, HMSO 1967

" " R D Connor, HMSO, 1987

" " R. D. Connor and A. D. C. Simpson
National Museums of Scotland, 2004,

** "English Medieval Weight-Standards Revisited" Pamela Nightingale, BNJ 2008