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Editor-in-chief:

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Technical editor:

ENIKŐ KOVÁCS

Contact: acta@numizmatika.org

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Medieval pattern coin from Esztergom

ENIKŐ KOVÁCS

A rare and yet unpublished pattern coin was found near the city of Esztergom. The exact date and place are still in question. The importance of the pattern coin is yet highly significant in getting to know the coinage system of Hungary in the 12th century. This is a problematic age in the medieval coin manufacturing of the kingdom, due to the lack of written sources and coin legends referring to the system. Minting tools are also rarely known from the era, as they had always been treated with great attention throughout the history of coinage, and had been guarded well, in order not to make it possible to use them against the will of the legal minting authority.

Description

The pattern coin in question is made of lead and its diameter is 19 mm. It was struck with the obverse die of the denar type H 99–101:¹ cross with beads and crescents in corners. The design is completed by three bead formed *siglas* situated as shown in (Fig. 1).

As the coin type struck in the pattern lacks any kind of legend referring to the king or the minting place, the precise dating of the piece leaves several questions unanswered. Based on the style and form of the design the denar type and the test piece can clearly be placed in the first half of the 12th century. Some scholars had made theories of the more accurate dating of the minting, yet none of them had been proved undoubtedly. In his monographic summary Bálint Hóman describes the coin type as the denar of King Béla II (1131–1141), referring to the chronological system set up by Károly Nuber.² This dating though had not been accepted widely. Based on the coin hoards found in the last century, and the idea that anonymous denar types should be paired with similar ones bearing legend stating the king's name, László Kovács set up a new chronological system of the era. In this hypothesis, the denar type struck in the test piece could be used through the reign of King Kálmán (1095–1116) and his son King István II (1116–1131).³ This new dating had neither been proved, nor denied since then. Given these pieces of information, the pattern coin could have been struck somewhere between the 1095 and 1141.



Fig. 1.

1 CNH I 87–89, CNH P 11, U 52.

2 HÓMAN 1916, 249.

3 KOVÁCS 1997, 287.; 1947 fn., 288.

Minting tools in Medieval Hungary

Equipment of minting are rare to find from the middle ages, and are mostly from collections or auctions. Their real finding place therefore is scarcely known. From medieval Hungary only five dies and – excluding the piece from Esztergom – two pattern coins were known. Among the dies, two are near in age to the newly found pattern:⁴

1. Trussel obverse die of the denar type H 53⁵ of Béla II
2. Trussel reverse die of an uncertain type denar from the 12th century

The two previously known pattern coins are of King Solomon (1063–1074) and King Charles I (1301–1342). The test piece of the denar of King Solomon turned up in an auction several years ago.⁶ The thick lead pattern coin has the obverse of the H 14 denar⁷ struck on it. The test piece was clearly polished after being struck. Its surface was flattened, the design is less bulging, and the edges were formed in an all around even, slightly out-curving shape.⁸ The pattern coin from King Charles I is exceptional, due to the fact that it was found during an excavation in Visegrád and so it can be connected with a specific place and context.⁹ This test piece is also made of lead, but differs strongly in its figure from the pattern coin of the 11th century. The obverse design of the H 448 type groat¹⁰ is struck on a lead plate that was hammered flat and cut out roughly, without any decorating intentions. Left of the design we can see traces of an earlier strike on the plate. These marks show that this reused pattern was clearly meant for practical functions, without any importance on its appearance. The design of the groat which appears on the ready coins is not the final version, either, but a control strike of a phase in engraving the die and it misses several details including the legend and the scepter of the seated king.¹¹

The pattern coin from Esztergom differs from both medieval test pieces known so far. This one has – by appearance – more in common with a seal, than a medieval coin. The lead in this case was not hammered flat, but moulded. This way the die sank deeper in the soft material and pushed some of it out all around itself creating a form similar to a seal. (Fig. 2) On the bottom of the coin pattern we can see the impression of the surface it was made on. (Fig. 3) On this test piece there are no signs of being refined after the strike.

These significant differences between the three test pieces could be explained by their stochastic making process and the diverse goals they were used for. Being just a probe version, coin patterns were usually made from the raw material that was available most easily. As one can see on the groat pattern from Visegrád these pieces were reused if needed, or simply struck on a snip of lead found in the yard. These rougher and unpolished pieces had no other purpose than trying out how the new die worked. Those more refined – like the one from the reign of King Solomon – could serve different, more versatile purposes, maybe for more ceremonial occasions.



Fig. 2–3. (Photo: Cs. Gedai)

4 Both dies are now in the Hungarian National Museum. GEDAI 1985–1986, 48–49.

5 CNH I 61, U 45.

6 Pannonia Terra 1997 October 18–19, lot 17/a. The test piece was bought by the Hungarian National Museum (1B.1998.1 MNM).

7 CNH I 19, U 8.

8 TÓTH 2016, Fig. 20–21.

9 KOVÁCS–GRÓF 2008, 307.

10 CNH II 7, U 355.

11 TÓTH 2016, Fig. 18.

Historical background

Esztergom played a major role in the governing of medieval Hungary, especially in the age of the Árpád dynasty, when – besides being an archbishopric and a commercial center – it occurred as one of the five greatest royal seats in the kingdom. From 1221 on, there are literary sources that mention the chamber working in the city, or the names of engravers.¹² The mint's work is traceable until its slow fading in the late 13th and early 14th century.¹³ Archaeologists and historians made several attempts to find the exact place of the mint in the city, including the castle, the royal town and the *suburbium* known as Kovácsi.¹⁴

In the 11–12th century there was supposedly only a single (at most two) royal mint, producing all the coins supervised by the royal court. This system went on until the decentralization reforms of the 13th century. The place of this early royal mint is, however, still not identified undoubtedly. The pattern coin discussed presently is exactly from this problematic period. Many researchers share the idea that the minting took place in Esztergom from the very beginning of coinage, from around 1000, and the legend REGIA CIVITAS could refer to this city.¹⁵ Lajos Huszár collected the observations that could support this theory of the early mint.¹⁶ From the period when the new coin pattern was made there are also finds that could refer to the royal mint's work in Esztergom. Several medieval scales are known from the city, which – by the analysis of Nándor Fettich¹⁷ – could be used before the Mongol invasion in 1241–42. One of these scales was found in a burnt down house along with the remains of a man and other tools of a goldsmith. The house could have been perished during the invasion, but the closest analogy for the scales is from earlier years, and shows monetary marks: Fettich mentions a similar pair of scales found in Buda that has the design of a denar from the second half of the 12th century struck in one of its pans.¹⁸

Even a different minting tool from the same period can be connected with the city. The 12th century reverse trussel mentioned above in the second place is – by the inventory of the National Museum of Hungary – said to have been found in a grave in Esztergom.¹⁹ It is worth considering the fact that minting tools with known provenience indicate the place of a mint with high probability. The pattern coin of King Charles I's groat was found in Visegrád, where literal and archaeological sources could confirm the operating of the royal mint at that time.²⁰

Conclusion

The new pattern coin from Esztergom could have been used in the long searched royal mint. As the exact circumstances of finding the new test piece are unknown, it cannot provide irrefutable evidence of the royal mint's work in Esztergom before the 13th century. On the other hand, it adds extra information to the group of already known dates that in any way could refer to the mint's earlier operation. Although neither of these small signs is a concrete positive proof, they – along with the new pattern coin – unambiguously raise the probability of the mint's existence.

12 HORVÁTH 1988, 300.

13 HUSZÁR 1968., ZOLNAY 1965.

14 ZOLNAY 1960; GYÖRFFY 1983, 345–346; HORVÁTH 1988.

15 The studies of the debate about the first mint's place were collected by László Kovács, Kovács 1997, 232–246, Most recent article in subject is GEDAI 2013–2014.

16 HUSZÁR 1938, 17–19. more detailed in HORVÁTH 1988, 300–301.

17 FETTICH 1968, 158–163.

18 MÉRI 1954.

19 GEDAI 1985–1986, 48. (Original inventory number: MNM 21B/1905)

20 TÓTH 2004.

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