

THE FALL OF A MYTH: THE COPPER COIN OF DOM JOÃO I WITH ARABIC INSCRIPTION

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In the first volume of his treatise on Portuguese coinage, although avowing uncertainties on the denomination of the copper coins of Dom João I, Aragão [2] indulged in routine and classified those coins as *ceitis*. Thus, under this name, he described two varieties of the *real preto* of that king and, as usually, he illustrated those varieties in the plates.

Moreover, Aragão advanced the hypothesis that the first Portuguese copper coins could have been produced in order to provide capital for the expedition to Ceuta or to circulate, after the conquest, in that North African place. To support his hypothesis, Aragão published a copper coin in poor state of preservation, whose obverse was identical to the homologous side of the *real preto*, but whose reverse exhibited an intricate design, which he interpreted as a possible remnant of an Arabic legend. Cautiously, Aragão admitted that this exotic exemplar could represent a pattern, produced at Lisbon for a prospective issue whose destination would be Ceuta, and he printed the correspondent illustration both in the text and the plate XXVI (*Fig. 1, A*).

Curiously enough, from the time of publication of the above mentioned volume (1874) until now, the authors of general works and catalogues of Portuguese coins, namely Batalha Reis [4, 5] and Ferraro Vaz [6], ignored

the dubitative tone of Aragão and presented the copper coin of Dom João I with Arabic inscription as a definite reality. As far as it can be inferred from their texts, those authors did not carry out the slightest effort to base that opinion on direct scrutiny of the unique exemplar studied by Aragão. On the contrary, all their knowledge of that unique coin was apparently based on the original engraving published in 1874. Moreover, although the mint-signature L (for Lisboa) is clearly reproduced in the engraving, Batalha Reis[5] and Ferraro Vaz[6] unjustifiably attributed the production of that exemplar to the mint of Ceuta.

Considering the incongruousnesses of those attitudes and the uppermost importance of such a coin for the Portuguese monetary history, we decided to follow the track of the exemplar published by Aragão, in order to find it and to form a personal opinion on the odd design of its reverse. It was not a difficult task. It is known that Aragão based the most part of his work on material supplied by Dom Luís, king of Portugal (1861-1889), and that the coins owned by the monarch were used as the main nucleus around which it was built the National Coin Collection, now kept at the Museu Numismático Português. So, the probabilities of finding the coin at this museum seemed fairly good and our first move was to see if it had been included in the respective catalogue, whose first volume — Portuguese coins from Dom Afonso Henriques (1128-1185) to Dom Filipe III (1621-1640) — was published by Amaral[7] in 1977. It was a good guess. The coin published by Aragão is succinctly described, but not illustrated, in that work, with the serial number 951 (museum inventory number 4713).

The description is no more than a literal copy of the museum file card, whose text seems to have been influenced by a confusing passage of Batalha Reis [4]. In reality, Batalha Reis, in order to conciliate the idea of an Arabic inscription with the puzzle represented by an illustration where it is impossible to discern a single well-defined symbol, advanced the hypothesis of a work of poor quality due to an engraver not acquainted with that idiom. However, since Batalha Reis had not seen the coin but only the correspondent illustration, it remains to be known whether he was imputing the error to the die-engraver or to the engraver who had worked the plates for the Aragão's book. Amaral was not in the same position. At least in principle, he knew the actual coin and, when repeating the hypothesis of a poor interpretation of an Arabic legend, he was certainly charging the die-engraver with the fault. Moreover, in the catalogue of the Museu Numismático Português, there is a statement which deserves correction. In fact, in the description of the reverse, one can read that this side exhibits «indecipherable characters, which Aragão says to be Arabic». The truth is that Aragão was more circumspect when

dealing with the matter and that his exact words were «vestiges of characters, which seem Arabic to us».

Our next step was to scrutinize directly the coin and to obtain a series of imprints and photographs under different conditions of illumination, in order to achieve the best reading of the types. From that work it resulted an entirely different interpretation of the coin.

DESCRIPTION OF THE COIN

The coin (*Fig. 1, B*) may be described as follows:

Obv. (...) IVT(OR)(.....)

The abbreviation IHNS of the king's name crowned, enclosed by an eight-arched tressure. The mint-mark L (for Lisboa) is shown below the abbreviation.

Rev. The corrosion, particularly severe at the periphery, did not leave any traces of the circular inscription which might have existed. On the field, a complex of reliefs, without the slightest resemblance to Arabic characters (*Fig. 1, C*). However, among those reliefs it is possible to identify (a) remnants of a polylobed tressure (*Fig. 1, D-1*), (b) vestiges of the abbreviation of the king's name, particularly the final S (*Fig. 1, D-2*), and (c) evident remnants of the *quinas* of the Portuguese heraldry (*Fig. 1, D-3*).

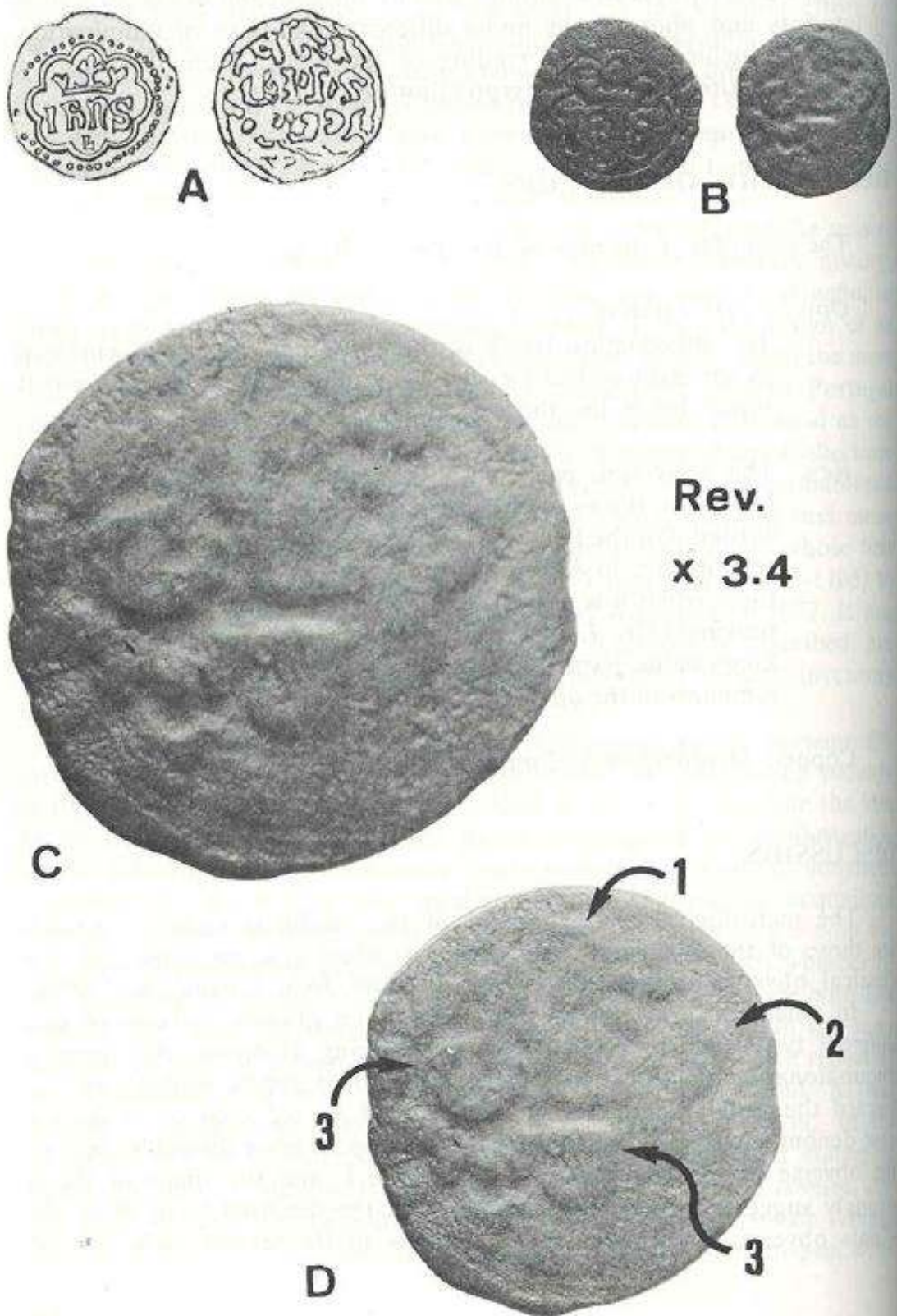
Copper. Diameter 20.5-22 mm. Weight 1.85 g.

DISCUSSION

The metrological characteristics of the exemplar under discussion are those of the *real preto*. Moreover, its obverse is no more than the classical obverse of the *reais pretos* of Dom João I struck at Lisboa.

In what concerns the reverse, there is an obvious mixture of two different types, which resulted from overstriking. However, the virtually unquestionable identification of the superposed types, enables one to discard the usual eventuality of restriking of an old coin to produce a new denomination. In fact, one of those types is, most probably, that of the obverse of the *real preto* of Dom João I, and the shape of the S strongly suggests that it was stamped with the die used to produce the «final» obverse of the coin. The remnants of the second blow are the

Figure 1



quinas, which appear in a very large proportion of the Portuguese coinages. However, considering the epoch of production, the size of those elements and the fact that they are not enclosed by a tressure, it is virtually impossible to think of another type besides that which was used for the reverse of the *real preto*. It is well known that, in this type, there is a small castle in each one of the angles of the cross formed by the *quinas* and it is a fact there are no identifiable vestiges of the castles in the coin under consideration. Nevertheless, taking into account the superposition with the reliefs of another type, the obvious weakness of the blow and the corrosion, the lack of identifiable traces of the castles does not seem enough to discard the hypothesis that a reverse-die of *real preto* was the second die which was used to strike the coin.

Therefore, there are good reasons to admit that the «final» reverse of the coin under discussion was the result of a first blow from an obverse-die of *real preto* followed by a second blow from a reverse-die of the same denomination. The sequence of the happenings was probably as follows:

1. During a routine production of *reis pretos* at the mint of Lisboa, an exemplar was badly struck — badly centred, double-struck and weakly stamped.

2. The fact was noticed and the coin put again over the fixed die to receive another blow.

3. However, when placing again the coin over the fixed die, the moneyer inverted the position of the flan.

4. Consequently, the second blow stamped the obverse type over the previous reverse and, conversely, the reverse type over the previous obverse.

5. As it frequently happened, one of the «final» sides — the «final» obverse — was deeply stamped and so it does not display evident traces of the first type. On the contrary, the opposite side — the «final» reverse — was not so deeply stamped and the remnants of the first type stay visible.

The above described sequence of happenings is not so uncommon as one can suppose. To speak only of medieval coins of the Iberian Peninsula, we shall remember that, a few years ago, Crusafont^[3] demonstrated that another controversial exemplar — a Catalan *òbol* attributed to

Alfons I—is no more than a coin of Pere I displaying abnormal features which resulted from the same technical error.

Therefore, we should not blame too severely a busy fifteenth century moneyer for that mistake. But we will never be severe enough to the twentieth century numismatists who—based upon an outdated illustration of an exemplar which they could easily submit to direct scrutiny—indulged in laziness and created the myth of a copper coin of Dom João I with Arabic legend, which never existed.

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