

Royal Coin for Her Majesty Anna Leigh Late Medieval English Gold Coin

In the latter half of the 16th century, gold became abundant throughout Europe, and English gold coins became more prevalent. The increase in gold supply was primarily because of an influx of gold from the New World (via Spain), but also due to the success of English privateers. The use of gold coinage was a great boon to the Royal economy, and gold is considered a major reason for the economic success that occurred at the start of the Tudor reigns.

Gold coinage was so important that most mints were not permitted to strike in gold. Whereas silver mints were scattered throughout England, gold coins came exclusively from the Tower of London. At the same time, new technology was emerging that would change minting. The screw-press replaced medieval striking techniques, providing more uniform and reliable imprints and paving the way for modern coinage.

Coins from this period in England do not include minting dates, so the dating is based on coin styles and content. The die axis of these coins, like most medieval coins, is random.

As the medieval period came to an end, there was a series of massive debasements in which the royalty secretly diluted the gold content of coins without changing their nominal value. This debasement resulted in a loss of trust in coinage that had been based on the inherent value of metals, and marked the end of medieval coinage.

The Royal coin for HRM Anna Leigh is made of “jeweler’s gold”, a type of brass intended to have a similar color to modern gold jewelry. (Medieval gold coins would have been more reddish in color.) We began with sheet brass, cut it into 1-inch strips, then rolled the sheets to the appropriate thickness. This process hardens the metal, so the strips were annealed and polished, after which coin blanks were punched. The coins were made with a combination of pressing and striking, as might be seen in late period medieval mints.

Obverse

Although women were featured on the obverse of many medieval coins, Elizabeth I (who reigned 1558-1603) was known for leading her country by herself and is one of the best-known medieval queens. Her coins provide excellent examples of how a female monarch would be depicted on coinage.



The series of coins that were struck in 1559 are among the earliest in Elizabeth's reign. They are the first to depict Elizabeth herself. The exquisite detail of the engraved bust demonstrates the maturity of English minting in the late medieval period. With a diameter of 3cm, these gold coins contained more rare metal than almost any medieval coins, particularly compared to those that might be used in everyday transactions.

Elizabeth is depicted wearing her royal crown and with her characteristic ruff and an elaborate outfit. Her long hair flows down her back. There is generally a circle (wire-line or beaded) separating the figure from the surrounding inscription.



The inscription on Elizabethan coins is remarkably consistent. It begins with the monarch's name, almost always spelled out completely (smaller coins used later in the reign might shorten it to "Elizab"). This is followed by "Dei gratia" (by the grace of God), which is usually shortened to "D.G.". The kingdom is then named, either "ANG" or "AN", although sometimes Hibernia also gets a mention. The final word, "Regina" (queen) is abbreviated variably depending on the amount of space left (REG / REGI / REGIN / REGINA). Unlike earlier medieval coins, the words of the inscription are clearly separated by a dot or a double-dot or a cross.

For Anna Leigh's coin, we modified the inscription only with regard to the names of monarch and kingdom: ANNALEIGH•D.G.•AETHELMEARC•REGINA•

Reverse



The reverse is based on a coin from the reign of Henry VIII in the first half of the 16th century. The Tudor rose is depicted in the center, overlying a cross with arms ending in fleur de lis. Between the fleurs are depicted the King's initial with a crown and the English lions. Converting the H's and lions to fleurs makes an easy transition to SCA motifs, as it depicts the traditional rose of the Royal peers atop the escarbuncle of Æthelmearc.

The inscription was taken directly from this coin: RVTILANS•ROSA•SINE•SPINA (the red rose has no thorns). This inscription is sometimes taken to mean that Henry himself was a “dazzling rose without thorns”, which is certainly true of our Queen.

Size

Late 15th-century gold coins vary widely in size but are much larger than early-medieval gold currency. The exemplar coin from Henry VIII is 2.4 cm in diameter; the coins from early in Elizabeth's reign are 2.9 – 3.1 cm. We chose to make a 1” coin, which would be large by SCA standards but would still fit nicely in your palm.

References

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