



Semi-official counterfeiting:

'False' coinage produced within
the French mint system, 1380-1422,
and what it tells us

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Introduction



1. French gros florettes of the period 1417-20: genuine (left) and counterfeit (right). All coins coll. the author unless otherwise attributed.

Counterfeiting in one form or another has been around as long as coinage itself. While most of it has traditionally been private-enterprise fakery, with individuals trying to rip off their fellow individuals – and, of course, it is still going on, to the point where the Canadians had to add micro-engraved security features to their “Loonies” and “Toonies” – there have been a wide variety of imitations (illustration 2). Some of these have been official; the Roman series, for example, contains numerous examples of “fourrée” denarii, which are silver-plated¹ copper coins, at least some of which appear to have been struck with official dies.

¹ Not, of course, plated in the sense of chemical or electro-plated; they were base-metal blanks wrapped in silver foil and struck.



2. 2011 Canadian “Loonie” test token with anti-counterfeiting features (detail to right)

In the fifteenth century the problem is somewhat complicated. There were counterfeits *per se*: private-enterprise fakes made of base metal produced in clandestine workshops to be passed as genuine. Examples of these include the well-known tinned pennies imitating Edward I and successors in England. At the other end were genuine, state produced coins which were struck to lower standard; the government regarded them as the real thing, but a variety of thinkers (e. g. Nicole Oresme) regarded debasement as essentially official counterfeiting, a sort of robbery against the public by issuing coinage which claimed to be of a certain value but which was in fact worth less than stated (Illustration 2). Here in the US the closest analogy was the issue of base-metal coinage in 1965, replacing the silver coinage of 1964, while ostensibly the same value².

² See any catalogue of modern US coinage. Nowadays the only fractional coins struck to pre-1965 standards are those in the silver proof sets offered by the US Mint; see <http://catalog.usmint.gov/silver-proof-set-2015-SW2.html?cgid=proof-sets#start=1> (but note that this link is only good through the end of 2015).

Types of Imitations: 1. Official

Between these extremes we find a variety of imitations, some of which were authorized. As we are here considering two issues of coinage: the French “blanc dit guénar” of 1385, and the “gros dit florette” which more or less replaced it from 1417, we have certain examples of each (Illustration 4)³.



4. Coins of Charles VI: Gros “dit Florette”, 1417–20, top; blanc “dit Guénar”, 1385–1419. The inscriptions are the same: obv., **FRANCISCVS REX**, rev., **SIT DOMINI BENEDICTIO**. Shapes of the letters varies, as do the word-separators (usually **•**, sometimes **!**).

³The basic outline of the coinage production is from my dissertation: Sorenson, D., *Silver and Billon Coinage in France under Charles VI, 1380–1422*, Cambridge 1988.

The obvious examples are those of the great duchies, Burgundy and Brittany, and, late in the reign, Henry V of England for his French territories. They issued coins which were interchangeable with the official coinage, and, at least in the case of the Burgundian blancs, circulated alongside it (Illustration 5). Beginning in the reign of Philippe le Hardi, who issued a few blancs, then reaching a peak in the reign of his son Jean le Bon (1402-19), both in terms of blancs and gros, they continued into the reign of Jean's son Philippe le Bon (1419-67), who copied a variety of issues, including Henry VI's blanc aux écus as well as the double tournois known as the “niquet”. All of these were perfectly legitimate in the eyes of the French crown, which at one point was actively involved in their production⁴.



5. *Two Burgundian Florettes: Jean le Bon (left) and Philippe le Bon (right).*

Types of Imitations: 2. Semi-Official

The Breton issues are more problematic (Illustration 6). As Brittany, unlike Burgundy, was not

⁴ The archives at Dijon contain a fine series of mint accounts for the period, filed as B.1593 and B.1594. These include mint accounts for the royal and Burgundian mints at Dijon, and French royal treasury accounts of 1417-20, among others.

closely tied to the French crown, its issues – much less common than the Burgundian ones – may have been more tolerated than officially accepted. Still, the treatment meted out to counterfeiters does not seem to have been applied to Breton agents, so that some sort of tolerance must have been the order of the day⁵.

The English issues were issued by someone who was, at least at first, openly hostile, by Henry V as a claimant to the French crown. As such they were intended to fit in with what was already there, but were hardly officially accepted. Later, after the Treaty of Troyes, they became at least semi-official.



6. Breton (left) and Anglo-Norman (right) florettes.

One step down from that was the series of gros issued by the Dauphin Charles, later Charles VII, from his setting up his own government in 1418 (Illustration 7). At first the equivalent of the king's issues⁶, they were soon produced to much lower standards, as the Dauphin tried various ways to make

⁵ Breton blancs of various types do turn up in royal hoards, notably that of Commer (BN 1958, pp. 117-28), which contained 15.

⁶ Not getting into a discussion of king / puppet vs. Dauphin regent / rebel here!!

enough money to overcome his initial defeats. The last ones, in 1422, were small, base, grubby looking coins, with a silver content reduced to 2.7%, as opposed to the issues of 1418, which were 42.5% silver.



7. Florettes, royal (top row) and delphinal (middle and bottom rows).

These bad coins, which imitated the (somewhat) better royal gros reasonably closely – they were, after all, official products made by skilled mint personnel – were a major reason for the elimination of the royal gros in 1421, although they remained in production in the Dauphin's mints until the death of king Charles.

Another sort of imitation, which probably should be classed as counterfeit even though its production was nominally official, was the sort of sharp practice which in part led to the introduction of mint-marks in the French mints in 1389. The blancs struck before that date had no official distinguishing marks. As the mint officers were responsible for ensuring that the coinage which their mint produced was up to the required standards, but there was no way of distinguishing who was responsible for what coins, it was easy enough for a dishonest master to use good coins from some other mint to send in for verification, while producing slightly substandard coins for distribution. This seems to have been common enough for some mints to use dies with unofficial marks to distinguish their product from that of other mints; notable examples are the three-pellet word separators used at Angers and Tournai. The changes made in 1389, which among other things introduced mintmarks, put a stop to this.

Types of Imitations: 3. Unofficial

Proceeding further down the scale, we find the products of seigneurial minters such as Rummen, whose lords were notorious imitators of a variety of coinages⁷. Seigneurial counterfeiting in the Low Countries was nothing new; slightly debased imitation sterling pennies had plagued the English since the

⁷ Illustration 8. Top row: Rummen guénar from Sixbid.com, iNumis, Mail Bid Sale 20, 12 March 2013, lot 1476, realized E 400. <http://www.sixbid.com/browse.html?auction=635&category=14188&lot=652483>

introduction of the original – but Rummen was notorious for its counterfeiting.



8. Counterfeits. Rummen Florette (from Sixbid.com, see note 7), top row; two tinned copper counterfeit Guénars, middle row; lead counterfeit Guénar, bottom left; copper counterfeit Florette, bottom right.

The issues always had the name of the lord of the territory, usually Jean de Wesemael (1418–64), on them, although they bore the coat-of-arms of someone else; this did not save the agents of the

lordship when they were caught and executed as counterfeiters⁸.

In most cases, however, when we are discussing counterfeiting we are dealing with the usual “private enterprise” sort. This usually involved the production of base-metal coins which looked enough like official ones to pass in a group. The usual medieval material was tin-plated copper, since the tin looked sufficiently silvery to pass a cursory inspection. Some examples survive, although they are quite uncommon. It is all too easy for us to assume that they would not have fooled anyone who was even marginally competent; that, however, is an illusion. Nowadays old tinned items are dark, as the tin discolours with age; new tinned items are sufficiently silvery to pass muster, especially when a few of them are passed in a large group. The differences in the details of the coins are plain enough to an experienced numismatist, or to a mint inspector, but they would not have been clear to the average vegetable-seller in a town market.

Getting back to the question of fakes produced with official dies, as we find so frequently in the so-called “fourrées” in the Roman denarius series, it turns out that we may have a medieval example which can shed some light on the matter. The generally accepted hypothesis, that they were produced officially, that Sheffield-plated blanks⁹ were added to the planchet supply and were struck officially, like good silver ones, may be correct; but there are other possibilities which can be considered. Given that, at least in France, mint personnel got paid largely by the number of coins they produced, it would provide a powerful motive to pad the production figures with questionable coins, if the Roman personnel got paid

8 Not the easiest thing to track down. There were numerous ordonnances by various authorities against these coins; see Serrure, E. P., *Notices sur les monnaies frappées à Rummen, par Jean II ...*, Gand 1839, p. 17.

9 So-called “Sheffield plate” was a sort of imitation silver plate made by wrapping base metal in heavy silver foil, heat or pressure welded together; it was common for various sorts of tablewares mainly before the development of electroplating in the 1840s.

the same way.

Paris 1420: Mintworkers as Counterfeiters

In the case for which we have the best documentation, which is not all that good, we find two entries in the records of the Cour des Monnaies in Paris, that indicate that some workers were not entirely on the level¹⁰. The entries are brief: the first one, dated 28 May 1421, simply notes the seizure of a small wooden money-coffer (“un petit coffret de bois des deniers”) which contained copper and silver which had been cast, found in the lodging of several workers of the Paris mint”. The second, dated 6 November of the same year, tells us that one Guillaume de Saussoy and others of the mint-workers confessed to having made blanks for striking counterfeit gros and preparing them for striking. The entry ends with “Les aucuns este executez”.

With all the ambiguities of this entry – is the building part of the mint complex, or simply an outside lodging-house? Is the coffer a money-box, or a box which contained actual coins, albeit bogus ones? – it is evident enough that here was a plot hatched among some of the mint workers to produce counterfeit florettes, which was somehow uncovered. It is particularly curious, because these workers were not the personnel who had anything to do with the production of actual coins; they did the odd jobs of the mint, such as preparing the blanks for striking. So we know that they knew how to prepare the flans according to orthodox mint practice. They were not charged with the tasks of producing the dies nor of striking the coins. Accordingly we have the questions of how they were going to get dies – steal them from the wardens, or have fake ones made by some corrupt goldsmith, perhaps? Striking them themselves might seem straightforward; but when we remember that the mint workers had the privilege

¹⁰ Archives Nationales (Paris), Z1B 2.

of being exempted from “guet et garde”, watch and ward, or sentry duty¹¹, it's easy to forget that there was a good reason, and it wasn't merely to attract applicants. The process of striking was loud! Pounding metal on metal all day every work day was presumably enough to do a job on the hearing of anyone within range; now imagine doing it in some public lodging-house (Illustration 9)¹².



9. Schematic of a mint, time of Louis XII (1498-1515).

Preparing blanks was bad enough – the process of “blanching”, or surface-enriching, the flans required the use of dilute nitric acid, which was not pleasant for anyone downwind – but striking coins out of normal working hours is not something that endears the striker to his or her neighbors. And, of

11 “Guet et garde”, or watch and ward, was a common and onerous feature of city life in France in this period as it was in England; it's the basis of the colonial American militia system. Every citizen was liable to make the rounds as a sentry or constable, with his own equipment, to provide a first line of defense against both internal criminals and outside attackers, and in the case of the latter to delay the attack long enough for the professionals of the garrison to arrive on the scene. Exemption from this duty was eagerly sought after. See Archives Nationales, T1491, papers of the Corporation des Monnayeurs. For a colonial example see *The Code of 1650*, Hartford 1833 (and many other editions) for a much later version.

12 Illustration 9. From Blanchet and Dieudonné, *Manuel de numismatique française*, t. 2, Paris 1916, p. 23.

course, the location had its dangers – the “hostel” had a lot of inhabitants who would have been all too familiar with the sounds of flan preparation, and who could have easily alerted the authorities.

These are interesting from a technical point of view. What sort of fakes were these people trying to make? Most fakers produced either pure copper imitations, thereby saving the value of the silver, or tinned copper fakes, which looked silvery enough to pass if they were paid out in a group. But these were not like that; they were billon, good enough to be better than the ordinary fakes.

The normal coinage of the period was not very good; it was at this point (28 May 1421 [O. S.]) quite base. They were nominally about a fifth silver (0.199 fine), weighing about 2.5 gm (2.447 gm)¹³. They look it. They were shortly to be entirely replaced with a very different coinage in August. So we have to wonder exactly what they were about.

Such clues as we have are few but tantalizing. The next entry, in fact, tells us that a few days after, on 2. June, the mint was unable to pay its officers due to lack of funds. It doesn't say anything about the workers, but it isn't too difficult to suggest that someone had bills to pay and needed cash to pay them; they weren't so much interested in making money by counterfeiting as they were in simply having some ready cash¹⁴. Now this is at present all speculation; but their coins would have been a little bit too good for the usual monetary fraud, which lends some weight to the idea. And they would not have been the only ones; Feller notes among others a case in 1408 where one Jean Murgault made some

¹³ Duplessy, *Les monnaies francaises royales*, Paris 1988, p. 177.

¹⁴ More recently we have several examples of this; the flood of imitation English coppers in the eighteenth century, the issues of “Hard Times” and Civil War tokens in the US, and to a lesser extent all the “Good For” tokens in twentieth-century America served the same function. The producers of these, however, were generally not dealt with using the full rigour of the law as counterfeiters.

tin coins for paying his current expenses¹⁵.

Not that it mattered in the end. They confessed to the charges against them, and were all executed. We have one of the names, but no more: one Guillaume du Saussoy confessed to having made blanks for striking fake gros and preparing them for striking, as of 6 November. Now execution was standard for the offense; and it was not a pleasant way to go. As Feller writes¹⁶: the condemned was plunged head first into a boiling mixture of water and oil. It was standard from at least a century earlier¹⁷. Whether these unfortunates received the full treatment is not stated; and the full condemnation was apparently the exception rather than the rule. Certainly governments were not inclined to take these things lightly; in England, by some point at least, it was regarded as faking the king's signature, as it were, hence high treason, and punished accordingly¹⁸. In addition there was always the problem of the use, by persons not qualified, of the royal arms¹⁹.

Conclusion

Counterfeit coinage has always been a problem in societies which use some sort of money. Medieval France was no exception. It is easy to think of producers of false coin as simply greedy individuals in the private sector looking to make a fast buck, or sou, or shekel, or whatever. As I have tried to show, it is often a bit more complicated than that. Counterfeiting can simply indicate greed; or it can indicate various aspects of the society in which it takes place, whether a shortage of circulating

15 , Feller, L.; *Faux-monnayeurs et fausses monnaies en France a la fin du moyen-age*, Paris 1986, p. 50.

16 Feller, op. cit, p. 8.

17 d'Avenel describes the sundries purchased for the execution of one such in 1323, where a cauldron was purchased 'pour fair bouillir un faux monnayeur' (d'Avenel 1898, 37) at Calais. d'Avenel, G., *Histoire economique de la propriété, des salaires, des denrées, et de tous les prix en général*, 7 v., Paris 1894-1926.

18 Chamberlayne, E., *Anglia Notitia*, London 1673, 50

19 Up until fairly recently the business of coat-armour was taken at least as seriously as trademarks are nowadays; supposedly in Scotland it still is.

money, or a lack of oversight within a governmental entity which needed correction, or simply the way a government reacted to attempts to usurp its functions.



10. Boiling a victim in a cauldron; counterfeiters were, however, boiled head first. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS français 9187, folio 34v. Source: <http://classes.bnf.fr/franc/images/3/21.jpg>. Reproduced here for non-commercial scholarly purposes.