A letter concerning coins in sixteenth-century Ferrara

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One of the perennial concerns of art history is the way in which works of art were perceived by their original viewers. A number of texts have survived which give us a fair idea of the main concerns of viewers of Italian renaissance painting and architecture, but the same cannot be said of the so-called minor arts. In this article, I hope to redress the balance by discussing an account of the viewing of coins in early sixteenth-century Italy.

The text in question is a letter from the Bolognese notary and author, Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti, to Alfonso I d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, and is dated 19 June 1505. Written from Bologna, it reads as follows:

Today, as I was in the presence of several distinguished citizens, Your Most Illustrious Lordship’s new coin was shown, struck with your image, breathing and natural. My mind took such delight in it, that I kissed it because of its sweetness. I am pleased [to say] with this [letter] of mine, that Your Excellency was much praised, and we discussed it at length, and with various opinions on the meaning of the reverse, which [shows] when Hercules had killed the wild lion, from whose mouth bees emerged; and then the serpent leaving the base of the trunk, and encircling it, was discussed without reaching a conclusion. The master was greatly commended who had made the die for the ducal coin, or rather numisma, which could very well stand comparison with those of the ancient Roman princes. And I, believing [myself] to be the first, went to show this coin to the illustrious Lady Lucrezia d’Este your sister. Her Ladyship, laughing, said she had seen it, and that she had one of silver, and [one] of gold worth two ducats, and she showed me the one and the other to our mutual happiness. Certainly the gospel saying on the back, Christ saying \textit{Quae Dei Deo sunt, is wise.}\footnote{1 Quarto (estone) of Alfonso I d’Este, Duke of Ferrara, 1505. Silver, diam. 2.9 cm. British Museum. Alfonso’s beardless portrait identifies the coin as one of those issued at the beginning of his reign. The reverse shows Samson holding the lion’s head (Judges xiv.5–9).}

Despite the rather rushed tone, characteristic of much of Arienti’s correspondence, and a slight misunderstanding, the letter provides enough information for us to identify the coins mentioned by Arienti. Both were newly-minted by Alfonso. The first showed his portrait on the obverse, and on the reverse, according to Arienti, Hercules and the Nemean Lion. No such coin is known. However, Arienti was more used to the Herculean imagery of Alfonso’s father, Ercole I d’Este – who had issued a gold coin with Hercules and the Nemean Lion on its reverse. He had, after all, studied at the University of Bologna, matriculated as a notary, and knew the major classical Latin texts. It is perhaps understandable, therefore, that Arienti, seeing a figure armed \textit{all’antica} and holding a lion’s head, would immediately think of Hercules, when he was actually looking at a depiction of Samson and the lion. The subject-matter is confirmed by his reference to bees leaving the lion’s mouth. These identify the coin as one of several silver \textit{quarti} minted by Alfonso at the beginning of his reign, bearing the inscription \textit{De forti dulcedo} (based upon the biblical \textit{de forti egressa est dulcedo}, ‘Out of the strong came forth sweetness’, Judges, xiv.14) (Fig. 1). Arienti’s later reference in the letter to looking at a silver coin with Lucrezia d’Este would also seem to support the identification.

The second coin was a gold ducat, with a reverse bearing the inscription \textit{Quae Dei Deo sunt} (‘Unto God the things that are God’s’, Matthew xxvi.21 and Luke xx.25). This must be the double ducat issued with a beardless portrait of Alfonso on the obverse, and a reverse showing Christ and the Pharisee’s agent together with the inscription \textit{Quae sunt Dei Deo} (Fig. 2). Arienti’s letter therefore confirms Sacco’s dating of this coin to 1505, when dies for a double ducat were commissioned from Giovanni Antonio da Foligno.8

If we turn to Arienti for an assessment of the coins’ artistic quality, we find that his remarks are relatively uninformative, repeating motifs found in antiquity and in other Italian renaissance authors. They are typical of his other writings on art, which include several references to the figures portrayed in frescoes appearing ‘breathing and natural’, as well as repetitions of the topos comparing a contemporary artist’s work with that of the ancient Romans in descriptions of architecture, mural paintings, and sculpture.9

Arienti’s letter is, however, more interesting in indicating at least some of the reasons for looking at coins. It is clear that these were new coins, which had just arrived in Bologna from Ferrara, where they had been struck following Alfonso’s succession to the Duchy nearly six months previously.10 Despite the proximi-
ty of Ferrara, their appearance in Bologna provoked much interest, at least in the comparatively educated and aristocratic circles within which Arienti moved. This is unsurprising, given the close links between the Estense and the Bentivoglio, de facto rulers of Bologna, embodied in the marriage between Annibale II Bentivoglio and Alfonso's illegitimate half-sister Lucrezia d'Este in 1487, which Arienti had observed and recorded. As Arienti noted, Lucrezia herself had received copies of the new coins, suggesting that they were also circulated amongst Este family members.

Arienti’s reasons for interest in the coins were more focused: they represented an opportunity to flatter a potential employer. Alfonso’s father, Ercol I d’Este, had helped Arienti in the 1480s, and had been one of his staunchest supporters in the 1490s, a difficult period for the author following the death of Andrea Bentivoglio in 1491, for whom he had worked as secretary for twenty years. Ercol’s support was most clearly manifested in the appointment of Arienti to two positions in Ferrara – one in 1491, and the second from Easter 1497 until at least October 1498 – and the provision of a hundred ducat dowry to help Arienti’s daughter Angelica enter the Augustinian convent of S Lorenzo in Bologna in 1493. In return, Arienti dedicated Le Porretane (a collection of novelle) and De triumphis religiosis (a treatise on princely virtues) to Ercol – although the Duke seems to have considered the author more useful as a correspondent within Bologna, and so turned down Arienti’s requests for further support. Yet Arienti remained dedicated to the Estense, and continued to write to Ercol.

Consequently, the Duke’s death must have come as a blow to the ageing author, and his surviving letters reveal that he was anxious to secure Alfonso’s patronage. He had already cultivated Alfonso’s wife, Lucrezia Borgia, in 1501, by sending her a copy of his Colloquium ad Ferrariam, which celebrated her forthcoming marriage to Alfonso. In Bologna, Arienti remained on good terms with Alfonso’s sister Lucrezia. She had been present at his daughter’s profession in 1493, and several of his letters refer to time spent in her company. His Descrizione del Giardino della Viola, written in 1501, provides a more extensive description of a spring day spent chatting, admiring pictures and eating at the suburban villa of La Viola in the company of Lucrezia and her entourage. A copy of the Descrizione revived a flagging correspondence with Alfonso’s sister Isabella d’Este, and the Marchioness of Mantua was to prove a steadfast supporter in Arienti’s declining years. Arienti’s letter, then, is one fragment of his continued attempts to exploit a network of patrons and contacts, built up around Ercol I d’Este and his descendants, in an attempt to secure favour and advancement.

Arienti’s letter also indicates those aspects of the two coins which particularly caught his eye. First, and perhaps most significant, was Alfonso’s image, ‘breathing and natural’ – presumably, a good likeness. The coin was important because it literally circulated an image of Alfonso. Those who saw the coin could see what the new Duke of Ferrara looked like – and they in turn could use this image to demonstrate their attitudes to him. In this case, Alfonso was ‘much praised’ by the ‘distinguished citizens’ who saw his coins; Arienti was so moved by the sight of his potential patron’s likeness that, he would have him believe, he kissed it from devotion. Lucrezia’s reaction to seeing her brother’s coins was more familiar as, in much the same way as we would now show photographs, she laughed and showed them to Arienti.

But Arienti’s mistaken identification of the quatre’s reverse also implies a mental connection of that coin with those issued by Alfonso’s father, Ercol I. If we compare the portraits on Alfonso’s quatre (Fig. 1) with one issued about ten years earlier by Ercol (Fig. 3), there are certain similarities in the portraits of the two rulers which suggest that Alfonso may, in these early strikings, have been empha-

sising the continuity of his rule with his father’s. Although the portraits are clearly different, Alfonso appears very much as his father’s son, sharing his long nose, and the pronounced bags under his eyes. Likewise, allowing for changes in fashion, Alfonso’s long, wavy hair can be compared to his father’s distinctively long, somewhat straggly haircut – a similarity enhanced by the lack of colour in such metallic portraits which removes the distinction between Ercol’s grey hair and Alfonso’s black. The inscription around Alfonso’s portrait echoes that around his father’s. This image of continuity was, however, soon dispensed with by Alfonso, who quickly adopted the more familiar bearded portrait on his coins.

Arienti’s references to the reverses also demonstrate that attention was paid to the more purely symbolic aspects of coins. By quoting the inscription on the reverse of the gold double ducat (Fig. 2), he implicitly draws attention to the coin as an embodiment of Alfonso’s authority. It seems likely that anyone able to understand the Latin of the inscription Que sunt Dei Deo (unto God the things that are God’s) would have identified the quotation, and the clause which precedes it, Reddite ergo quae sunt Caesaris Caesar (Render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar’s) – a fairly direct biblical exhortation to pay one’s taxes, no doubt addressed to the people of Ferrara, and reinforced by the image of Christ and the Pharisee’s agent which the inscription encircles.

Likewise, the depiction of Samson on the reverse of the quatre implicitly associates Alfonso with the Old Testament hero who is, with a biblical warrior. In this context, it seems significant that later versions

Fig. 2 is published with the permission of / su concessione del Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo — Soprintendenza Speciale per il Colosseo e l’Area archeologica centrale di Roma

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of the coin bear on the obverse the inscription [SANCTAE] ROMANAE] ECCLESIAE CON[AGRONE]LIUS (‘Confratelli of the Holy Roman Church’), referring to Alfonso’s appointment as Papal Captain-General in April 1509. If we compare this with the classicising Herculean imagery found on the reverse of some of Ercol’s coins, we find that, rather than stress continuity with his father as on the obverse, Alfonso used the reverse of the coin to emphasize his Christianity. Likewise, despite the similarity in the features, Ercol’s bare breast on the obverse of his quarzo (Fig. 3) contrasts with the armour worn by Alfonso on the obverses of his coins (Figs. 1, 2): antique hero contrasts with biblical warrior.

Yet even the most basic interpretation of this imagery was beyond Arienti and the ‘distinguished citizens’ with whom he discussed the quarto’s reverse: as we have seen, they mistook the image of Samson for that of Hercules. Clearly, the somewhat condensated symbolism of the coins’ reverses was not immediately readable by all those who saw them. Such an error might be understandable when viewing coins of a high value and therefore limited circulation, such as the double ducat, which would have been handled only by the wealthy few. It seems likely that the symbolism of these coins was directed to such presumably well-educated viewers. However, it would seem perverse to assume that coins of a much lower value such as the quarto under discussion would only be seen by – or addressed to – such a restricted group of viewers: with a value of between 12 and 20 soldi, a servant might receive between 4 and 7 quarti a month as his salary. Thus, nearly all Alfonso’s lower-denomination silver coins, worth 5 and 10 soldi, carry biblical or religious designs on their reverses, whilst his billion (silver alloy) quattrini carry the arms of Ferrara on the obverse and the head of St Maurilius on the reverse. Given Arienti’s obtuseness, we might feel that to make such direct links between the figure portrayed on a coin’s obverse and the imagery of its reverse is to read too much into the imagery of the coin. Yet we know that Arienti made such a connection on at least one occasion. In De triumphis religiousis, written over the period 1497-99, he compared Ercol’s drainage work in the marshes around the ducal residence of Comacchio to Hercules’s labour in draining ‘that swamp in Greece called Hydra’. He continued by noting how the task was symbolized by the seven-headed serpent we know as the Hydra, and how ‘you, most moral prince, had this serpent Hydra in the fire placed on your rich and beautiful gold numisma, worthy of commendation’. Arienti here seems to be referring to the coin known as the idra (Fig. 3). Although the design is only known as a silver quarto (or its brass proof), Arienti may be referring to a hitherto unknown special striking in gold. Grisoni has suggested that such strikings were not unknown in Ferrarese coins, proposing that Ercol’s gold coin with Hercules and the lion on its reverse was a gold striking made with dies for a silver testone. On the other hand, Arienti might simply have been flattering Ercol, implying that only gold would be a fitting support for such an image. Yet whatever the precise coin intended by Arienti, the overall thrust of his text is clear: Ercol intended a direct comparison to be made between his drainage projects and the Labours of Hercules. This has long been suspected, but Arienti’s text is the first which, to my knowledge, makes the link explicitly.

So, despite the pedestrian nature of his remarks upon the coins’ artistic quality, Arienti’s letter provides a vivid illustration of the importance of the circulation of these numismatic images for the family, friends, and clients of their issuers, and the excitement which they could generate. This is particularly significant given that it is likely – at least in the case of lower-denomination (i.e. silver and alloy) coins – that the representations on coins were the images with which most people would have had the closest contact on a daily basis. The letter shows how viewers directed their attention to the depictions which appeared upon the coins, whether portraits on the obverses, or the more symbolic images on the reverses. Yet it also provides a salutary reminder that even fairly well-educated viewers might mis-identify these images, and so remain unaware of the messages so carefully directed towards them.
‘Circulating a Likeness? Coin Portraits in Late Fifteenth Century Italy’, in Idem. and Nicholas Mann (eds), The Image in the Museo Nacional Romano, p. 92, no. 204, see colour plates 17 and 18.


78 From a recent discussion of portraits on coins by Syson, op. cit. 

79 A very clear example of Syson’s suggestion that ‘the design and execution of the coins… might even have been handled by another artist… and handed over their money’; Syson, op. cit., p. 122. On the other hand, Johannes Wild, Venetian Art from Bellini to Titian, Oxford, 1974, pp. 129-130, relates the test Que Delfino to the ‘widespread genre of oval portraits painted as the door to a cupboard in Alfonso’s Camera d’alabastro’, and with Alfonso’s strained relations with the city-state of Genoa.

80 Corpus, pp. 446-47, nos. 36-42; Museo Nazionale Romano, pp. 99-101, nos. 232-38. For Alfonso’s appointment, see Quaia, op. cit., p. 334.

81 Quaia, op. cit., p. 118.

82 Whilst many quarti were worth about 20 soldi, Ercole I’s Idra was substantially lighter, and worth only 12 soldi: Giorni, op. cit, p. 42 n. 5. The useful table of quarteni in Peter Burke, Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy, Cambridge, 1986, pp. 218-19, gives a Venetian servant’s annual income c. 1500 as 50 lire, i.e. 1000 quarteni.

83 Alfonso’s ten-fold coins carry the Magdalen washing Christ’s feet, a shepherd seizing a lamb from a lion’s mouth (i.e. protecting his flock), the Flight into Egypt, or one of the many many others.

84 Sir James, op. cit., p. 11, and Shepherd, op. cit., pp. 22-25; a summary of his knowledge of the Quattrocento is found in Sir James, op. cit., pp. 44-46 and 105-109. Arriani might have known that Heraclius and the Nemean lion from sources such as Boccaccio, Genealogia degli Dei, xivii, Ovid, Metamorphoses, vii, 309-24; Heraklios, 395-409; Hyginus, Poeticae astrorum, n. 24; or, most expansive, Didieros Siculus, Bibliotheca historica, n. 34-4.

85 All were available in print by 1500. See the Short-title Cata

86 The figure’s helmet can be compared with that of the Lavinia in an antelope from the collection of Leonardo de’ Medici: Nicolas de Catesby et al., Il Borro di Lorenzo il Magnifico: Le gambe, ed. cit., Florence, Palazzo Medici Riccardi, 1972, no. 22. By 1483, this had been copied in two versions, one with a falcon and the other with a falcon and a rooster.


89 Four portraits of the Ducal Capital, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 123 and 289-90. See also the discussion of the coin known as the Idra, below. The use of tapestries illustrating scenes from the Legend of the Ducal Capital in Bologna during the celebrations for the wedding of Lucrezia d’Este and Annibale II Bentivoglio in 1487 suggests that Ercole’s taste for such imagery was known to a small audience. By 1517 a design in the Hieronymus Bongiovanni, published in Carol James, ‘Il Palazzo Bentivoglio in 1487’, Mitteilungen des Kunsthisto
torischen Institutes in Florenz, vol. xvi, 1977, pp. 188-98, esp. p. 188.

89 For Arriani’s education, see James, op. cit., n. 1, p. 11, and Shepherd, op. cit., pp. 22-25; a summary of his knowledge of the Quattrocento is found in Sir James, op. cit., pp. 44-46 and 105-109. Arriani might have known that Hercules and the Nemean lion from sources such as Boccaccio, Genealogia degli Dei, xivii, Ovid, Metamorphoses, vii, 309-24, Heraklios, 395-409, Hyginus, Poeticae astrorum, n. 24; or, most expansive, Didieros Siculus, Bibliotheca historica, n. 34-4. All were available in print by 1500. See the Short-title Cata

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