

A Portuguese gold coin from Tudor Worcester

by Murray Andrews

In November 1859 some post-medieval coins and tokens were unearthed by workmen digging foundations at 72 High Street, Worcester. Among their number were shillings of Elizabeth I, halfpence and farthings of Charles II and William III, 17th-century Worcester trade tokens, and, most unusually, a single gold coin. This last coin was described in some detail in the *Worcestershire Chronicle*.¹ According to the reporter, it was ‘very beautiful [...] and in fine preservation; it is of the size of half-a-sovereign, and weighs 2 dwts.; the legend is the same on both sides, viz., “X EMANVEL : P : R : P : ET : A.D. CIVNEE+”. On the obverse, a cross with gothic ornamental work; on the reverse a shield...its identity and date have not yet been satisfactorily proved’.

While the current whereabouts of these coins are unknown, the gold coin can be identified with some certainty: it is a *cruzado*, issued by Manuel I of Portugal in 1495-1521 (Fig 1).² Struck from African gold, the *cruzado* was one of the major trade currencies of 16th-century Europe, and was circulating in England as an unofficial high-value coinage as early as the 1530s. Their role in currency was formalised in the reign of Mary I, when two varieties of *cruzado* – one with a long cross and another, like the Worcester specimen, with a small cross – were made legal tender at 6s. 4d. and 6s. 8d., equivalent to

six to eight day’s wages for a skilled building labourer.³ Though officially demonetised in 1560, they remained in circulation throughout the reign of Elizabeth I, and as late as 1577 were still listed among the foreign coins current in England.⁴

Written sources suggest that large quantities of foreign gold coin circulated in England and Wales throughout the Tudor period, with named denominations including the Burgundian and French *écu d’or* (‘crown’), the Italian and Hungarian *ducat*, the Flemish and Rhenish *goldgulden* (‘guilder’), the Portuguese *cruzado*, and the Spanish *excelente* (‘ducat’) and *escudo* (‘pistole’). However, these coins rarely appear in the archaeological record: as high-value currency, their owners took great efforts to avoid losing them, and, if so unlucky, they spent a lot of time trying to recover them.

In the case of 16th-century Portuguese gold, we know of only 20 coins recorded from 12 hoards and single finds across the entirety of England and Wales (Fig 2). Interestingly, most of these coins have been found in south-west Britain, with a slight but perceptible concentration in the area of the Severn Estuary. This pattern differs significantly from the national distribution of medieval and Tudor coin finds, which is more strongly skewed towards East Anglia and



Fig 1: Gold cruzado of Manuel I of Portugal, 1495-1521

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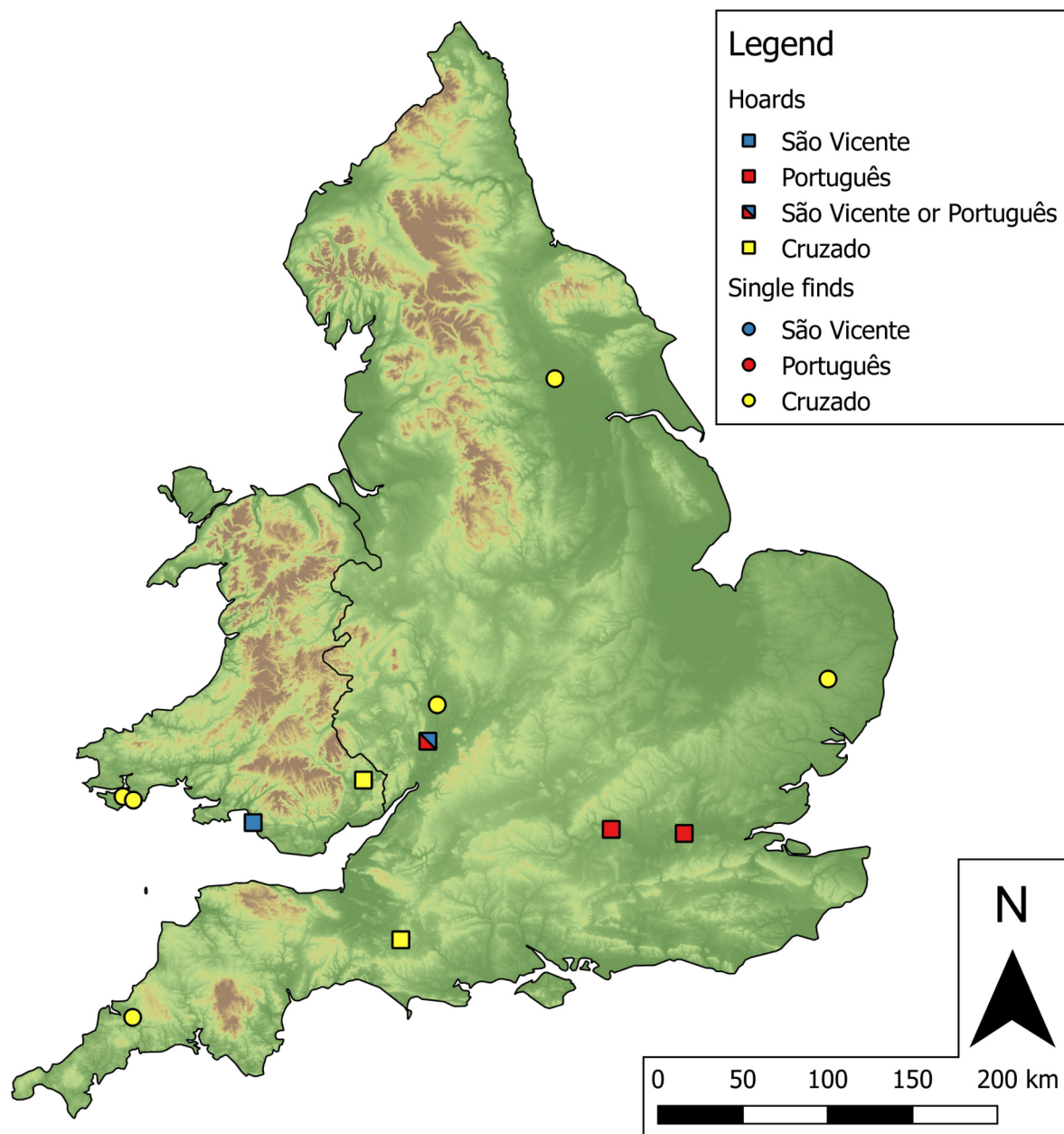


Fig 2: Distribution of 16th-century Portuguese gold coins found in England and Wales

south-eastern England. This distinction could reflect the significance of the Bristol Channel as an entrepôt of Anglo-Iberian trade during this period.⁵ The *cruzado* found in Worcester in 1859 fits within this broader distribution pattern, and has a local counterpart in the form of a gold *São Vicente* or *português* of John III of Portugal (1521-57) found in a hoard of gold and silver coins buried at Pendock in 1558-61.⁶ Seen together, these two coins offer a tantalising glimpse of Worcestershire's continental connections in the Tudor Age, and illustrate the role of the River Severn as a commercial artery linking inland England to the wider pre-modern world.

References

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