

The “English Custom” in Early Modern Scandinavia? A Folded Gold Ryal from Norway

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Abstract

The medieval “English custom” of folding coins for divine assistance has drawn much numismatic attention, and recent finds are reshaping our understanding of the geographical and chronological parameters of the practice in both Old and New World contexts. This article presents a new addition to the corpus of folded coins: a worn and broken gold coin held in the Coin Cabinet of the Museum of Cultural History at the University of Oslo. The coin, identified as a Dutch imitation of a ryal of Edvard IV struck in 1585-87, shows at least two major fold creases across six fragments, possibly produced in stages or over a longer period. Its late date and Scandinavian provenance are of major interest, and suggest that the practice of coin folding persisted beyond England’s borders even after the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. The origin of the folding remains uncertain, and while it could have happened in Lutheran Norway, the Netherlandish connection raises possibilities of it having been folded in the Low Countries, potentially as an act of faith by the Catholic underground during the Dutch Republic. The coin prompts further research into the “English custom” of coin folding in medieval and early modern northern Europe, and challenges previous assumptions about its scope and timeframe.

Research into the non-economic uses of coins has blossomed in recent years, a consequence of new theoretical trends in archaeological numismatics as well as a dramatic growth in the size and scope of coin find datasets across Europe¹. Within medieval numismatics the phenomenon of coin folding has received particular attention, and is now widely identified with a documented pre-Reformation “English custom” in which coins were dedicated to the saints and ritualistically folded in order to secure divine assistance in times of need².

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- 1 KEMMERS, MYRBERG 2011; KELLEHER 2012; KELLEHER 2018; TRAVAINI 2018; TRAVAINI 2022.
 - 2 MERRIFIELD 1987: 109-111; KELLEHER 2018; ANDREWS 2022. While religious or votive interpretations of medieval coin folding now dominate the Northern European literature, other explanations for the phenomenon have also been suggested. One of the more prominent alternatives centres on the potential of folding as a means of precious metal testing, which has been discussed by ARCHIBALD 1990 and KILGER 2006 in the context of Viking Age exchange systems. Whether this explanation might apply to other periods is debatable, not least due to significant differences in the nature of the folds observed on Viking Age and medieval coins; while the latter are normally folded in half along a central axis, the former typically

While much research into the “English custom” has naturally focused on medieval England, examples of folded medieval coins are now known from across the border in Scotland and Wales, as well as further afield in Belgium, France, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands³. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear that the phenomenon was not restricted to the medieval period, and recent publications have identified examples of folded coins from sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century contexts in England and its New World colonies⁴. Such material prompts further investigation of the origins and trajectory of coin folding as a cultural phenomenon, and raises fundamental questions about the intersections of money and faith amidst the religious upheavals of Europe’s “Long Reformation”⁵.

As a contribution to the wider field of research, this article presents a new addition to the corpus of folded coins in the form of an enigmatic gold coin held in the Coin Cabinet (UMK) of the Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo (Fig. 1)⁶. The coin is worn, bent, and broken into six separate fragments, which collectively weigh 7.46 g. Despite its poor condition, the coin can be identified with some confidence as a continental imitation of a ryal of Edward IV, most probably struck at Gorinchem in the Netherlands in 1585-87⁷. The coin is chiefly distinguished by its low relief and large, flat rose, whose pellets are arranged in neat rows, but retains many of the features seen on official English ryals, most notably the large fleurs in the reverse spandrels.

Reconstruction of the coin enables us to identify at least two major fold creases that follow a perpendicular route across the six fragments⁸. One crease runs diagonally across the obverse from five o’clock (150°) to eleven o’clock (330°), glancing the left side of the king’s shield, and is orientated so as to leave the obverse as the only visible exterior face when folded.

display irregularly placed bends at no more than 90° angles. Moreover, as KELLEHER 2018 notes, medieval applications of the ‘testing’ theory fail to account for the existence of folded jettons, which bear close physical resemblances to coins yet have no precious metal content. Another possibility is that coin folding relates to the traveller’s custom of hiding money in the fabric of one’s clothing. However, the nature of the relationship (if any) between these two practices is unclear; none of the documented medieval cases of garment concealment discussed by PIGOZZO 2004 make any reference to folded coins, and we might further note that none of the coins found sewn into clothing at the Black Death cemetery at San Leonardo di Siponto displayed any evidence of folding: RAELE *et alii* 2021: 3-7.

3 HALL 2016: 147-150; VAN VILSTEREN 2019; VAN VILSTEREN 2021; DOYEN 2021.

4 RIVERS COFIELD 2014; SHUTTY 2019: 63-73; ANDREWS 2022.

5 On the concept of the “Long Reformation”, see TYACKE 1998 and WALLACE 2019.

6 The coin is registered in the UMK collection as M170050.

7 THOMPSON 1948: 191-194; WOODHEAD 1996: 87-88; cf. STEWARTBY 2009: 348-352.

8 In addition to the two major fold creases, there is a minor crease that runs across the obverse from six o’clock (180°) to nine o’clock (270°). The fold is noticeably slighter, and does not continue across joining fragments. While it may have pre-depositional origins, it is more likely to represent ‘buckling’ caused by the impact of the plough on the coin.

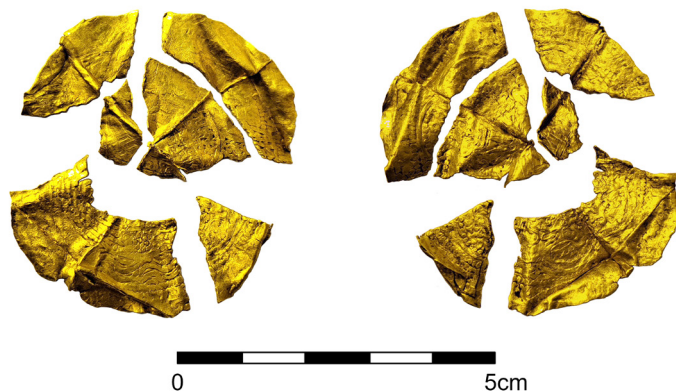


Fig. 1. Continental imitation of a gold ryal of Edward IV from the Collection of the Museum of Cultural History, Oslo (courtesy of Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo / Kulturhistorisk Museum, Universitet i Oslo, Myntkabinettet).

The second crease runs diagonally across the obverse from two o'clock (60°) to eight o'clock (240°), slicing the top left corner of the king's shield, and is also orientated in such a manner as to leave the obverse as the only visible exterior face. Since these creases run across breaks, they could only have been made before the coin was fragmented, which almost certainly results from damage in the ploughsoil⁹. Their perpendicular orientation implies two separate folding motions, which could have been undertaken successively as two stages in a single act, or alternatively as two separate folds of the same coin pursued over a longer period of time. This sequential process is particularly interesting in light of the coin's subsequent appearance, which shows clear traces of having been unfolded before its eventual deposition and destruction in the soil. In its current form, then, the coin is evidently the product of an extended *chaîne opératoire*, which began at the mint, continued through at least two separate stages of folding and unfolding, and ended with a process of fragmentation after impact in the ploughsoil.

While the appearance of the Oslo ryal is entirely suggestive of a coin found in a ploughed field, its exact provenance remains unclear. An important 'fixed peg' in the coin's collecting history is provided by a ticket in the hand of Hans

⁹ Post-depositional fragmentation is common seen on metal-detected artefacts from Scandinavia, and usually results from impact with farming equipment like ploughs and stone pickers: HENRIKSEN 2016. The UK Portable Antiquities Scheme database (<<https://finds.org.uk/>>) lists several gold coins that have been similarly damaged by ploughs, including Edwardian nobles and ryals (BUC-8939E8; NCL-595468; NMS-EF27AB) and an Elizabethan half-pound (HESH-AEAEC4).

Holst (Keeper 1926-56), which was almost certainly produced as part of a documented collections review in 1927¹⁰. This ticket describes the coin as «*6 stkr. av en engelsk rose-noble*», but gives no further indication of its findspot or date and mode of acquisition¹¹. Since Holst's ticket places the ryal in the UMK collection by the second quarter of the twentieth century, it is of no little interest to note the coin's absence from the lists of coins acquired in the period 1877-1932, as well as from Holst's own published research on foreign coins in Norway¹². Though strictly an *argumentum ex silentio*, there is nonetheless a strong circumstantial case to see the Oslo ryal as one of the numerous medieval and later coins acquired for the UMK collection by Christopher Andreas Holmboe (Keeper 1830-76) or his predecessor Søren Bruun Bugge (Keeper 1826-30), many of which were still uncatalogued by the time that Holst arrived at the museum in the 1920s¹³.

Since neither Holmboe nor Bugge would conceivably have bought such a low-quality coin as a display piece, we are left with the likelihood that the ryal was acquired for the UMK collection by virtue of being a Norwegian find, albeit one whose findspot is now lost to posterity. Such a circumstance is not without parallel in the Norwegian coin find record, and has a well-documented context in Scandinavian monetary history. Hoards and written sources show that English gold coins and their imitations flowed into Denmark and Norway throughout the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, playing a major role in high-value transactions in two countries that issued no gold coins of their own¹⁴. While the noble was eclipsed by the rhinegulden in the mid- to late fifteenth century, later incursions of English gold are attested by Elizabethan and Jacobean single finds and hoards from Øvre Eiker and Larkollen in eastern Norway¹⁵. During this later period English gold coins increasingly circulated alongside gold ducats from the Low Countries, and one important seventeenth-century Norwegian hoard from Brunlanes in Vestfold is notable for containing two English gold coins, one identified as a ryal of Edward IV, together

10 The ryal was one of 12 coins noted in 1927 that Holst attributed to the reigns of Edward III to Richard III: HOLST 1927, skap 53, skuff D. On Holst's career and work with the UMK collection, see SKAARE 1967.

11 «Six pieces of an English rose-noble». A second ticket, written in a neat but unattributed hand of the late 1930s, describes the coin as a «Edward IV 1461-1483, Grueber 354, Rose-Noble», but supplies no further information concerning its findspot or collecting history.

12 HOLST 1939; HOLST 1940; HOLST 1941.

13 In the mid-1870s Lyder Hermanstorff (Assistant Keeper 1873-79) started working on catalogue of the English, Scottish, and Irish coins in the UMK collection, and it is possible that the ryal was earmarked for inclusion in this list. However, the manuscript breaks off after the reign of Æthelred II, and was never completed: HERMANSTORFF 1875.

14 HELLAN 2012: 80; MÄRCHER 2018: 446.

15 HOLST 1939; ANDREWS 2024. Many of the English coins that entered Norway in this period are likely to have arrived by means of the timber trade: GULLBEKK 2014: 139-143; ANDREWS 2023, 414-415.

with three ducats from Holland, Kampen, and Zeeland¹⁶. Similar finds have also been made in neighbouring Sweden, where gold ryals were included among the contents of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century hoards unearthed at Ånsta, Sollentuna, and Veinge¹⁷.

The Oslo ryal appears to be the first published example of an early modern folded coin found in Norway, and would seem to offer unique insights into the “English custom” and its development on a European scale. In particular, the successive processes of folding and unfolding marked across the coin’s surface hint at a complex and non-linear object biography, defined by multiple cycles of sanctification and de-sanctification as it passed between the spheres of ritual and secular economy. These sequential processes, in which the ryal was repeatedly transformed from a folded object of pious dedication to an unfolded object of secular currency, invite comparison with the life cycles of coin offerings at medieval shrines, which were donated by pilgrims as tokens of affinity and devotion, collected and entered into the church treasury by monks and clergymen, and thereafter reintegrated into the money economy by means of church expenditure¹⁸. While it is impossible to say whether the Oslo ryal had passed through ecclesiastical hands in this exact manner, it nonetheless offers a salient reminder that the adaptive reuse of coins for religious purposes did not always signal the end of their monetary functions, and that even coins folded according to the “English custom” might subsequently be unfolded and re-enter currency in some form.

Since coin folding is often treated as an essentially Catholic and medieval “English custom”, the late date and Scandinavian provenance of the Oslo ryal are of much interest, and suggest that the practice continued beyond England’s borders two or more generations after the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. However, since the ryal was a foreign coin in Norway, it is difficult to determine whether it was folded before or after its arrival in Scandinavia. It seems unlikely that the coin would have been subjected to the “English custom” in England itself, since ryals and their imitations scarcely circulated in the late Elizabeth and Jacobean periods¹⁹. although it might plausibly have been folded in the Low Countries, where the custom is certainly recorded in the later middle ages²⁰. The Dutch connection leaves much room for speculation: the coin’s likely mint town, Gorinchem, was part of the Calvinist Dutch Republic for much

16 HOLST 1940: 112-113, no. 66. This ryal might also be a continental imitation, but the accompanying unite of Charles I is evidently genuine.

17 WISÉHN 1989: 189, no. 577; GOLABIEWSKI LANNBY 1990: 37, no. 59; BORNSTAF 2003: 142, no. 332.

18 TRAVAINI 2015: 215-218; GULLBEKK 2015. The use of coins as church offerings has been the subject of an extensive literature in Scandinavia: BERG 1989; VIBE MÜLLER 1989; KLACKENBERG 1992: 36-37; GULLBEKK 2018; JÜRGENSEN 2019; GULLBEKK *et alii* 2021: 5-10.

19 CHALLIS 1978: 229.

20 VAN VILSTEREN 2019; VAN VILSTEREN 2021.

of the Eighty Years' War, and had been the place of martyrdom for 19 Catholic clerics in 1572²¹. It is possible, therefore, that the coin been folded after a phase of circulation in the southern Catholic provinces, or might even have been folded as an act of faith by Gorinchem's Catholic underground. However, it is equally possible that the coin was folded after its arrival in Norway, which had been established as a Lutheran state in the reign of Christian III (1537-59)²²; at least 10 similar finds of medieval folded coins spanning the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries are known from Norwegian churches (Fig. 2), so the custom was hardly alien²³.

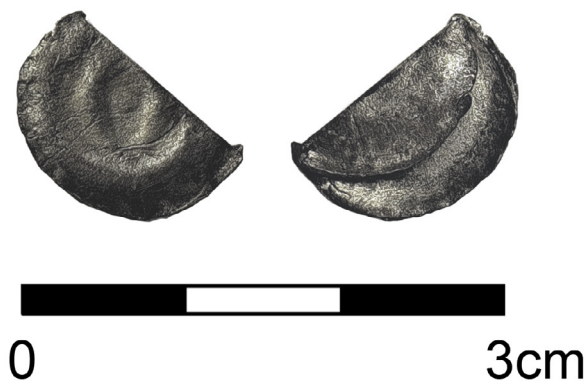


Fig. 2. Anonymous hulpenning (c.1350-1400) from Lom stave Church, Innlandet, Norway (courtesy of Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo / Kulturhistorisk Museum, Universitet i Oslo, Myntkabinettet).

Regardless of whether it was folded before or after its arrival in Norway, the cultural and historical implications of the Oslo ryal are clearly significant, and challenge traditional assumptions about the geographical and chronological extent of the “English custom”. At a broader level, its dating raises some fundamental questions about the socio-religious context of coin folding in the early modern world. Did the persistence of coin folding in the late sixteenth century represent a direct form of devotional continuity with the pre-Reformation world – that is, does it illustrate a kind of latent or persistent Catholicism in a reforming Protestant Europe? This suggestion has some merit in a large rural country like Norway, where the instruction of the laity in Lutheran doctrines

21 MACEVITT 2020: 377.

22 On the origins of the Reformation in Norway, see IMSEN 2016.

23 These include coins from churches at Bø, Lom, Ringebu, and Uvdal, which are the topic of ongoing research by the author.

was a protracted process that continued until c.1640,²⁴ and where medieval beliefs in the cult of saints continued to influence customs like infant naming into the sixteenth century and beyond²⁵. Conversely, might it instead reflect a transformation of Catholic tradition in a new Protestant context, substituting medieval beliefs in the power of saintly intercession for early modern beliefs in beneficent magic? Such a phenomenon is well attested by the changing language of post-medieval charms, which were stripped of Catholic allusions to Mary and the saints and bolstered by Protestant invocations of God, Christ, and the Trinity²⁶. While the Oslo ryal cannot answer these questions on its own, its publication hopefully serves as a prompt for further research into the phenomenon of coin folding as practiced in the early modern world.

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24 WISLÖFF 1966: 452-477.

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26 SCRIBNER 1993: 488-491; DAVIES 1996; BEVER 2008: 275-276.

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