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Benvenuto Cellini and the Testoon for Alessandro de' Medici: A Preliminary Study

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Abstract: This paper, that was born out of a discussion between the two authors on the online forum Tuttonumismatica.com, is a preliminary study of the dies of the Testoon of Alessandro de' Medici, engraved, together with other monetary types, by the famous Benvenuto Cellini. The study will also try to provide a few statistics on the weight of the coin in question. The final objective will be to determine the total number of dies and a possible mintage figure, which would be possible once more specimen will become available to study.

1. Historical context

Alessandro de' Medici (1510 or 1512 – 1537), first duke of Florence, belonged to the famous Florentine family, since – as officially stated – he was the natural son of Lorenzo Duke of Urbino, nephew of Lorenzo the magnificent. More likely Alessandro was the son of the cardinal Giulio de Medici – future pope Clemente VII - and Simonetta da Colvecchio.

He was awarded the title of duke in 1530 by the Emperor after the defeat of the Florentine Republic by the spanish army of Charles V, he was strictly connected to the Emperor as he married his daughter Margherita d'Austria.

Probably he would not have been a bad ruler had he not been involved in a game bigger than his skills, on one side the defeated Florentine republicans were trying to reestablish some kind of republic in the city, on the other the rich Florentine aristocracy wanted an oligarchic government similar to the one Florence had at the times of Lorenzo the Magnificent. In this situation his poor intellectual capabilities coupled with his womanizing behaviour proved to be more of hindrance than of help.

The production of the Testoons with his portrait, in place of the traditional lily and st John the baptist, was also a break with tradition and was seen as an attempt to become “Duke of Florence” instead of “Duke of the Florentines” (his formal title).

With these premises there's no surprise in learning that Alessandro was stabbed to death by his cousin Lorenzino, who was his mate in many of the stunts made by the pair, Probably Lorenzino thought himself as a new Brutus.

After Alessandro's death, without a direct heir, the great Florentine families, led by the Guicciardini, elected Cosimo (son of Giovanni delle Bande Nere) as Alessandro's heir before Charles V had time to advance his pretences on Florence.

In this political context in 1535 the sculptor Benvenuto Cellini was called by the duke in Florence and asked to prepare the dies for four different coins: the gold scudo, the testoon, the giulio and the half giulio; of these coins only the testoon had the portait of the Duke.

According to Cellini's autobiography¹: "...andai subito dal Duca Alessandro, e molto lo ringraziai del presente de' cinquanta scudi, dicendo a Sua Eccellenza, che io ero paratissimo a tutto quello che io fussi buono a servire Sua Eccellenza. Il quale subito m'impose, ch'io facessi le stampe delle sue monete. E la prima che feci, si fu una moneta di quaranta soldi [testone] con la testa di Sua Eccellenza da una banda, e dall'altra un San Cosimo e un San Damiano. Queste furono monete di argento, e piacquono tanto, che il Duca ardiva di dire, che quelle erano le più belle monete di Cristianità: così diceva tutto Firenze, e ognuno che le vedeva. ... Di nuovo feci le stampe per il Giulio, quale era un San Giovanni in profilo, a sedere, con un libro in mano, che a me non parve mai aver fatto opera così bella; e dall'altra banda era l'arme del detto Duca Alessandro. Appresso a questa io feci la stampa per li mezzi giuli, in nella quale io vi feci una testa in faccia di un San Giovannino. Questa fu la prima moneta con la testa in faccia in tanta sottigliezza d'argento, che mai si facesse: e questa tale difficoltà non apparisce, se non agli occhi di quelli, che sono eccellenti in cotai professioni. Appresso a questa io feci le stampe per gli scudi d'oro; in nella quale era una Croce da una banda con certi piccoli Cherubini, e dall'altra banda si era l'arme di Sua Eccellenza."

"I went to the duke Alessandro straight away, and thanked him for the fifty scudi gift, I also told him that i was prepared to serve his Majesty He asked me straight away to produce dies for his coins. The first one I made was a forty soldi coins (testoon) with a portrait of his excellency on one side and Saint Cosimo and Saint Damiano on the other. These silver coins were instantly liked by the Duke who said that these were the most beautiful coins in the Christian world: and so was said in all Florence and by anybody who saw them... I also made the dies for the Giulio, with a profile of St John seated with a book in his hand, I thought I had never made something this beautiful; and on the other side was the coat of arm of the Duke Alessandro. After this one I made the dies for the half giulio, where I made a frontal portrait of the head of St John. This was the first coin with a frontal portrait ever produced, and this difficulty is not apparent to those who do not practice this profession. After this one i prepared the dies for the gold Scudo, in which I placed a cross with Cherubs in the angles and on the other side there was the coat of arm of his excellency"

{Note to the reader, the translation is a free version of a passage written in 1500 with a different structure of the Italian language}

As you can see the dies produced by Cellini are incredibly well made you can appreciate their plasticity, their imagery (cf. Fig.1a, b) and their reliefs (cf. Fig.1: c, d).

2. Analysis of the dies for the testoon

Alessandro's coinage is quite rare so, when we thought about a preliminary study on Cellini's dies, we had to overcome the difficulty of finding a suitable sample to analyze; of the four coins the most common one, apart from the gold scudo, is the testoon, where we found 15 specimen that came up for auction in the last few years, plus two extra ones, one belonging to the collection of Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence and one published in C.M. Cipolla's book².

These testoons can be grouped into two subtypes: the first one has the obverse legend as **ALEXANDER • M • R • P • FLOREN • DVX •** while the second one has **ALEXANDER • MED • R • P • FLOREN • DVX •** with ligate ME; in both cases the reverse legend is the same **• S • COSMVS • S • DAMIANVS •**. All legends (obverse and reverse) start bottom left.

¹ CELLINI B. "Vita di Benvenuto Cellini scritta da lui medesimo", libro I, cap. XVI, pp.225-226, Firenze (ma Parigi) 1834.

² CIPOLLA C.M., 1987 – *La moneta a Firenze nel Cinquecento*.

The differences in the dies are in the legends because the portrait of Duke Alessandro and the two saints standing are the same throughout all dies and are clearly made by the same punch.



Figure 1: - a) testoon (NAC, 68, l.24); b) giulio (Museo Nazionale del Bargello,FI); c) half giulio (NAC, 35, l. 52); d) gold scudo (NAC,35, l.51). (Not in scale)

The number of coins found is unfortunately too low to produce a detailed study of the dies, we have found 10 coins for the first subtype and 7 for the second. There seems to be a substantial difference in the two series and it can easily be observed in picture 2.

An anomaly we have found regards the obverse dies is their frequency. For the subtype with legend ending in M we have found as many as 4 different dies, while for the second type (the one with legend ending in MED) a single die. Statistically the type with M should be a lot more common than the second one, this statement is clearly dismissed by our sample that shows a lot more coins of the second type than you would expect. In fact, while for the first group **ALEXANDER • M •** we have 4 obverse and 6 reverse dies (fig. 2), for the other we have a single obverse and 5 different reverse dies giving us a ratio Obv/Rev equal to 1/5 (fig. 3); however if we submit our data to a χ^2 test our differences are not significant with a probability between 50% and 30% (even considering an expected value < 3).

The existence of a single die for the obverse type MED leads us to believe that the second type was produced in a far smaller quantity than the first one.

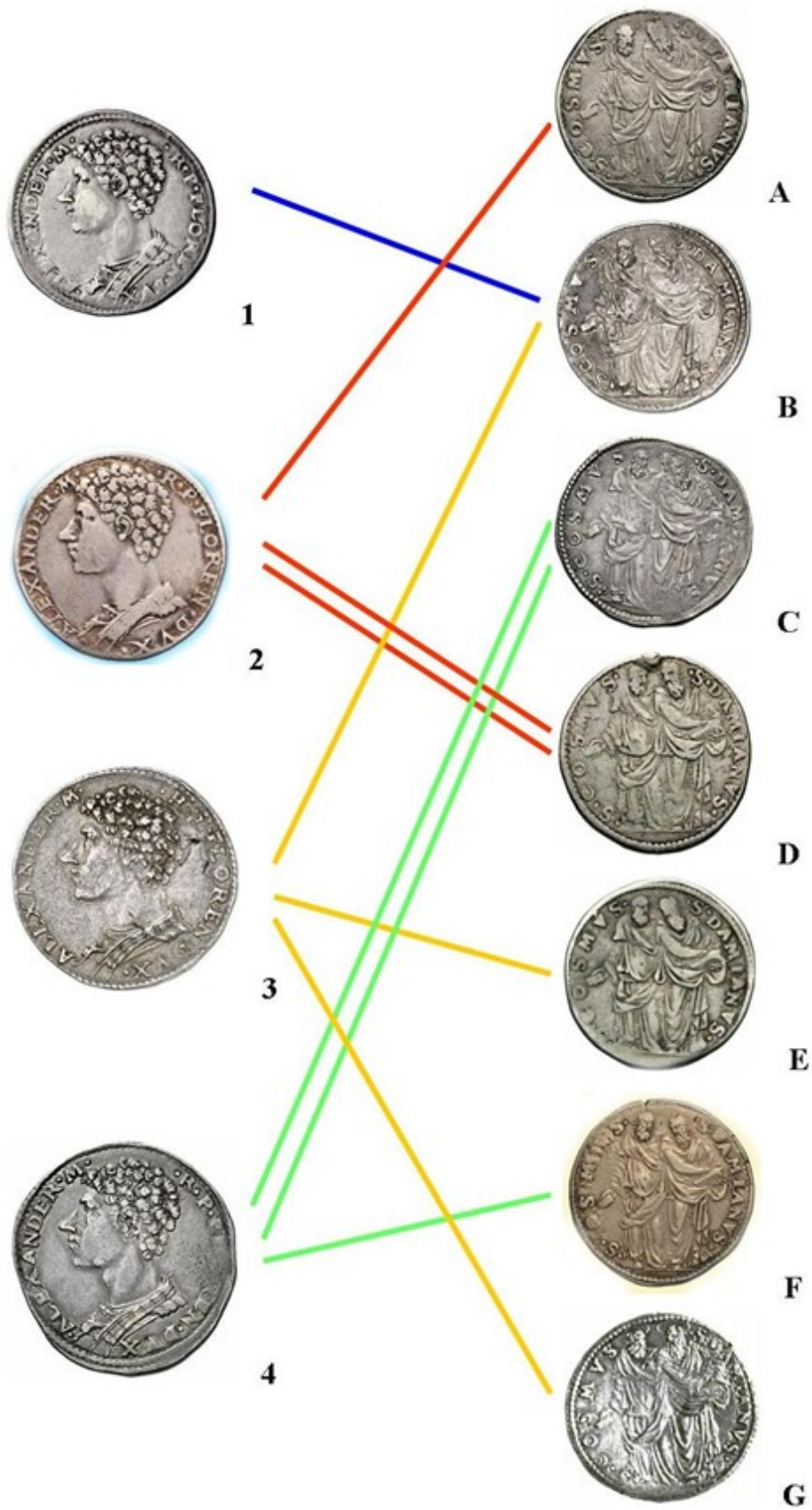


Figure 2: Relationship between obverse and reverse dies.

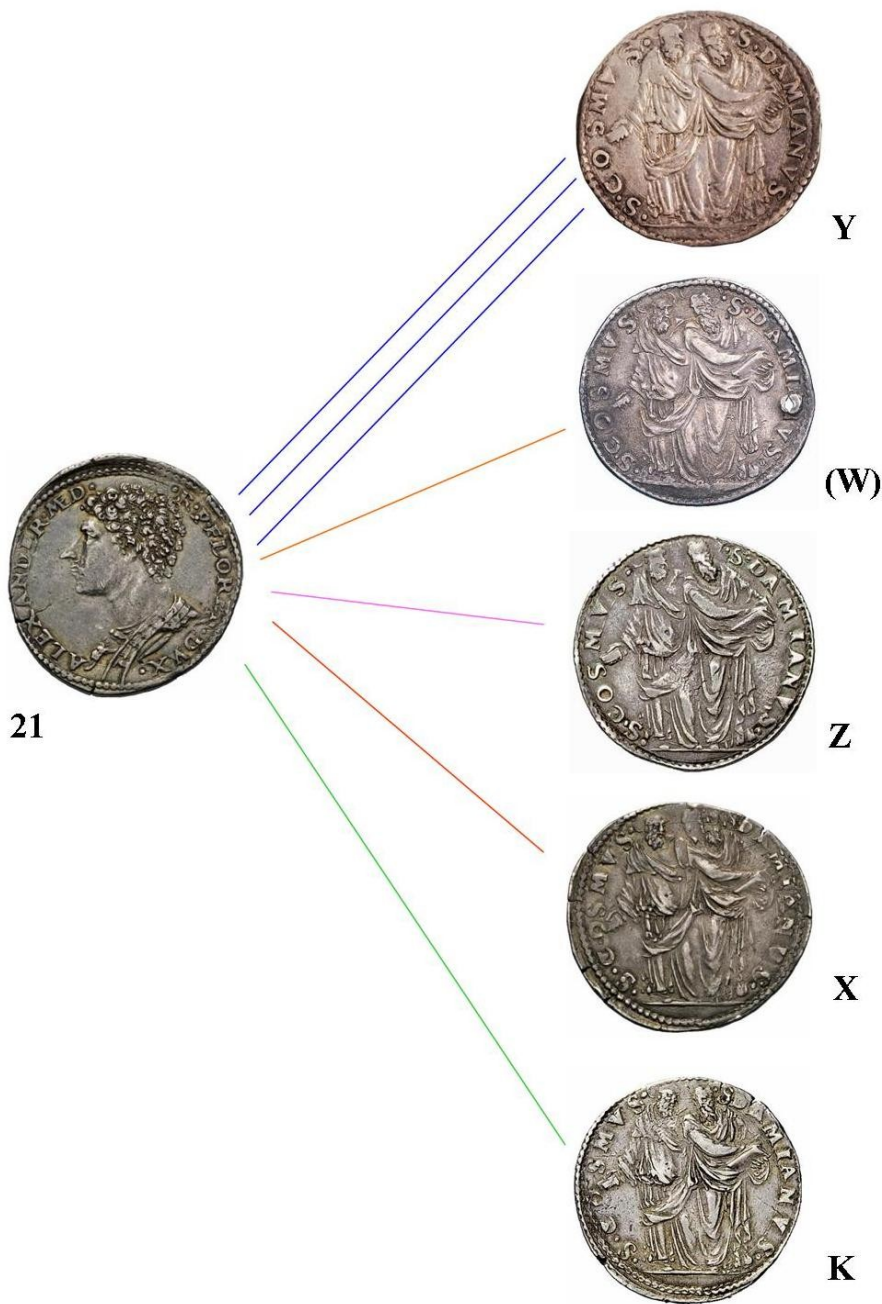


Figure 3: Relationship between obverse and reverse dies.

Unfortunately the small sample does not allow us to conduct a detailed study of the number of dies, however we can say that a ratio of 4:7 obverse to reverse die is what we would expect from normal use and production of hammered coins, we also find that the other ratio of 1:5 for the second subgroup is too large.

During our study we also noticed something strange. One of the coins of the second subgroup (legend ending in MED) (Fig. 4) has some different details in the bust of the Duke. In particular the nose was more pointed and the ear of the Duke had disappeared and had been replaced by curls.

We asked ourselves when these modifications could have been made. Were they made by an engraver at the mint to extend the life of the die, or were they made later by someone to try to improve a worn or damaged coin and hence its numismatic and monetary value?



Figure 4: On the left the normal portrait (7 specimen of the same die), on the right the "modified" coin.

Unfortunately these changes affect the highest parts of the coins and this little fact does not help us to get to a solution.

If the first hypothesis (the changes took place at the mint) is true, we could use this fact to determine a temporal sequence of the dies, if the second hypothesis is true (later reengraving) we would have a reasonable method to determine possible alterations of the coins that might have negative repercussions on the value of the coin.

At the moment we would tend to believe that these changes happened at a later date and that this could be a reengraving done to improve the look of the coin. We base our judgement on the fact that only one of the coins was different from the others, however we have open minds and we could reevaluate our conclusions if other coins with the same portrait were to be found.

We also found two coins (cf. Fig. 5: one for subtype **M**, another one for subtype **MED**) whose reverse seems to be very similar. According to one of the authors it could even come from the same die that was slightly modified. This would be the only die found so far that was used by the two subtypes. We think that this also could be used to try to understand the relationships between the two series; unfortunately the sample is still too small to draw any conclusion.



Figure 5: Right the reverse die used for subtype 2 MED, left the one used for subtype 1 M

List of all the coins in the sample and their reference coin number:

Reference	die type D/	Die type R/	group
1-PONTERIO	21	Y	MED
4-BOLAFFI, 1.12.11, L.589	21	W	MED
11-NAC, 50, L.87	21	Z	MED
14-NAC, 76, L.60	21	K	MED
15-CGN, TRITON XVII, L. 1073	21	Y	MED
16-ACR, 9, L.1002	21	X	MED
17-ICollector.COM, 7.11.09, L. 20	21	Y	MED
2-ACR, 7, L. 901	3	E	M
3-BOLAFFI, 31.05.12, L.390	2	D	M
5-RANIERI, 3, L. 83	2	A	M
6-HESS DIVO	1	B	M
7-NAC, 68, L. 24	4	C	M
8-RANIERI, 2, L. 119	2	D	M
12-KÜNKER	3	B	M
13-CRIPPA, CRONOS 7, L.4	4	F	M
18-MN BARGELLO, inv.384	4	C	M
19-da M.C.Cipolla	3	G	M

3. Statistics relating to the weight of the coins

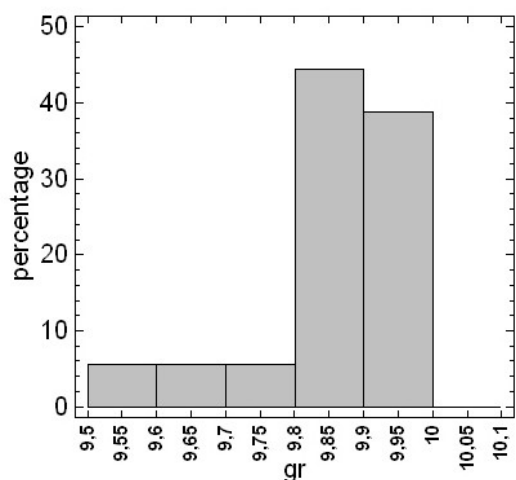
This statistics was compiled using the known weight of the coins in our sample plus the weight of the testoons listed by CNI³.

Count	18
Average	9,86667
Median	9,88
Mode	9,94
Variance	0,0122824
Standard deviation	0,110826
Coeff. of variation	1,12323%
Minimum	9,54
Maximum	9,99
Range	0,45
Skewness	-2,00072
Std. skewness	-3,46535
Kurtosis	4,18789
Std. kurtosis	3,62682

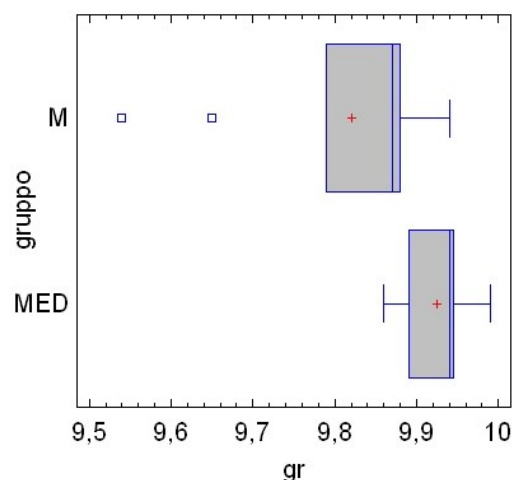
³

Corpus Nummorum Italicorum, vol. XII Toscana (Firenze), pagg. 244-245, nn. 17-20.

Histogram - ALESSANDRO DE' MEDICI - testoni



Box-and-Whisker Plot



The histogram clearly indicates a predominance of the weight in the high part of the standard weight (9,8 - 10,0 gr.) the theoretical weight would have been between 9,5 and 10 gr. This data is confirmed by the mode which was found to be 9,94 gr.

The Box&Whisker plot, which compares the two subgroups, finds a prevalence of high weight value in the MED subgroup.

The weight analysis does not return big surprises, all the coins are in the expected range and we believe that the loss of weight shown by some of our specimen is due to circulation or small repairs that might have altered the flan (one specimen has been mounted).

4. Conclusion

Unfortunately the small number of the sample limits the conclusion for this preliminary study on this intriguing testoon.

In the future we hope to be able to find a sufficient number of coins and through their study to be able to formulate strong hypothesis regarding the number of dies, their temporal sequence and hopefully a possible estimate of the number of pieces issued.

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