

1621 NUEVO REINO de
GRANADA
8 REALES SILVER COBS:
First Coin Issue of Colombia
by Samuel R. Zucker

We live in an exciting age of Spanish Colonial numismatic discovery. With the advances in diving and salvage technology that have come about in the last five decades, a whole new light has been shed upon the early coinage of the New World. This is no truer than in the area of Colombian silver cobs. Colombian silver cobs on the whole and in part are some of the rarest and least known issues of the Americas. Consider that prior to the discovery of an eight-*reales* cob marked with the “RN” of Nuevo Reino de Granada salvaged from the wreck of the *Atocha* by Mel Fisher’s team in May of 1973, there were no known examples of Colombian silver cobs of the period from 1621-1625. It was known from documents, however, that both the Cartagena and Santa Fé de Bogotá mints had been producing coinage, whether constantly or intermittently, during that period. Although we now have examples of these issues there is still much about them that is unknown or not yet accepted by all.

Though the new discoveries kept coming—first with the *Atocha* and the *Santa Margarita*, then with the “Dry Tortugas Wreck” salvaged in deep water by Seahawk Deep Ocean Technology in 1991—1622 was the earliest acknowledged date for either the silver or gold cobs of Nuevo Reino. Several different versions of clearly dated 1622 8-*reales* cobs had been found, some with the mint mark of RN, which is now taken to designate the mint at Cartagena for these issues. Some reportedly were marked “S” for Santa Fé de Bogotá (experts disagree on whether these truly exist), but all had the assayer initial “A” and the escutcheon of Portugal superimposed over the arms of Castile and Leon on the Hapsburg shield. This is unknown in any other

New World cobs.

It is thought that the dies for these coins were struck in Spain (probably in Seville), which used the escutcheon of Portugal on *their* coins, and transported to the New World. The “A” is thought to stand for Iñigo de Alvis or Martín de Arbustante, high level mint employees, but it could also stand for Alonso de Turillo de Yebra, the Treasurer of Nuevo Reino de Granada. It is theorized that the main distinguishing mark between the 8-*real* pieces minted in Cartagena and Santa Fé de Bogotá is the presence of the arms of Granada on pieces minted in Bogotá. The arms of Granada consist of a small triangle containing a pomegranate located either just below the escutcheon of Portugal above the midline of the shield, or at the base of the shield. Pieces attributed to Cartagena lack the arms of Granada. All clearly visible examples of 8-*real* coins show the ordinal of Phillip IV. It has been reported that some 8-*real* coins show the ordinal of Phillip III, and although there is what may be an 8-*real* with the ordinal of Phillip III pictured on page 39 of Lasser and Restrepo’s *The Cob Coinage of Colombia* (code M8C-1, 1622) many still believe that the ordinal shown is that of a doubled and blurred Phillip IV.

There were claims made as early as the first finds that some of the 8-*real* pieces found were dated 1621, but they could never be proven. All clearly dated coins were of the year 1622 only; so it became gospel that 1622 was the first year of production of Colombian cobs. Since documents show that Captain Alonso Turillo de Yebra purchased the post of Treasurer and Proprietor of the Casa de Moneda of Nuevo Reino de Granada from Philip III on April 1, 1620, it is entirely possible that the old documents were right and coins were produced in 1621 as well. It is known that Turillo was transporting many, or perhaps even *all* (since the only known Colombian cobs of this era

have been salvaged from the 1622 fleet) examples of his work back to Spain on the 1622 Fleet to demonstrate the quality of his minting to the King. Because of the distances involved and the time it took to mint the coins it can be surmised that some of his product would be dated 1621, but proof has been lacking until now.



THE ZUCKER SPECIMEN. An 8-*reales* piece from Colombia dated 1621. The obverse (above, right of shield) shows the enigmatic “A” assayer’s mark, and the Portuguese inescutcheon lies in the center of the upper field. The “21” of the date sits between 11:00 and 12:00 o’clock on the reverse.



One of the coins brought up from the “Dry Tortugas Wreck” has tantalized coin experts for years. This coin appears to be an 8 *reales*, mint marked (R)N, assayer “A”, with a clear date of (1)621. But because of corrosion (the coin shows almost full details but weighs just 12.7 grams) and the fact that everyone “knew” that

1621 Nuevo Reino 8 reales didn't exist, no one would step forward and validate it. The coin went on sale in Ponterio's auction #129 as item 609. Despite the visual evidence, it was identified as a (162)2 NR A 8 reales. The coin did not sell at auction, but I was able to purchase it in 2004. At that time I was certain that this was a 1621 but still had to prove it to the "experts" who had decided the final "1" of the date was actually part of the H of "Hispaniarum". I will refer to this coin hereafter as the Zucker specimen.



THE SINCLAIR SPECIMEN. An 8-reales piece from Colombia clearly dated (16)21! The obverse (above, right of shield) shows the as yet unassigned assayer's mark "A" and the embedded Portuguese Arms in the upper shield. Between 11:00 and 12:00 o'clock in the reverse legend are the quite visible critical digits "2 and 1" of the date.



and live within a few miles of his place of business. Lisa Sinclair had recently dropped some coins off with Dan for study purposes. One of these coins, salvaged from the *Atocha*, though lacking in some areas, showed the "21" of the date, as well as the beginning of "Hispaniarum", very clearly. What is more important is that after careful and close study by both Dan Sedwick and me it was determined that the two coins were produced from the exact same dies, both obverse and reverse. While my specimen by itself was not enough to convince most, the Sinclair specimen validated it beyond any doubt. There were 8-real pieces produced in Nuevo Reino de Granada and, because they lacked the arms of Granada, almost definitely from the Cartagena mint in 1621.



THE BLANTON SPECIMEN. An 8-reales piece from Colombia (1621, but date off planchet). The assayer's initial "A" and the Portuguese Arms are boldly visible on the obverse (above). Numerous details on both sides of this coin link it with the other two specimens as being struck with the same two dies!



Now the real work for me began. I set out to identify any more coins using these dies. The obverse die has several obvious identifying points and the reverse even more. I found several coins which shared the obverse die, most notably coin #233 of the Atocha Research Collection (currently for sale by Dan Sedwick) which has the best obverse view of this die, but they all had different reverse dies. After combing more auction catalogs, research books, articles, and web sites than I care to count, I found one other coin with the same obverse and reverse dies as the Zucker and Sinclair specimens. It should be noted that I found no other coins bearing the reverse die other than this one. This coin belongs to Herman Blanton and is pictured on his *Macuquina* web site at <http://www.macuquina.com/coins/1806.htm> along with many other fine examples of Colombian cobs. The Blanton specimen, while lacking any visible date, clearly is from the same obverse and reverse dies as the Zucker and Sinclair specimens and thus can be included in known examples of 1621 Nuevo Reino 8-real cobs.

I would like to thank Dan Sedwick and Herman Blanton for their input, help, and support in writing this article.

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NOTE: Although these three specimens are underweight and show the ravages of immersion in the sea for nearly 400 years, do NOT let this detract from their importance! These ARE the first known examples of the silver output from the early mints in Colombia under Turillo de Yebra, and kudos must go out to Sam Zucker, Dan Sedwick, and Herman Blanton for their diligent detective work in bringing this momentous series to light! (All photos are shown here larger than life to better scrutinize on these pages). Photographic efforts by these three scholars are also to be lauded. Though the results are less than desirable, it is the fault of the coins' condition. I know; I also tried to capture their eroded surfaces... =EJR=

Fortune smiled upon me. I live in the central Florida area, and just happen to know Dan Sedwick well