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Oro Corriente

Part One: An Overview of Early Gold Monies of *Las Indias*

Herman Blanton, NI #LM115

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This article concerns *oro corriente*, a Spanish term which literally means circulating gold. It is gold that circulated alongside coined money or in the absence of coined money during the early days of the Spanish Conquest of America. The presentation is in three parts: (1) A brief overview including definitions of the various types of circulating gold. (2) Examples of *Oro Corriente* with emphasis on a special seal showing the Golden Fleece and possible historical antecedents of Charles I of Spain. (3) Some additional seals found on silver ingots from an unknown shipwreck referred to as the “Golden Fleece” and three other shipwrecks of the period.

Part One: Overview

Commencing with the landing of Columbus in the New World in 1492 the Spanish instituted their monetary system in *Las Indias* (the Indies).¹ From the beginning of colonization the Spaniards brought coined money with them, but this certainly was only a small portion of the “money” that the economy required. Local gold and silver money emerged to fill the void. The gold that was “redeemed” from the natives was cut into pieces or melted into ingots of various sizes. These in turn were used as money. The natural gold dust and nuggets found in streams and the like were also used, and later, gold from worked mines. The Spanish crown authorized a mint for Mexico in 1535 but gold coinage was not included; Mexico was not authorized to mint gold coins until 1680.²

We find reference to the parallel gold monies in circulation in a primary source document *Historia general y natural de las Indias (General and Natural History of the Indies)* by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés (1478-1557). Oviedo began this work, which turned into a series of books, in 1521. He was appointed royal chronicler by King Charles I of Spain (Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire) in 1532. He first published his *General and Natural History of the Indies* in 1535.

From Book VI, Chapter VIII

*El qual traeta de los metales é minas que hay de oro en esta Isla Española: el qual se divide en once párrafos ó partes; y decirse ha assi misimo de la manera que se tiene en el coger del oro, é otras particularidades notables é concernientes á la historia.*³

¹ The name *Las Indias* referred to all the Spanish claimed territories in the New World; this is the meaning used in this article even though additional entities were later created, such as *Nueva España* (New Spain [more commonly Mexico] and *Tierra Firme* (mainland and especially Panama).

² The minting of gold coinage was restricted to Spain proper until authorized for Santa Fe de Bogotá in 1620. Lima produced a few unauthorized gold coins in 1659-60.

³ Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdés, *Historia General y Natural de las Indias, Islas y Tierra-Firme del Mar Océano* (1555 edition; reprint, Madrid: La Real Academia de la Historia, 1851), p. 176.

That which deals with gold metal and mines on this Spanish Island (Hispaniola). It is divided into eleven paragraphs or parts; describing in like manner the methods of getting gold, and other remarkable peculiarities concerning this account.

No hablo aqui en el oro que se ha avido por rescates, ó en la guerra, ni en lo que de su grado ó sin el han dado los indios en estas islas ó en la Tierra-Firme; porque esse tal oro ellos lo labran é lo suelen mezclar con cobre ó con plata, y lo abaxan, segund quieren, é assi es de diferentes quilates é valores.⁴

I do not speak here about gold that was obtained by extraction, neither from war, nor to what degree of payment, if any was given to the Indians in these islands or the mainland; because such gold was usually mixed with copper or silver to degrade it, however they desired, and thus it had different karats and values.

Pero muchas veces he visto gocarse mucho mas los mineros y señores de las minas con el oro menudo que con el granado; porque es la mina mas turable é abundante é se saca mas oro della que de la que parece el oro en granos. E haylo algunas veces tan menudo é volador que es menester juntarlo con el azogue. Y pues que los extranjeros no sabrán, leyendo aquesto , qué peso es el del castellano que acá en Indias decimos un peso, digo que un peso ó un castellano es una misma cantidad, que pesa ocho tomines, é un ducado pesa seys; de manera que el peso monta é tiene una quarta parte mas de peso que el ducado.⁵

But I have often seen miners and owners prefer ore mines over granular gold; because it makes a more workable and abundant mine. Sometimes granular gold is so fine that it floats, requiring amalgamation with mercury. Since foreigners will not know, reading this, which *peso* is a castellano, which the Indians call a *peso*, I say that a peso or a castellano are a same amount, weighing eight *tomines* (a unit of mass equal to twelve grains), and a ducat weighs six; so that the weight amounts to one fourth part more than the ducat.

From *Recopilación de leyes de los reinos de las Indias* (Recompilation of the Laws of the Kingdoms of the Indies) we find some more references to low grade gold and to circulating gold.

Habiendo reconocido...mucha cantidad...oro muy bajo, y encobrado, ques sin fundicion no es possible saber su ley, ni quilatar su valor: Mandamos que este oro, y peizas sea quilatado, fundido y quintado.... Y hechas estas diligencias, siendo quilatadas, y marcadas dichas piezas de oro, de qualquier ley que sean, y teniendo nuestra marca real....⁶

⁴ Ibid., p. 183.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 188-9.

⁶ Emperor Charles in Barcelona 14 September 1519 as recorded in *Recopilación de las Leyes de los Reynos de Indias* (Compilation of the Laws of the Kingdoms of the Indies) Vol. II, Book IV, Title XXII, Ley I. Madrid. 1680.

Knowing that...a great amount...low grade gold, and with copper color, that without smelting is impossible to know its fineness or determine its value: We order that this gold, and pieces to be assayed, (to be) smelted and taxed the fifth.... And after these measures, having assayed and marked each piece of gold, of whatever fineness they have, and having our royal mark....

*Ordenamos y mandamos, que todo el oro, y plata, que hubiere en las provincias de las Indias, y se pudiere recoger, y sacar de los rios y minas, se quilate y ensaye, y echen los punzones de los quilates, y ley verdadera, y conocida, que cada uno tuviere, y por la dicha ley, y ensaye, corra, y de no otra forma....*⁷

We order and command that all the gold and silver that there is in the provinces of the Indies, that can be gathered and taken from the rivers and mines, be assayed, tested and marked with karat punches. And each one shall circulate according to its true fineness and by no other manner....

We can infer from these quotations that adulterated gold circulated alongside “good” gold throughout Spanish America. Jorge Proctor has written on the subject of circulating gold and silver, largely concerning Hispaniola and Panama.⁸ We do not know the precise fineness of this degraded gold or the purchasing power relative to the castellano but we do know that the local “peso” weighed the same as the castellano. The castellano mentioned here was the standard gold coin in Spain up until 1497, when the Catholic Monarchs changed the monetary system a second time. The castellano coin weighed 50 pieces to the “mark of Castile” and had a fineness of 22.5 karats, although originally the fineness had been higher.⁹ The castellano coin was no longer issued, having been replaced by the “Excelente of Granada” (which Oviedo called a ducat) in the decrees of 1497, but it remained an accounting unit for money, especially in (Spanish) America.

Burzio records some of the various types of gold “pesos” used during and shortly after the conquest of America. The word peso means “weight” and was used as an accounting unit, eventually becoming the name of a certain coin.

Peso de buen oro (Peso of good gold) and ***Peso de ley perfecta de 450 maravedises*** (Peso of legal fineness of 450 maravedis). This was 22.5 karat gold and valued at 450 maravedis per equal weight of one castellano¹⁰ (50 pieces per the weight of the mark).

Peso de oro de minas (Peso of mined gold) an accounting unit equal to peso de buen oro.¹¹

⁷ Ibid., Ley II. Emperor Charles, Lerida, 8 August 1551.

⁸ Jorge Proctor, “The Plata and Oro Corriente of the Americas,” *Numismatics International Bulletin* Vol. 42 Number 7 (July, 2007) pp. 146-51.

⁹ Humberto F. Burzio, *Diccionario de la Moneda, I, Letras A a LL* (Santiago de Chile: Fondo Histórico y Bibliográfico José Toribio Medina, 1958), p. 26.

¹⁰ Humberto F. Burzio, *Diccionario de la Moneda, II, Letras M a Z* (Santiago de Chile: Fondo Histórico y Bibliográfico José Toribio Medina, 1958), p. 184.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 185.

- Peso de oro** (Peso of gold) Disks or small bars of native unadulterated gold. Also, an accounting unit equal to peso de buen oro.¹²
- Peso de oro corriente** (Peso of circulating gold) *Peso de oro corriente. El que circulaba sin ensayar, de título variable y sin haber pagado el derecho del Real Quinto.* Circulating gold. Gold that circulated without testing (assay), of variable quality and without having paid the “Royal Fifth” tax.¹³
- Peso de oro castellano** (Peso of gold castellano) the accounting standard, 22.5 karat with weight of 50 pieces to the mark.¹⁴
- Peso de oro en polvo** (Peso of gold dust) Fine gold dust packed into feather quills.¹⁵
- Peso de oro ensayado** (Peso of assayed gold) Gold disks, pieces or small ingots marked with fineness so its value can be ascertained.¹⁶
- Peso de oro fundido y marcado** (Peso of smelted and marked gold) Gold marked with fineness, value or other mark of guarantee.¹⁷
- Oro en pasta.** *El que ha sido reducido a barras, lingotes, tejos, etc., siendo su valor apreciado por los quilates de fino. Fué la moneda en uso en los primeros tiempos de la dominación española, cuando se carecía de numerario sellado o cuando éste era insuficiente. Recibió distintos nombres, según fuese ensayado o no.* Gold bullion (non-forged). That which was cast into bars, ingots, disks (or tiles), etc., having its value determined by karat fineness. It was money in use during the earliest period of the Spanish domination, lacking official seals (punches) or gold on which the seals were not reliable. Called by different names, whether assayed or not.¹⁸
- Peso de oro de Tepuzque** (Peso of *Tepuzque*) Low fineness gold alloyed with copper, appearing after the initial gold captured during the conquest was consumed. Purposely debased with copper to defraud, so named from the indigenous Mexican word “teputzli” meaning copper.¹⁹

Burzio identified these “pesos” from various source documents. If we consider these descriptions we can arrive at three basic groups of smelted gold pieces; *oro corriente*, *oro ensayado* and *tepusque*.

For gold that was unmarked, or whose marks were unofficial (that is, they did not have a tax seal), or were official yet compromised for some reason, we can use the description *peso de oro corriente*, or simply *oro corriente*, meaning circulating gold. This includes *oro en pasta* with or without fineness (purity) marks.

For gold that was marked with, and retained official seals, we can use the description *peso de oro ensayado*, or simply *oro ensayado*. However, these and *Tepuzque* gold described below also circulated in commercial transactions, so technically they can also be called *oro corriente*. In fact Burzio as much as says so, “*La ordenanza del virrey Mendoza, aunque no hizo desaparecer del curso al peso de oro de Tepuzque y*

¹² Ibid., p. 187.

¹³ Ibid., p. 191.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 191.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 192.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 192.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 192.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 160.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 192.

a los otros corrientes, apreciados por su fino... (Although Viceroy Mendoza's decree did not stop Tepuzque or the other circulating gold priced by its fineness...).²⁰

Tepuzque gold is a special classification of privately (or officially) fabricated gold pieces. It appeared after the initial gold redeemed (confiscated) from the natives had been consumed. Gold was mixed with copper or lead with the intent to defraud by passing the gold at a higher purity than it really was. According to Dr. Alberto Pradeau the use of *Tepuzque* began around the year 1522 and continued until the time of Philip II (reigned 1556-98).²¹ This type of gold is most likely the same as cited by Oviedo above. In my opinion these *Tepuzque* gold pieces could have been made in various regular and odd shapes as well as circular disks, the values determined by weight. Today, distinguishing between *Tepuzque*, *oro corriente*, and segments of *oro en pasta* appears to be arbitrary, yet some of the pieces found and yet to be found must be *Tepuzque* gold, especially those cut into small pieces which could have passed as "coins." Officially marked *Tepuzque* gold coins struck on "round" planchets are still unknown, though the possibility of finding these among shipwreck artifacts exists.

Tepuzque gold was of varying fineness, Burzio says that it was approximately 13-1/2 karats.²² Pradeau cites Bernal Diaz del Castillo as the source for the interesting commentary concerning Hernando Cortés. Cortés issued an order that the *Tepuzque* gold pieces be marked with fineness of three karats higher than they really were. This order was in effect for five or six years.²³

Part two of this article will illustrate specimens of *oro corriente*.

Summary of part one

Oro corriente is generally any gold bullion, marked or unmarked, official or private, legal or illegal that circulated in place of legal coins in early Spanish America. These pieces may be further classified depending on certain characteristics, e.g., *Tepuzque*.

To be continued...

NI

QUIZ

Bob Fritsch, NI #LM134

This month we have Primitive and Unusual Money, try these questions:

1. Why does Yap Stone Money have value?
 2. Name four types of Chinese money that fit the category.
 3. What is Wampum made of, and what color was more valuable?
 4. Bermuda issued some unusual money in 1996-98. What shape are these coins?
- Bonus: What else is unusual about the series?

²⁰ Ibid., p. 193.

²¹ Alberto Francisco Pradeau, *Numismatic History of Mexico from the Pre-Columbian epoch to 1823* (1978 edition with annotations and revisions by Clyde Hubbard; New York: Sanford J. Durst), p. 21.

²² Burzio, Vol. II p. 160.

²³ Pradeau, p. 21

Oro Corriente

Part Two: Early Gold Ingots and Cut Specimens

Herman Blanton, NI #LM115

(Continued from May / June 2011 NI Bulletin, vol. 46, numbers 5/6)

This article concerns *oro corriente*, a Spanish term which literally means circulating gold. It is gold that circulated alongside coined money or in the absence of coined money during the early days of the Spanish Conquest of America. The presentation is in three parts: (1) A brief overview including definitions of the various types of circulating gold. (2) Examples of *oro corriente* with emphasis on a special seal showing the Golden Fleece and possible historical antecedents of Charles V (Charles I of Spain). (3) Additional seals on early silver ingots from the “Golden Fleece” and two other shipwrecks of the period.

Part Two

Early Gold Ingots and Cut Specimens

Treasure recovered from Spanish shipwrecks has greatly added to the database of gold and silver specimens of coins, ingots and cut pieces from ingots. This article specifically references specimens recovered from three early Spanish shipwrecks that were carrying treasure from the Indies.

Tumbaga wreck: c. 1528. Unidentified wreck salvaged off Grand Bahama Island.

Golden Fleece wreck: c. 1550. Unidentified wreck salvaged in northern Caribbean.

Padre Island: Documented as 1554 fleet ships wrecked off Padre Island, Texas.

“Tumbaga” wreck

The earliest shipwreck dating to the conquest period thus far salvaged was situated northwest of Grand Bahama Island. It has been called the “Tumbaga Wreck,” after the type of gold and silver ingots that were recovered.²⁴ This wreck is dated no earlier than 1526 and likely within a few years after that.²⁵ Ingots of various mixtures of copper, silver and gold were recovered. García identifies this mixture of silver and copper as “Metal of Michoacán” and coming from the Tarascan people group in western Mexico.²⁶ Analysis performed on these pieces indicates they were made under primitive conditions as might be expected so soon after the conquest. A number of small cut gold pieces are also reported to have come from this wreck.²⁷ Though recorded in the early documents, none of these small cut pieces were known to exist (or at least not recognized) prior to the discovery and salvage of this early shipwreck.

Footnote numbering continued from part one.

²⁴ Alan K. Craig and Ernest J. Richards, Jr, *Spanish Treasure Bars From New World Shipwrecks Volume I* (West Palm Beach, Florida: EN RADA Publications, 2003). Alan Craig developed a new name for the silver alloy ingots, “*mimbres* bars.” Notwithstanding this, the common name for both the gold and silver ingots remains “tumbaga.” See, p. 22.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²⁶ Agustín García-Barneche, *The Tumbaga Saga-Treasure of the Conquistadors* (Winter Park, Florida: Daniel Frank Sedwick, LLC, 2010), pp. 36-39.

²⁷ *Coins, Banknotes, Commemorative Medals and Treasure from Spanish Shipwrecks* (Auction Catalog; London: Christie's, April 28, 1993).

For my research I used Trabucco,²⁸ Armstrong²⁹ and Christie's³⁰ for data and images. I consulted Craig & Richards and García for analysis. A comparison of data between Trabucco, Armstrong and Christie's shows some differences. For example, the Trabucco catalog is a promotional brochure and does not have metrological data and the items illustrated are not explicitly described. The small cut pieces I describe in this article are grouped in a photograph simply described as "gold artifacts" without mentioning any provenance. One of these, a pentagonal piece, was also illustrated singly.

Apparently the Trabucco lot of small cut gold pieces did not sell as nine of the ten specimens were offered later in London by Christie's where they were cataloged individually. In addition to the cut pieces there were also silver ingots and gold ingots attributed to the same wreck.

Twelve of the thirteen gold tumbaga ingots in Christie's (lots 288-99, 287 is an ingot completely different than the others) have been reduced in size by way of material having been cut away from the ends. There are various hypotheses for this (Craig: 28) and in *my opinion* material was cut away to make smaller pieces for commerce. According to Marex data in Armstrong these gold ingots are low fineness ranging from 27.6% to 73.5% with an average of 48% gold.³¹ These ingots show various stamps ranging from probable tax seals to single letters. For example, lot number 296 shows a partial tax seal in five places, the Roman numeral VI in six places and the single letter B in two places. The gold purity of lot 296 is listed in the catalog as 70.8% and the silver at 16.7% for a total gold & silver of 87.5%. Furthermore, lot number 292 has gold content of 29.1% but it too is marked VI. If, as cataloged, the gold purity of lot 296 is over 100% higher than that of lot 292 and yet they both bear Roman numeral VI then this marking must not be karat fineness. I agree with Craig that these ingots can be considered tepuzque (see part one of this article for definition of tepuzque) because they are not high purity gold (Craig: 22).

The best source for images is the Christie's auction catalog. On internet I discovered that two of the gold ingots and one silver ingot are in the British Museum, so these should be accessible for study. For reference:

BM Registration No.: 1993,0516.1. Note: Christie's ... lot 285. Silver ingot 1715.5 g

BM Registration No.: 1993,0516.2. Note: Christie's ... lot 289. Gold ingot 357.1 g

BM Registration No.: 1993,0516.3. Note: Christie's ... lot 291. Gold ingot 520.2 g

By fortuitous happenstance the ingot cataloged in Christie's as lot 296 has come to market in the last few days while I was proof reading this article and it will be offered

²⁸ Joseph P. Trabucco Auctioneers' Treasure Auction '93, Atlantic City, NJ on January 24, 1993.

²⁹ Douglas R. Armstrong. *Tumbaga Silver for Emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire: the Study of a Large Trove of Early 16th Century Spanish Silver Bars Recovered from a Spanish Shipwreck off Grand Bahama Island*. (Palm Bay, Fl.: Author, 1993).

³⁰ Christie's, lots 257-65.

³¹ Armstrong "... (data) were made from micro surface rubbings and cannot be trusted to be more than skin deep." p. 22.

in Sedwick's *Treasure Auction 10* in the autumn of 2011. Fortunately, there is time to include an image of it here.



**Tumbaga ingot: Armstrong (Marex) number 1014, Christie's lot 296 and Sedwick's forthcoming Treasure Auction 10.
Figure 1 (not actual size)**

Size: 230 mm x 18 mm, 312.3 g. Close-up of partial tax stamp, Roman numeral VI and the letter B; all are stamped in multiple places presumably so that the ingot could be cut into pieces with each piece retaining some markings.

The nine gold cut pieces in Christie's (lots 257-65) weigh 2.5, 6.8, 10.0, 19.6, 20.6, 25.2, 42.0, 45.0 and 86.1 grams. All have some markings or traces thereof still showing. These markings are tax seals, Roman numeral marks and possibly other types of marks of the larger ingots from which they were cut. In *my opinion* they were cut from the type of ingots described above. As these pieces were cut into small sizes they must have been used in commercial transactions, making them early *oro corriente* and if they were made from tepuzque ingots then in *my opinion* they must be the enigmatic *tejos de tepuzque*. The pentagonal specimen illustrated in Trabucco but not in Christie's was acquired privately by Frank & Daniel Sedwick and has been written about many times (Craig: 29 and García: 24), see Figure 2.



Gold cut piece with "Crowned C" and assay mark XV with three dots vertical.

Approximately 22 mm wide, 6 mm thick.
Mass of 23.8 g.

Figure 2

In 1519 Emperor Charles V ordered that gold be assayed and marked with karat fineness (Blanton: NI May/June 2011, p. 94) inferring that before this date there was no requirement that gold be marked with fineness, i.e., with karat marks. The pentagonal specimen with XV••• is interpreted as 15-3/4 Karat so this is clearly a karat mark. The twelve ingots and oro corriente in Christie's have Roman numerals

no higher than VIII and none show any dots “•” which would represent quarter karats. If the ingots were made following the assay orders of Charles then the Roman Numerals should be karat marks. If the ingots were made before the order, or in violation of the order, the Roman numerals could have another meaning such as *partida* (batch or lot number) or according to a sorting system in grades or classes.

If the Roman numerals on the ingots are indeed karat marks but none (of the twelve) show any dots for quarter karat then they were made using a different (presumably earlier) methodology than that used on the pentagonal specimen. Christie’s ingot lot number 298 also suggests that the ingots are from different times or places as it was cast in a mold and is “regular” in shape. Lot 287 mentioned above as being different reminds me of the silver tumbaga ingots due to its rough surface. The variety among these specimens does not suggest they were not aboard the same wrecked ship but does suggest that the ingots and specimens were made at different times and places.

Further analysis is needed on the “Tumbaga” gold ingots to determine their purity; this would help confirm the meaning of the Roman numerals on these ingots.

On April 6th, 1526 the Mexico City Council authorized owners of tepuzque *tejuelos*, which are small *tejos*, to deliver them to the Royal Foundry & Assay Office to be converted into “standard” size tepuzque pieces.³² If any of these standard pieces were circular shaped we don’t know; as yet none are known, though there may be some awaiting discovery and identification.

From the Spanish Language Dictionary, 22nd edition published by the Real Academia Española (<http://buscon.rae.es/draeI/>) the word *tejo* has several meanings. For the tepuzque gold the two closest definitions of *tejo* are: *Plancha metálica gruesa y de forma circular* (Thick, round metal plate) and *Pedazo de oro en pasta* (Small piece of gold bullion).

“Golden Fleece” wreck, sunk ca. 1550 in the northern Caribbean

“This wreck was nicknamed for a royal ‘Golden Fleece’ stamp on several of the gold ‘finger’ bars (ingots) it yielded. Practically all the coins from this wreck were Mexican Carlos-Juana silver coins (all assayers prior to S), including several rarities, the most important being three specimens of the Rincón ‘Early Series’ 8 reales of 1538, the very first 8 reales ever struck in the New World ... To date the finders of the wreck have not identified the wreck or disclosed its exact location, but they affirm it was in international waters in the northern Caribbean...Perhaps more impressive than the coins from this wreck are the few dozen gold and silver ingots it has yielded ... The varying purities of these bars are reminiscent of the ‘tumbaga’ bars although the later gold ingots were cast in somewhat standard shapes (‘fingers’) and sizes ... The gold ingots also show a fineness marking, but no tax stamps or other markings, in parts per 24, with a dot being a quarter karat. Many of the silver and gold ingots from this wreck were cut into two or more parts, presumably to divide into separate accounts.”³³

³² Pradeau, p. 22

³³ *Treasure and World Coin Auction 9*. (Auction Catalog; Daniel Frank Sedwick, LLC. Winter Park, Fl. April 26-28, 2011).

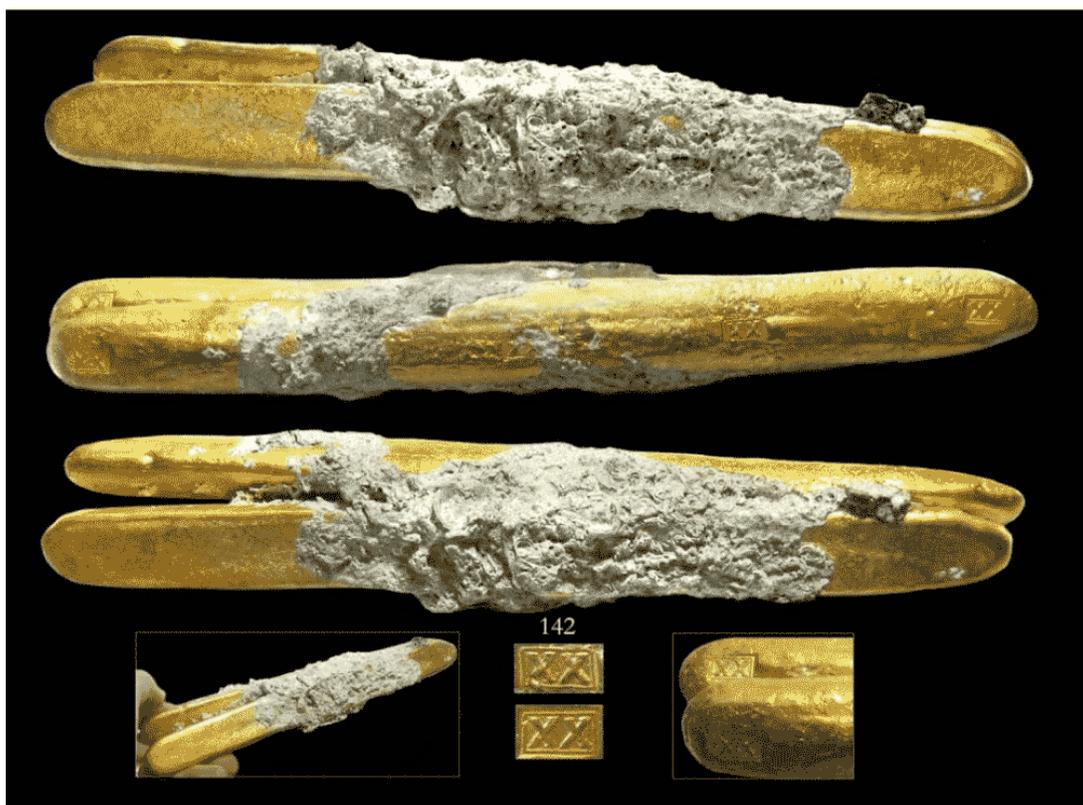


Figure 3
Gold Ingots from the “Golden Fleece” wreck
 (Image reduced)

Pair of 20 karat ingots fused together with coral. These ingots are marked with XX for fineness of 20 karat; the mark is applied five times and evenly spaced along each ingot. The ingots do not have any official seal. It is from such ingots that *oro corriente* pieces were cut. 2396 grams, approximately 10-1/2×1-1/2 inches (265×38 mm). Sedwick *Treasure Auction 7*, lot 142.



Figure 4
Gold ingot from the “Golden Fleece” wreck
 (Image reduced)

Another ingot from which at least one piece of *oro corriente* has been cut as this ingot shows only four of the likely five fineness marks XX that it originally had. 853 grams, approximately 8×1×1/2 inches (200×25×13 mm). Sedwick, *Treasure Auction 5*, lot 92.

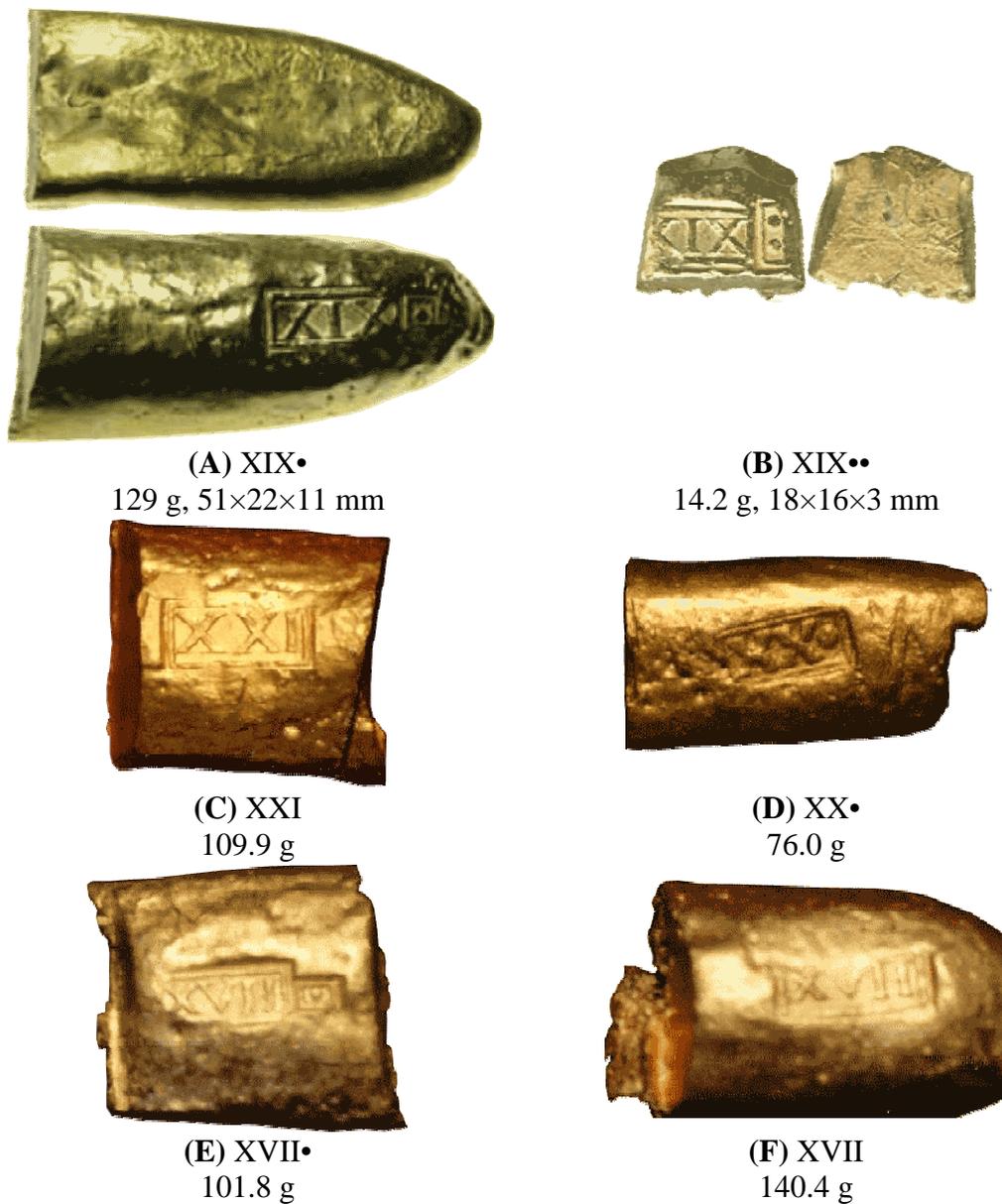


Figure 5 (A-F)

Six specimens of *oro corriente* cut from longer ingots, each showing a fineness mark. Sedwick: (5A) *Treasure Auction 5*, lot 94; (5B) *Treasure Auction 3*, lot 51; (5C-F) unpublished.

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Charles V and the Order of the Golden Fleece

Charles was born in 1500 to Philip the Handsome of Burgundy and Joanna the Mad of Castile. His father was the Sovereign of the Order of the Golden Fleece. Charles was inducted into the order in 1501 and upon the death of his father in 1506 became the sovereign of the order.

Charles inherited vast domains from his parents and grandparents; it has been said that his was an empire on which the sun never set (*El imperio en el que nunca se pone el sol*). Without discussing details of whether he was King, or was Regent for his mother, suffice it to say that after his maternal grandfather, Ferdinand II of Aragon, died (23 January 1516) Charles claimed the Crown of Aragon and Kingdom of Castile (as Charles I of Spain) jointly with his mother Joanna.



Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Emperor Charles V

Charles made his triumphal entry into Barcelona on 15 February 1519. Three weeks later (March 5) in the Cathedral of Barcelona he opened the 19th general meeting of the Order of the Golden Fleece.³⁴ He made the most of this reunion to build support for his claims to empire. Charles had ornate armorial panels made showing the arms of each knight; these were stationed above seats in the choir of the cathedral. Emperor Maximilian had died earlier the same year and his seat was unfilled. (Charles himself would soon be elected Emperor.) Four of the knights were kings; Henry VIII of England, Francis I of France, Louis II of Hungary & Bohemia and Manuel I of Portugal. These four kings were each represented by their respective ambassadors. Through solemn religious and civil ceremonies, and the swearing of allegiances he united the knights in the order as a type of Universal Christian Empire. The setting must have resembled King Arthur and his knights of the round table. At the doorway of the choir Charles had positioned his symbol, the Columns of Hercules. The atmosphere at the reunion imbued the spirit of adventure...the new Argonauts, now called *Conquistadors*, passed through the Columns of Hercules having discovered for their Caesar, Charles, a new continent where they recreated the mythical Golden Fleece which they called *El Dorado*.³⁵



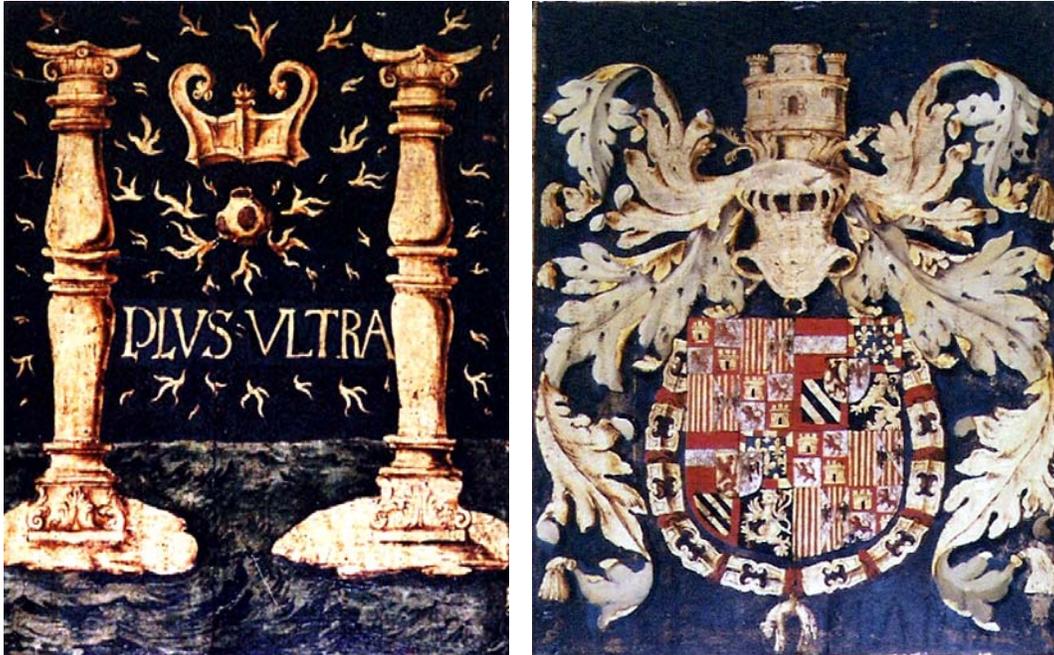
Rafael Domínguez Casas

Choir of Cathedral of the Holy Cross and Saint Eulalia (Cathedral of Barcelona)

³⁴ José María de Francisco Olmos, “Estudio documental de la moneda castellana de Carlos I fabricada en los Países Bajos (1517)” in *Revista General de Información y Documentación*. 2003, 13, number 2. p. 146.

³⁵ Rafael Domínguez Casas, “Arte y simbología en el capítulo barcelonés de la Orden del Toisón de Oro (1519).” *Liber Amicorum Raphaël de Smedt*, 2, *Artium Historia (Miscellanea Neerlandica XXIV)*. Ed. Joost Van Der Auwera. 2001. Peeters Publishers, Leuven Belgium. pp.173-204, especially p. 204.

As Sovereign of the Order of the Golden Fleece, Charles had two of the panels in the choir made for himself. One showed a fire-steel located between the Columns of Hercules with his motto “PLVS VLTRA” below. The other shows his arms with a castle above and the fleece below. The latter looks like the model for the Golden Fleece seal, Castile above and Fleece below.

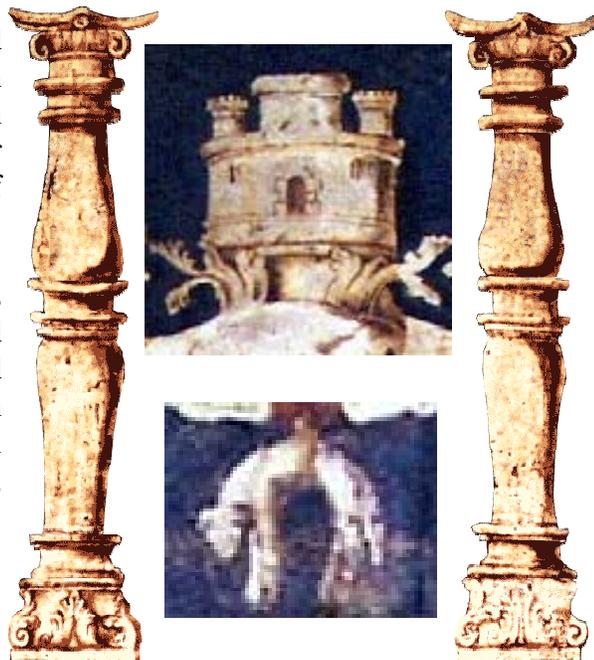


Rafael Domínguez Casas

Armorial panels of Charles I of Spain in the Choir of St Eulalia

The panel with Castle at the top and Fleece at the bottom must have been created to show a connection between Castile and Leon (Spain) and the Order of the Golden Fleece, in the person of Charles, Charles I of Spain.

If we use the Columns of Hercules from the PLVS VLTRA panel and position between them the Castle and Fleece from the Castile panel we can create a design that resembles a seal that was used on some *oro corriente*, see below for specimens.



***Oro Corriente* with mark of the Order of the Golden Fleece**

Three remarkable specimens struck with a seal showing the Golden Fleece were recovered from the same unidentified shipwreck as were the pieces illustrated in Figures 3-5. Because it uses the symbols of the Order of the Golden Fleece, a castle for the Kingdom of Castile and León and his personal device the Columns of Hercules, it is *my opinion* that this seal must have been an official Imperial Seal of Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire. Never seen before their discovery among the unidentified shipwreck treasure, these are of the highest interest. The seal shows a castle from which is suspended the Golden Fleece. This resembles Charles' panel from the 19th general meeting of the Order of the Golden Fleece illustrated above (Castle at top, fleece at bottom).

Each of the three specimens recovered showing the Golden Fleece mark was cut from an ingot. These have an estimated fineness of 22 k.

Ingot 1: Partial "Golden Fleece" seal showing the fleece suspended. Dimensions 22×17×9 mm with mass of 34.6 grams which is 10 ducat weight. Cut from end of longer ingot.

Ingot 2: Partial "Golden Fleece" seal showing Castle between Columns of Hercules. Mass 166.7 grams. Cut from end of longer ingot.

Ingot 3: Nearly complete "Golden Fleece" seal near middle. Mass 119 grams. Middle section from longer ingot, cut on both ends. No image available.

Never before have images of these specimens been published. Ingot 2 is known by only one image and none are available for ingot 3. Thankfully we have good images of ingot 1 which shows the fleece and is the only one close to the weight of a coin.



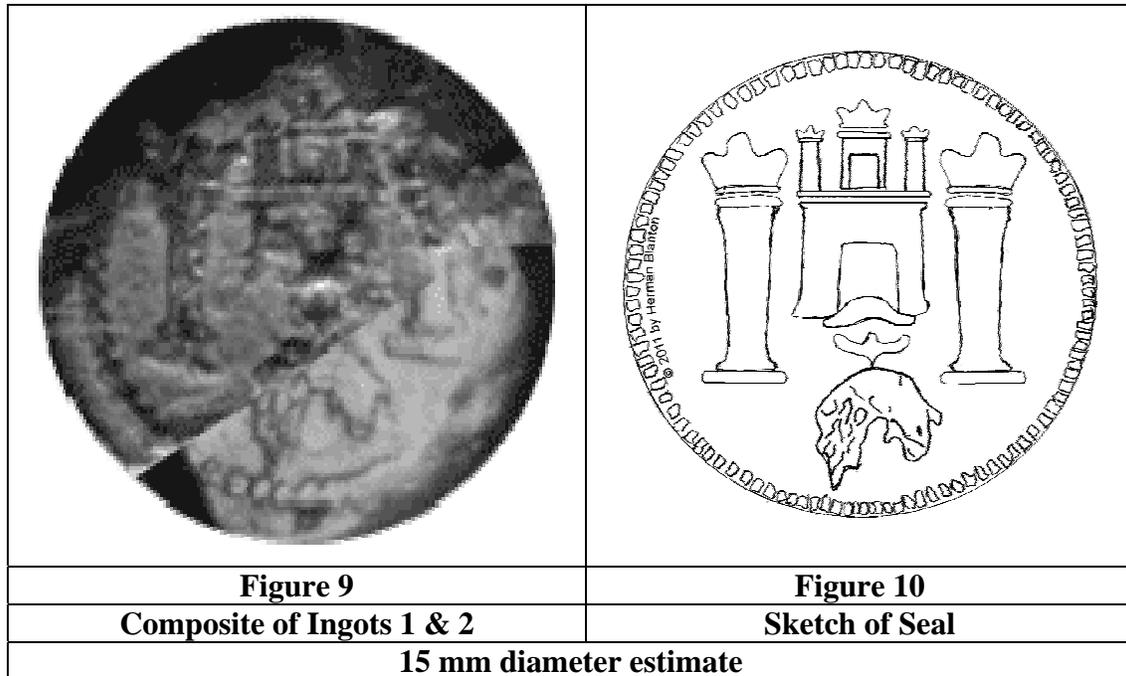
Figure 6
Ingot 1



Figure 7
Ingot 2



Figure 8
Ingot 1 Enlarged



The Golden Fleece seal of Charles V has thus far been found only on gold specimens and only from the “Golden Fleece” shipwreck.

Notwithstanding that I have not seen any documentation that authorized this particular seal it is *my opinion* that it must be an official seal due to its royal imperial symbols. Some may argue that it is not official due to the lack of inscription.³⁶

Summary of part 2

Various gold and silver ingots were recovered from the Golden Fleece wreck. One particular seal includes the fleece symbol of the Order of the Golden Fleece and it is reminiscent of the armorial panel of Charles I of Spain that was made for the 19th general meeting of the Order conducted in the Cathedral of Barcelona in 1519. This seal is known by only three specimens. No documentation has been found to connect this seal with the Order of the Golden Fleece or to explain its origin and purpose.

For more information about the 19th general meeting of the Order of the Golden Fleece and the Choir of the Barcelona Cathedral see the web page by Dr. Domínguez.

“*Arte y simbología en el capítulo barcelonés de la Orden del Toisón de Oro (1519).*” In Spanish, available on-line (6 June 2011) at:

http://bib.cervantesvirtual.com/historia/CarlosV/graf/DguezCasas/8_3_dguez_casas_fotosmini.shtml

³⁶ Craig and Richards, p. 36, when discussing seals used on silver ingots “...the complete lack of any legend eliminates it as an official tax seal.”

*Oro Corriente***Part Three: Additional Seals on Early Silver Ingots**

If the seal (Part 2: Figures 9 & 10) represents Charles V and his association with the Order of the Golden Fleece some questions arise. Were other seals used? Do any relate to orders of knighthood? In part 3 of this *oro corriente* article I will illustrate some seals found on silver ingots from the same three shipwrecks listed earlier: Tumbaga c. 1528, unidentified called Golden Fleece: c. 1550 and the 1554 Fleet / Padre Island: c. 1554.



Agustín García

Figure 11

Castle with legend round: X CAROLVS : IMPERATOR

Carolvs Imperator seal (García: 54). This is a detailed seal and must have been created after Charles' election as Holy Roman Emperor (28 June 1519). It is present on many silver ingots recovered from the "Tumbaga" shipwreck. The seal is only partially visible on the ingots and the image above is a composite diagram. The design shows a castle (presumably for Castile) with inscription around.

Order of St James

There are multiple seals found on silver ingots with scallop shell punches. From the "Golden Fleece" wreck there is a seal described as a crown. However, it reminds me of the scallop shell of the Order of St James seen on silver ingots recovered from the 1554 Fleet shipwrecks (see Figure 13).

The Order of St. James (*La Orden de Santiago*) is a military order of knights founded in the 12th century. One of its goals was the spread of the Catholic faith. St James (one of the original 12 apostles, brother of John) is the patron saint of Spain. Charles was Sovereign of the Order.

Whether the seal is for the Order of St James or is a crown as Sedwick described it, it is still official as both are royal symbols.

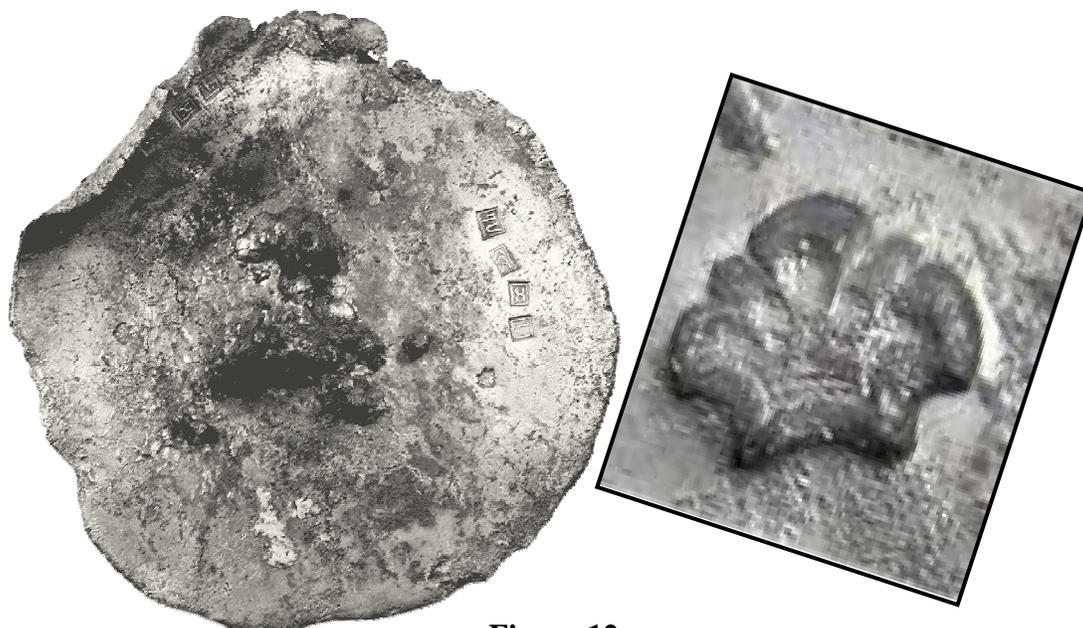


Figure 12

Silver ingot from “Golden Fleece” wreck, 2988 g, 25 cm diameter, max thickness about 25 mm. Fineness mark IIU CCC X L (2340)³⁷ and “quinto” mark at four places Sedwick, Treasure Auction 8 (Oct 21-23, 2010), lot 409. Image of ingot reduced, punch enlarged. The seal is punched at four places on this silver ingot.

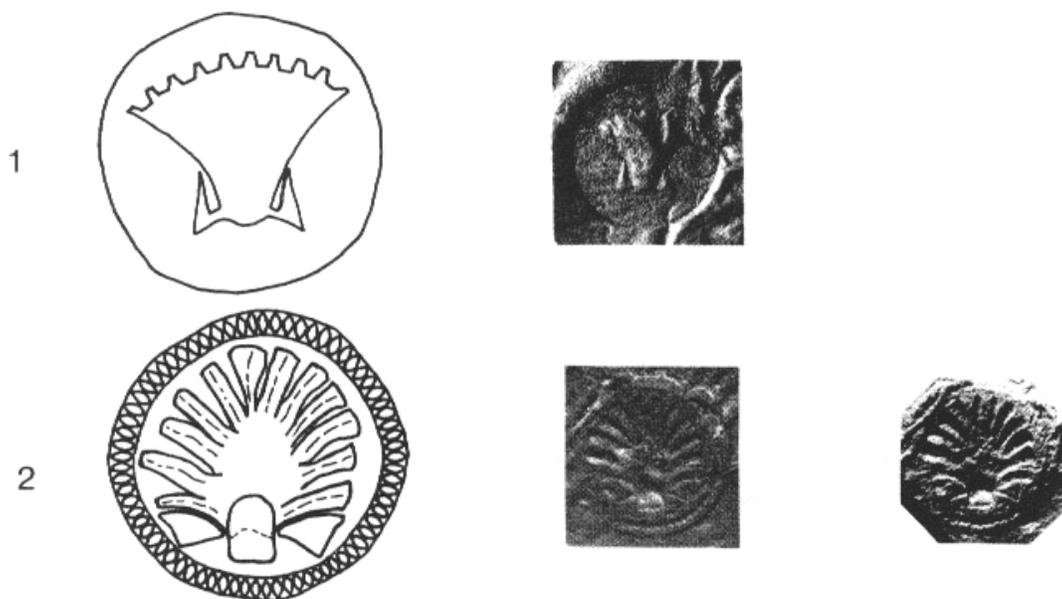


Figure 13

**Republished from *Miscellaneous Papers Number 5*, Texas Memorial Museum, The University of Texas at Austin, 1976³⁸
Scallop shell seals from 1554 Fleet, approx. 15 mm diameter (Olds: 124, 1 & 2)**

³⁷ Fineness based on 2400 being pure. For explanation of the fineness mark see Armstrong pp. 8-10.

³⁸ Doris L. Olds. *Texas Legacy from the Gulf, A Report on Sixteenth Century Shipwreck Materials Recovered from the Texas Tidelands*. (1976. Austin: Texas Memorial Museum.)

Crowned C
Charles I of Spain, Charles V of Holy Roman Empire



Figure 14

Silver ingot from “Golden Fleece” wreck, 815 g, approx. 15 cm diameter, max thickness about 6 mm. Fineness mark IIU CCC L (2350) and crowned “C” seal applied in two places, Sedwick, Treasure Auction 4 (Nov 6, 2008), lot 143. A section has been cut away, probably to be used as *plata corriente* (circulating silver). Ingot image reduced, seal enlarged.

PLVS VLTRA



Figure 15

**Republished from *Miscellaneous Papers Number 5*, Texas Memorial Museum,
The University of Texas at Austin, 1976**

Seal, approx. 15 mm diameter, with head of Charles V, under crown and between the Columns of Hercules with the inscription PLVS VLTRA and M, presumably for Mexico City foundry (Olds: 124, 4). The seals on 1554 fleet Padre Island silver ingots and a similar specimen in Colonial Williamsburg Foundation indicate that there is no peripheral inscription.

Multiple ingots bear this PLVS VLTRA seal, e.g., Sedwick *Treasure Auction 8*, lots 411-12.

One silver ingot with the Charles V head seal, cut to the weight of a 10 reals, was sold at auction in 2007 by Ponterio and Associates; currently it is owned by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.



Figure 16

Piece of plata corriente

33.16 g

Ponterio & Associates, Sale 143
(September 25-26, 2007) lot 1104



Figure 17

Seal (enlargement)

Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

Summary of part 3

Various gold and silver ingots were recovered from the Golden Fleece and two contemporary shipwrecks. One particular seal shows the fleece of the Order of the Golden Fleece. Some silver ingots show seals with the scallop shell, a symbol associated with of the Order of St. James. Other seals show official symbols of Charles I of Spain. I've not found any documentation that links these seals with orders of knighthood other than the fact that Charles I was Sovereign over both. It seems *self evident to me* that they are official seals. Until documentation is revealed the origin and purpose of these seals remains uncertain, but for certain, they are interesting.

Acknowledgements

Painting of Charles V, *Kaiser Karl V*, by Christoph Amberger is in the *Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*. ([http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karl_V._\(HRR\).jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karl_V._(HRR).jpg)). Charles is wearing the Golden Fleece and on the wall behind are his royal imperial arms flanked by the Columns of Hercules.

Images of Choir of Cathedral of the Holy Cross and Saint Eulalia and of armorial panels provided by Rafael Domínguez Casas, Department of Art History, University of Valladolid.

Unless otherwise noted all pictures are courtesy of Daniel Frank Sedwick, LLC. *NI*