

THE *MERCURIO*
A BRIG OF THE REGNO ITALICO SUNK DURING
THE BATTLE OF GRADO (1812)

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5. COINS

Tomaso Lucchelli

The collection of coins found in the shipwreck of the *Mercurio* provides a particularly interesting opportunity to study a limited yet significant cross-section of the coins that were circulating in the Adriatic region during the Napoleonic era. In general terms, it is difficult to establish how representative the coins that have been found and identified may be, not least if we consider this sample in relation to all the coinage that was actually aboard the Franco-Italian brig. Nevertheless, it is immediately apparent that the numismatic finds from the *Mercurio* form a remarkably diverse collection of documented coins. The great variety of coins — in particular in terms of their nominal value and place of mintage — begs numerous questions, but it perhaps also provides some helpful clues that might help to piece together or confirm various aspects about life onboard this unfortunate ship.

We first ought to explore how ‘normal’ or otherwise such a collection of pieces may be. Yet it is difficult to find any terms of comparison in this regard, since research into findings of modern-day coins is — at least in Italy — still in its infancy. For this reason, it is probably more useful to examine whether the situation that emerges from what the *Mercurio* shipwreck has revealed appears to be congruent with what regulations would suggest, on the basis of legal documents for coinage pertaining to the Napoleonic era.

With regards to monetary organization in general, one of the main problems faced by Napoleonic Italy — in its various stages and institutional forms, from the Italian Republic to the Kingdom of Italy — was the fact that at the time that the new state was established, the various territories from which it was comprised all had different monetary systems. As a result, there was a very

great range of different metallic pieces of currency in circulation.

The process of simplification and unification launched by the governments of the Republic and then the Kingdom, which ultimately led to the creation of the Italian lira, was extremely slow. Furthermore and also for contingent reasons, this process never managed to achieve its objectives of standardizing domestic money circulation (La Guardia, 1978). For the whole of the first half of the nineteenth century, Italy had what has been described as a ‘monetary tower of Babel’ (De Mattia, 1959, 5), a situation that continued virtually up to the unification of the country in 1861. Indeed, one of the most significant aspects of the Napoleonic domination of Italy was the fact that coins of different origin and with different features continued to be used throughout the period, even if some of them were legal tender only in certain areas.

Decree no. 281, introduced on 21 December 1807 (Fig. IV.5.1) established, among other things, a precise list of which coins continued to be considered legal tender in the territories that made up the Kingdom of Italy. Among these coins, some of them included on one specific list (*tariffa A*) could freely circulate throughout the kingdom, while others, set out on a different list (*tariffa B*), were deemed legal tender only in certain departments and districts.¹⁰⁷ In addition, and even if they were allowed in a specific department or district since they were traditionally used in such areas, the law also expressly prohibited the introduction and the use of ‘billion coins and copper coins’ as well as actual possession

107 Bollettino delle leggi del Regno d’Italia, 1807, III, pages 1337–99 (especially Titolo II, art. 3–4).

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(1344)

T A R I F F A delle Monete che continueranno ad aver corso legale ne' Dipartimenti e Distretti rispettivi. (B)

(1345)

		VALORE					VALORE			
		In lire locali.	In lire di Milano.	In lire Italiane.			In lire locali.	In lire di Milano.	In lire Italiane.	
<i>Fianonensi</i> pel Dipartimento dell'Agogna.	Soldi venti		8 6	3a	Papetto		19 20	1 7 9	1 06 1/2	
	Soldi dieci		4 3	16		Cavallotto		11 2	15 8	60
	Lira	14 6	4 10	18		Paolo, metà e quarto in proporzione	9 10	13 10	15 2	53
	Metà detta	6 3	2 5	08		Pezzo da due Carlini	10 10	15 2	15 2	58
	Quarto detta	3 1	1 2	04		Detto da un Carlino	5 5	7 7	7 7	30
	Pezzo da soldi sessanta	1 11 9	10 7	40 1/2		Murajola da Bajocchi otto	7 2	10 7	10 7	38 1/2
	Detto da soldi quaranta	1 1	7 7	16 1/2		Detta da quattro	3 3	4 6	17 1/2	17 1/2
	Lira	13 13	4 4	16 1/2		Detta da due	1 7	2 3	08 1/2	08 1/2
	Mezza detta	6 6	2 2	08		Detta da uno	9 9	1 1	04	04
	Quarto detta, o Trairo	7 7	2 4	08 1/2		Cappellone	3 4	4 8	18	18
	Lira	18 9	6 3	24		Mezzo detto	1 8	2 4	09	09
	Trairo	9 9	3 3	11 1/2		Bajocco da due	1 4	1 8	06 1/2	06 1/2
Lira del secondo Blocco	15 6	5 2	19 1/2	Bajocco	1 8	1 10	03 1/2	03 1/2		
Pezzo da soldi cinque di Milano del secondo Blocco	9 9	3 1	12	Mezzo detto	4 4	5 5	01 1/2	01 1/2		
Rame	6 6	8 8	00 1/2	Quatrino	1 1	1 1	00 1/2	00 1/2		
{ Soldo del Sole	2 2	2 2	00 1/2	Lirazza o Fetizza	1 3	3 15	6 50	50 1/2		
{ Pezzo da soldi due	6 6	8 8	00 1/2	Tezzo da soldi quindici	11 6	7 8	20	20		
{ Mezzo soldo di Mantova	8 8	5 5	01 1/2	Detto da soldi dieci	7 6	5 10	19	19		
{ Bluzzero } a valore di Valtellina	1 1	5 5	01 1/2	Detto da soldi cinque, o Trairo	3 6	2 4	09	09		
{ Bluzzero } a valore di Chiavenna	8 8	5 5	01 1/2	{ Soldo di S. Marco	9 9	6 6	01 1/2	01 1/2		
{ Bluzzero } a valore di Chiavenna	8 8	5 5	01 1/2	{ Bezzo	3 3	2 2	00 1/2	00 1/2		
{ Sudo dell' Aquila	3 13 6	1 16 9	1 41	Da lire due	1 1	12 4	50	50		
{ Ducato	7 5 6	3 12 9	2 79	Da lire una	10 10	6 8	25	25		
{ Quarantana	1 13 8	16 10	64 1/2	Da soldi dieci	5 5	3 4	12 1/2	12 1/2		
{ Lira di Modena	1 16	8 1	30 1/2	Da soldi trenta	1 6	17 4	66	66		
{ Mesh detta	7 8	3 10	14 1/2	Da lire una	17 17	11 4	44	44		
{ Giorgino	2 4	1 2	04 1/2	Da soldi dieci	8 6	5 8	21 1/2	21 1/2		
{ Murajola vecchia di Francesco III	2 4	1 2	04 1/2	{ Pezzo da un Carantonio	6 6	4 4	01	01		
{ Detta di Ercole III	14 14	5 5	01 1/2	{ Rame } Detto da due soldi, o marchetto	8 8	5 1/2	01	01		
{ Lira di Reggio	14 14	4 8	18	{ Mezzo detto	4 4	2 1/2	00 1/2	00 1/2		
{ Mezza detta	3 9	1 3	04 1/2	Pezzo da Carantani 8 1/2	11 9	7 10	30	30		
{ Bolognino vecch. di Modena	1 1	6 6	01 1/2	Pezzo da Carantani 7	9 9	6 6	24 1/2	24 1/2		
{ Detto nuovo	1 1	6 6	01 1/2	Lira di Parma	13 13	2 2	16	16		
{ Rame } Soldo vecchio di Modena	1 1	8 8	01	Mezza detta	4 4	2 4	05	05		
{ Detto nuovo	1 1	8 8	01	Cavallotto di Piacenza	6 7	1 1	08	08		
{ Sesino di Modena	4 4	2 2	00 1/2	Mezzo detto	2 2	8 8	02 1/2	02 1/2		
				Rame = Soldi cinque di Parma	3 3	1 1	03 1/2	03 1/2		

AVVERTENZA.

Nell' espressione del valor nominale attribuito alle Monete specificate nella presente Tariffa non si è avuto riguardo alle frazioni minori del denaro e mezzo centesimo.

Figure IV.5.1. Tariffa B from decree no. 281 of 21 December 1807. Figure: courtesy of Società Numismatica Italiana.

from 'one month after the publication of this decree law' within any other department or district.

If we compare the pieces found on the *Mercurio* (see above) with the coinage recorded on these lists and in other similar legal provisions stemming from territorial changes in the Napoleonic Italian state after the annexation of new areas and the exclusion of others, it can be seen that the coins found on the shipwreck bear witness to the fact that this is a very particular find. In fact, if we exclude the presence of coins that were issued specifically by the Kingdom of Italy (i.e. the Italian 1 centime lira coin of 1810, nos 765, 770, and 808 A-D) (see Fig. IV.4.6, above) which obviously circulated without limitation throughout the country, the pieces identified make up a sort of monetary collection that could only have been used legally in some specific departments of

the kingdom, or probably in one case, also outside the kingdom.

One specific example of this can be seen with the 1½ lira veneta (or 30 soldi) (nos 352.1 and 352.2) (see Fig. IV.4.3, above) piece; according to the new decree of 21 December 1807, this was considered legal tender only in the 'newly associated' Veneto departments. Presumably this refers to those created in 1806, that is to say, the departments of Adriatico, Bacchiglione, Brenta, Istria, Passariano, Piave, and Tagliamento, areas to which the system in force in the rest of the kingdom had been extended from that year.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, the baiocco coins of Pope Pius VII (781 A-E) (see Fig. IV.4.5, above) were,

108 Decree no. 208 of 10 October 1806 (Bollettino delle leggi del Regno d'Italia, 1806, III, pp. 971-74).

according to Decree no. 349, of 29 November 1808,¹⁰⁹ considered legal tender only in the departments of Metauro, Musone, and Tronto, which had been formed that same year.

As a final example, the 6 and 15 kreutzer coins (nos 536.2 A, 536.3 A, and 536.2 B) (see Fig. IV.4.4, above), the former of which were explicitly banned from circulating in the Italian Republic in 1802,¹¹⁰ and neither of which were mentioned as a legitimate currency on either of the *tariffa* lists or among the specific information given for the Kingdom of Italy, seem to have been legal tender only in the areas comprising the Illyrian provinces of the French Empire. In these provinces, which also included Istria and Dalmatia, Imperial Decree no. 5162 from 25 December 1809¹¹¹ confirmed that the official currency was the (Austrian) florin, subdivided into kreutzers, which circulated alongside the French franc (Pivec-Stelè, 1930). More specifically and in relation to the specific denominations of the coins found on the *Mercurio*, it is worthwhile pointing out that an order issued by the governor general of the Illyrian provinces on 9 November 1810¹¹² allowed the 15 and 6 kreutzer coins to continue to be used as legal currency within the provinces, in contrast to the 17 and 7 kreutzer coins, which would only be accepted at the reduced value of 15 and 6 kreutzer respectively.

It is more difficult to ascertain the origin of the (half) Ferrara baiocco coin (536.3 B) found on the *Mercurio* with any degree of certainty. Over half a century old at the time the ship went down, this coin is not listed explicitly in any *tariffa* of the Napoleonic era. However, it was probably in circulation in the former Papal territories that had already been annexed to the Cisalpine Republic from 1797 onwards, or to the Kingdom of Italy in 1808.

On the basis of these finds, as outlined here, it is fairly evident that the coins found on the wreck of the *Mercurio* can hardly be said to be a snapshot of the ‘normal’ coins in circulation within any specific area, since

they include examples of coins that — at least according to legal provisions — were not supposed to have legal currency in the same place. One explanation for a situation that in many ways appears to be unusual could be that the actual coins in circulation did not conform to those envisaged by law. However, a more plausible — if perhaps more banal — explanation relates to the actual voyages made by the ship and/or its crew members between various Adriatic ports that belonged to partly different monetary areas (at least as far as concerns the circulation of certain coins only in specific departments). From such a standpoint, we could, for example, envisage the 1½ lira veneta coins being taken on board in Venice, the Pius VII baiocchos in Ancona, and the 15 and 6 kreutzer coins in Trieste, or another port of the Illyrian provinces. In other words, the apparently unusual collection of coins on the *Mercurio* is likely to be the result of very particular circumstances, that of a ship that needed to visit various ports of call on its voyages, ports that lay in different areas of Napoleonic domination, and in this journeying, the crew inevitably came into contact with specific local monetary conditions, giving rise to a sort of itinerant monetary microcosm on board the ship.

109 Bollettino delle leggi del Regno d'Italia, 1808, II, pp. 976–82 (especially Titolo II, art. 5).

110 Decree no. 27 of 6 April 1802 (*Foglio Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, anno I, 1802, pp. 51–52*).

111 ‘Décret impérial contenant Organisation du Gouvernement des Provinces d'Illyrie’, especially Titolo VIII, art. 49 (‘Monnaies’); Bulletin des lois de l'Empire Français, 4 s., 12, no. 265, pp. 85–96.

112 Télégraphe officiel, no. 12, 10 November 1810, p. 48; Giornale Italiano, no. 327, 23 November 1810, pp. 1307–08.

