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CONTEMPORARY EVIDENCE FOR SIEGE COINS: HERMANNUS HUGO'S JOURNAL ON THE SIEGE OF BRED A OF 1624-1625.

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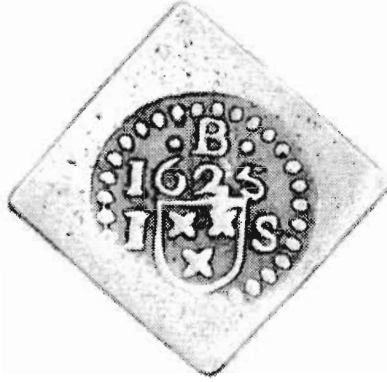


Figure 1: Uniface 1 stiver Breda siege coin dated 1625 from the authors' collection (approximate magnification is 2.5).

As collectors of siege coins, we are keen to learn more about their historical context. Of particular interest are contemporary historical accounts, which can provide unique insights into the economic laws of supply and demand in towns and cities under siege. In researching the background of a siege of Breda coin in our collection (Figure 1), we came across Hermannus Hugo's eye-witness journal of the siege of Breda "Obsidio Bredana" [1]. Hugo's account has proven to be a rich source of information for scholars, including art historians [2] and those interested in siege warfare [3] and is widely regarded as a reliable source of information since he was Spinola's personal field chaplain and superior of the Army Mission [2]. In civilian life he was a Latin poet and an academic.

Hugo's account was originally published in Latin in 1626, but was subsequently translated and published in English in two different versions: H. Hugo "The siege of Breda", 1627 (see the frontispiece illustrated in Figure 2)^a and "The siege of Breda by the armes of Phillip the fourth under the government of Isabella Atchieved by the conduct of Ambr. Spinola", 1627. Fortunately the latter are now fairly readily available due to their reproduction in 1975 [1]. Considering the wealth of information contained in Hugo's journal, it comes as a surprise that it has been neglected by numismatists. For example, it is not referenced in Mailliet's classic work on siege coins [4], nor is it mentioned in a more recent discussion of Dutch siege coins of the 16th and 17th centuries [5]. The purpose of this article is to

briefly review the historical context of the siege of Breda and then highlight parts of Hugo's work which are of numismatic interest (quotes are drawn from the reprinted English text [1] and are given in their original spelling).

Breda's Role in the Eighty Years War in the Netherlands (1566-1648)

Breda was a rich town in north Brabant, located on the road to Antwerp and close to the frontier which separated the Spanish Netherlands from the United Provinces. Breda's strategic value to both sides is highlighted by the fact that it changed hands several times during the eighty years war. Originally controlled by the Spanish Netherlands, it fell to the Dutch (under the command of Maurice of Nassau) in 1590, who fortified the town with advanced defensive works. Following the end of a Twelve years truce in 1620, the Spanish government aimed to revive the commercial life of Antwerp and the rest of the Spanish Netherlands. A key effort was the siege of Breda, which was led by Marquis Ambrogio Spinola (under command of Archduchess Isabella). Spinola set down his army of 18,000 on August 28, 1624 before the bristling defences, with the hope of reducing Breda by starvation and exhausting Dutch supplies.

Items of Numismatic Interest from Hugo's Journal are included in the sections (a) - (c).

(a) The Early Stage of the Siege

There is no doubt from Hugo's account that both sides suffered hardships at different times during the siege. Initially the besieged Dutch were well organized and provisioned. Thus orders were given to:

(i) control finances, which led to the first recall of the coinage (page 34 [1]) "Meanwhile the enemy left nothing unthought of that forecast and counsell could adde to his defence: And emoungst other things he decreed.....that every man, upon his oath, should deliver to the Magistrates what store of money he had lying by him, and consequently lend it to the receivers deputed by the states, towards defraying the charges of their works, and payment of their souldiers, in regard that their Exchequer was but slenderly furnished.By this meanes there was brought into their Treasurie a hundred and fifty thousand Crownes, out of which summe the souldier was weekly paid, and the expenses of the works duely defrayed."

(ii) control prices of provisions (pages 58-59 [1]) "For the Towne, hitherto, had plenty of corne, at no great rate and the Magistrates had set a price uppon all marchandize, no greater then that they were priced at before our Seige, that so the townes men and souldiers might less feele the Seige. A measure of wheat was sold for eight florens^b; Rie for five; Buck-wheat for four; Barly or three florens and a halfe; Oats for as much. A sack of salt was sold for four florens; Dried haberdine and cheese for three stivers the pound; green cheese for two stivers the pound; oile for a florene and two stivers the quart; oile of Rape Seede for eight stivers the quart; Beefe for three stivers the pound. And it is incredible how much the cheapnes of all things encouraged the besieged."

(b) The Later Stage of the Siege

During the earlier stages of the siege, the Spanish siege works were incomplete, which allowed the defenders movement in

and out of the town. As Spinola tightened his stranglehold on Breda, however, this movement was curtailed thereby denuding the defenders their ability to forage as well as severely limiting contact with the outside (Page 61-62 [1]):

“Our works being finished, when now they perceaved themselves to be brought to these straights, souldiers, tradesmen and peasants, for fear of sterving, rendred themselves: for they were wearied out with the extremity of the present inconveniences, and afflicted with a dangerous infection, continuall enclosure and alteration of diet, their Corne being now prodigally dealt, and their flesh, fish and cheese as they understood, being welneare consumed. Bread spread with oile of rapeseed was the daintyes of the common people.”

As time passed, the supply of money and provisions started to dry up, which led to desertion and hoarding. To maintain order, the following decrees were made:

(i) *to stop hoarding of provisions (page 79 [1])* “Those statutes being proclaimed upon the second of January, the Magistrates and Captaines searching all mens howses and granaryes, carried away their corne, forcing all men to take their oath, that they had no more corne concealed in their houses.

(ii) *the second recall of the coinage and the minting of siege coins in 5 denominations (page 79 [1])* “For the failing of their treasure, they tooke this course. The Governour of the Towne, the Coronells, Lieutenant-Coronells and Captaines deposed upon their oath, what store of money every man had, that it might be knowne how much every man had, that it might be knowne how much every man was able to lend. Whith done, five severall sorts of coyne, of silver and brasse, were stamped in a four square forme. The silver peeces of

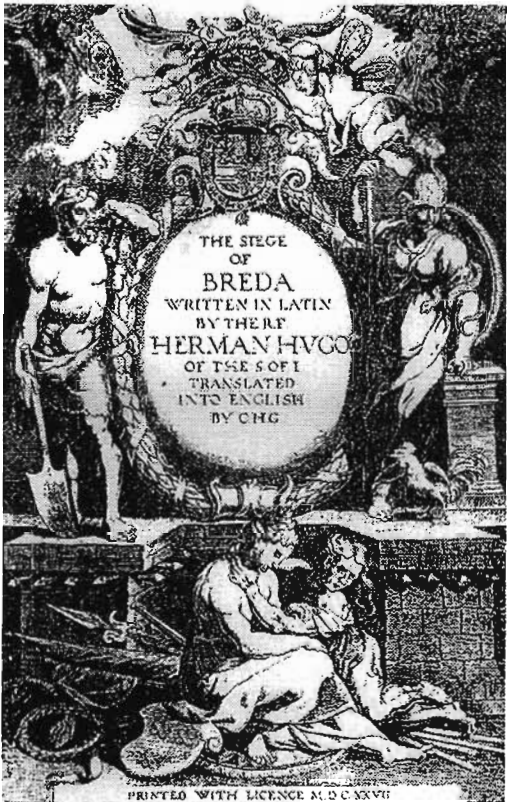


Figure 2: Frontispiece for H. Hugo “The siege of Breda”, 1627

a florene, of two florens, and three florens: the brasse of a stiver, and a stiver and halfe. And it was proclaimed that those peeces should runne current, according to the value of the marke set upon them. Of the silver this was the forme.”

This valuable descriptive reference to the siege coinage nicely matches the surviving numismatic evidence (Mailliet lists all 5 siege coin denominations in his catalog - see coins 10-16 of Plates XVII and XVIII). A further bonus is that three different silver pieces are illustrated as a figure in Hugo’s account (see page 79 of (1), which is reproduced as Figure 3 here) and these closely

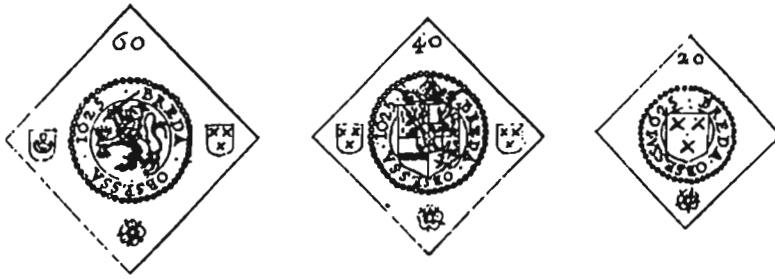


Figure 3: Illustration of Breda silver siege coins from Hugo's text [1].

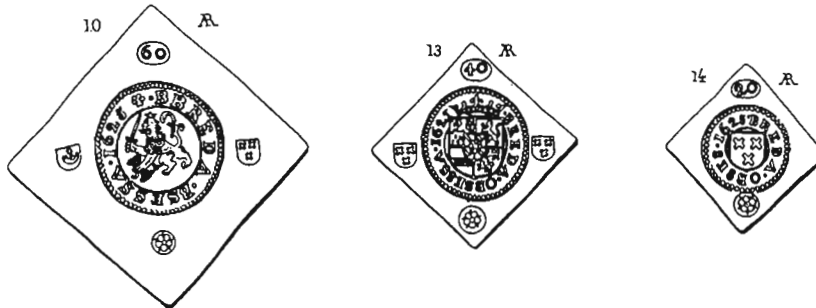


Figure 4: Illustration of Breda silver siege coins from Mailliet's catalog [4] which match those from Figure 3. Left coin corresponds to Mailliet Plate XVII, coin 10, middle coin corresponds to Mailliet Plate XVII, coin 13, right coin corresponds to Mailliet Plate XVIII, coin 14.

match the actual pieces illustrated in Mailliet (the appropriate matches are shown as Figure 4 here).

(c) Does Hugo's account provide evidence for a hitherto unknown counterstamped Breda siege coin?

Perhaps the most numismatically tantalizing part of Hugo's account is his reference to the initial counterstamping of the existing coinage after the first recall of the coinage.^c Thus on page 35 [1] we read "Moreover a marke was put upon certayne

coin worne out of date and not currant, by which that coyne was knowne and commaunded to runne at the old rate, and other coyne was enhaunced, and made runne above the value, by which course the summe gathered encreased and grew greater." What happened to these counterstamped coins? Unfortunately, we may never know the answer to this question since Hugo's account neither describes the design nor contains an illustration of the counterstamped coinage which could be used to help identify it. An argument might be made that all of these pieces were destroyed during the second

recall of the coinage. It seems unlikely, however, that not a single example of the counterstamped coinage would have survived this event.^d

Conclusions

Although Hugo's account leaves some numismatic questions unanswered (such as: "What was the design of the first counterstamped coinage?"; "Who was responsible for the design and manufacture of the siege pieces?"; "Was the source of the metal for the siege coinage solely from the recalled coins?"), it provides valuable insights into the social and economic milieu for siege coins. We are undertaking further research to gain new insights into siege coinages by examining contemporary historical accounts of other sieges.

Footnotes

^a It is interesting to note that the title page was designed by Rubens [2] and shows the personification of Breda as a beautiful maiden being strangled into submission by Famine.

^b In the English translation [1], the reader is informed on page 59 that: "a florene is two shillings English" and "a stiver is somewhat more than a penny so that ten stivers make twelve pence".

^c We have been unable to find any numismatic literature which attributes counterstamped Dutch coins to the Siege of Breda.

^d The Irish gunmoney of James II is a good example of specimens surviving despite a restriking over an existing necessity coinage.

References

- (1) English Recusant Literature, Volume 261, D.M. Rogers (ed.), Scholar Press, London 1975 (ISBN: 0 85967 257 3).
- (2) S. Zurawski, *The Art Bulletin*, Volume LXX, 1988, 621-639.
- (3) C. Duffy, *Siege Warfare*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1979 (ISBN: 0 7100 8871 X).
- (4) P. Mailliet, *Catalogue Descriptif des Monnaies Obsidionales et de Necessite*. 4 volumes, Brussels 1868-73.
- (5) L.C. Korchnak, *The Numismatist*, 1990, 1947-1952; 2001-2003; 2041.