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PIECE OF EIGHT

Alejandra Irigoin and Bridget Millmore



Figure 1. Piece of eight with Plus Ultra pillars, Potosí mint, 1663 (courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).

The 'Spanish' or 'Spanish American' *peso* or 'piece of eight' was the first global currency, and its impact was deep, long lasting and far reaching. Successively known in Spanish first as *ryal* or *real*; in English as piece of eight, cob or pillar; in French as *piastre*; and after 1730 in Spanish as *peso columnario* or *moneda columnaria* and milled dollar in English, this specie was also well known in Asia. After 1772 the specie stamped with the face of the king was also called the Carolus or bust dollar. These coins circulated the world from South America to Asia via European and Mediterranean ports and cities and travelled directly through the Pacific, affecting the economies of countries producing, intermediating and demanding it. The piece of eight also shaped the endeavours of traders, the innovations of manufacturers and the conditions of workers well beyond the mines. As they circulated far and wide across the oceans, these coins

changed people's consumption habits by providing access to a wealth of imported goods. Pieces of eight were traded for luxury items including spices, silk and cotton textiles, porcelain and tea, all of which became staple commodities as global commerce expanded.

Early modern states and empires did not always have the precious metals required to produce their own coins. The abundant pieces of eight provided a source of reliable currency where cash was scarce and banks did not yet exist. In addition to commercial trading, pieces of eight were used in a variety of contexts: stored as reserves in the Netherlands, Britain and America; received for taxes in China; paid to seafarers in the Mediterranean and the Pacific Oceans alike; sent home by Chinese migrants in East Asia; used by European governments to recruit foreign mercenaries; mobilised through charitable donations across the Spanish Empire; and offered to ancestors in indigenous ceremonies in Peru. The ubiquity of the piece of eight stemmed from the sheer number minted and the steady quality of its coinage. As a result, it circulated worldwide at a value above its content of fine silver.

Pieces of eight, large silver coins famed for their appearance in pirate stories and films, started life deep within mines far from the sites of such storied maritime adventures. The coins were fashioned from more than 70,000 tonnes of silver mined in the Hispanic

Indies or America from the 16th to the 19th centuries, most notably from the silver 'Rich Mountain' of Potosí in the Viceroyalty of Peru and Zacatecas in New Spain or Mexico. At its most prolific in the 17th century, Potosí produced 60 per cent of the world's silver; a century later, Mexico alone produced 70 per cent of the world total. The mining of silver on such a vast scale in the New World brought extraordinary wealth and global reach to the Hispanic monarchy. Thanks to the availability of resources essential for silver refining – like mercury, salted water to wash it out and wood fuel for smelting – refining could take place on site, and as a result the environmental and human cost of silver mining was devastating.

The journey from silver ore to manufactured coin was long and complex. It involved the coerced, rotational (*mitayo*) and free labour of hundreds of thousands of workers (mostly Indians but also *mestizos* and African slaves) in the New World. Since mining was the engine of the broader economy, many more people worked in agriculture and textile production to clothe and feed the mine workers and ore carriers who transported the bulk product to refining centres and mints in three of the biggest cities of the Hispanic Indies or America. The precious metal left the region mostly as newly minted coins stowed in linen bags and mainly as return from private trade, not as a royal exaction.

Until the late 18th century the silver dollars or pesos were minted in three cities only: Mexico, Lima and Potosí. The process involved cutting the silver with pliers into discs or planchets of a specified weight and purity, set at a weight of 423.9 grains, or 27.47 grams inclusive of alloy, and 930.7 thousandths of fine silver quality. The blanks were then struck with a hammer between two dies and imprinted with two different designs, one for the obverse face and the other for the reverse. The resulting hammered coins became known as cobs. Cob designs changed little over the period they were minted, between 1536 and 1732, but always featured a number of distinctive details which provided information on the specie. These details included the initials of the assayer and of the mint house where the coin had been made, the denomination (number of *reals*) of the coin and the name of the current king. Dates were added in the early 1600s. The coins were decorated with symbols of power of the sovereign; for example, on the obverse they displayed the Habsburg standard



Figure 2. Silver cob or piece of eight; Potosí mint before 1617 (courtesy of University of Notre Dame Department of Special Collections).

and the Jerusalem cross between the lions and castles of the Castilian coat of arms (Figure 1). The legend *Hispaniarum et Indiarum Rex* evoked the *plus ultra* reach of the monarchy and distinguished the cob from coins minted in Spain that made no reference to the Indies. As they were hand struck, it was difficult to keep the uniformity and the integrity of the coin, making it easy for people to profit by clipping or shaving the silver from their edges (Figure 2). Mexico alone cut 761 million of these coins.

Minting in Spanish America was very much a private business. Mint offices were purchased by wealthy merchants who in turn bought the ore from miners at a discount. After a massive adulteration of the coin in 1640s Potosí, most features about the minting remained the same but the appearance of the coin changed. The new reverse side portrayed the Pillars of Hercules and swirling waves, representing the overseas extension of the monarchy or empire, with the words *Plus Ultra* between the columns. Thereafter these coins became known as *moneda columnaria*. The impact of the Potosí debasement loomed large in Europe and Asia and prompted the introduction of new coinage technology. This impact, together with other reforms, meant that the production, minting and export of silver would leap to new heights.

Beginning in 1732 in Mexico, the introduction of mule-driven rolling mills produced blanks of very consistent thickness, since both the mechanical cut of the disc and the details of the coins were now embossed by a screw press. Furthermore, a set of rings were used to imprint a corded edge on the coin designed to prevent clipping, known as *de cordoncillo* (Figure 3). Thus, milling and the new minting process resulted in a coin that was uniform in purity,



Figure 3. Silver pillar dollar or piece of eight, Mexico, 1770. Public domain.

size, weight and dimensions. The coin had a 38 mm diameter, weighed 417.6 grains or 27.5 grams with alloy and at 916.6 thousandths of fine contained 25.6 grams of silver. A centralised engraving of the dies – sent from Madrid – standardised the aspect of the coins throughout.

The crowned pillars, indicating the unlimited reach of the Hispanic monarchy, are accompanied by the motto *Plus Ultra*, meaning 'beyond' (the Mediterranean). Between the pillars are two orbs or globes, representing the New and Old Worlds with the waves of the oceans swirling below, together with the mint mark and year of coinage. The words *UTRAQUE UNUM* on either side of the pillars allude to the East and West Indies, or to Hispania and the Indies. As with the pieces of eight, the reverse shows the Castilian arms with the coin's denomination, the assayer's initials and the king's name as sovereign in the Hispanic monarchy by grace of God, all of which remained the same. With such detail, the history of where, when, how and by whom a coin was minted is not so difficult to trace.

Total coinage in Spanish America doubled by 1750, and by the 1780s the volume that had been minted in the 1730s had nearly tripled. Successively the other mints in America adopted this technology – Lima in 1750 and Potosí in 1771. Other mints opened in Guatemala in 1733, in Popayán and Bogotá in 1758 and in Santiago de Chile in 1772. In all these, the peso coin, equivalent to eight reales, was overwhelmingly the denomination most often minted. This was a large value for current money in domestic and retail markets, creating problems of scarcity of small change

in the local Spanish American economies. In 40 years, the Mexico mint coined 462 million pieces of this type.

In 1772 the arms of León and Castile were replaced by the bust and the name of the current king and emperor and the year. On the reverse, the Castilian standard was inserted into the space between the pillars in lieu of the two globes, together with all the details of the minting. This coin maintained the size and total weight but had a lower content of fine; at 902.7 thousandths, the pure silver was 24.7 grams, so the peso was slightly debased. The minting of Spanish pesos and dollars reached its peak, producing 24 million pieces a year, by the 1790s. Exports to Europe and China peaked at the same time. These coins with the face of Charles III or Charles IV were widely known as bust or head dollars and in Asia as the Carolus, old or Buddha heads, long robes or *sikong-yin* in China, and also *sangong* (three gongs) and *singong* (four gongs) in reference to the roman numerals III and IIII that followed 'Carolus' (Figure 4).

This specie was the forerunner of the American silver dollar designed by Alexander Hamilton in 1791, which nearly replicated the dimension, purity and weight of the coin to identical specification. The Chinese quickly recognised the distinction between the Carolus and the Fernand heads, which they called the short robe, and started receiving the coins at a discount (Figure 4). The Carolus peso remained in high demand inside China well into the 19th century, but the end of its coinage after 1808 led to an end of Chinese imports of silver. After independence, the coordinated, empire-wide production of silver coinage ceased within ten years, with each republic



Figure 4. The obverse of a 1797 coin showing the bust of Charles IV (left); the obverse of a 1810 coin with the bust of Ferdinand VII, possibly from Mexico (right) (courtesy of the personal collection of the author).

minting their own silver specie. It was the end of the monetary standard that the Spanish American silver coin had provided to the early modern world.

The social lives of three coins may serve to illustrate their extraordinary global impact. Our first example is a coin that carries the merchant marks of Chinese silver assessors. The second has been countermarked with the name of a British cotton mill. The third coin is no longer a coin. It has been crafted into a love token and re-engraved with words of affection and belonging. These three mini-histories offer glimpses into how a small object held in the hand and carried in a pocket or purse affected people's lives in memorable ways. Each illustrates how money is so much more than a token means of payment – how it can become embedded in not only economic but also social and emotional values.

Our first coin is a piece of eight stamped with what are known as chop marks. From the early 1600s China imported more silver than any other good or commodity, lacking institutions to mint her own. Spanish American coins offered China a valuable import that could support the overseas sale of Chinese manufactures, such as porcelain, silk and other Asian textiles that Europeans re-exported worldwide. Chinese assayers or shroffs tested the quality of the imported coins and stamped them with their own marks each time they were exchanged (Figure 5). In so doing, they certified the purity before accepting a coin in payment. The chop marks took the form of Chinese characters as well as symbols, and guides were published to identify different marks. In other words, these marks indicated that the coins were acceptable for trade and current within China. The piece of

eight played a substantive role in the development of Eurasian trade while supplying China with a much-needed source of reliable, convenient and abundant means of payment. It facilitated the trading of goods within China, where local silver and coins were lacking.

Our second example illustrates how the coin which was adapted to meet the cash needs of industrialising Britain. With practically no English coinage of silver for most of the 18th century, at a time of rapid mechanisation in the production of cotton textiles and in the context of inflation caused by the French wars in Europe, the northern cotton towns suffered from a severe shortage of means with which to pay their mill workers. The fast-growing production of cotton in the country relied heavily on a large workforce. Without sufficient coins of a convenient denomination, manufacturers faced problems retaining good workers. Rather than using large-denomination gold coins, bank notes – the Bank of England notes were worth £50 until 1797 – or low-denomination copper coins of dubious origin, mill owners took the step of countermarking the Spanish American silver dollars that were available in abundant supply. It proved successful, and during the restriction on conversion of bank sterling notes into gold after 1797, the Bank of England also resorted to countermarking some of their reserves of Spanish American pieces of eight – and even bought large quantities of them – to alleviate the domestic shortage of cash at home, to pay foreign allies and to ensure the East India Company remained able to trade in Asia.

Mill owners and manufacturers in the northern industrial centres imported coins and marked them with their own stamps, altering the face value of the coin to a higher value than its intrinsic silver content as a way of ensuring the money was accepted and stayed in circulation. The illustrated example is inscribed with the name of Cromford Mill as well as the value of four shillings and ninepence – whereas the mint price was four shillings and sixpence (Figure 6). The coins were exchangeable by the mill workers in the factory shops and sometimes in the local towns. The practice of countermarking increased with prices and wages and is visible in the subsequent stamping of Spanish American coins with values of five shillings and even five shillings and sixpence (Figure 7),



Figure 5. Charles III silver dollar minted in Santiago de Chile (1784), stamped with Chinese merchant marks (courtesy of the personal collection of the author).

shadowing changes by the bank countermarks. This provided a vital solution to a serious problem for the industry, and the countermarked coins are material evidence of a time of great change in the lives and purchasing power of British workers.

The practice of turning low-value coins into mementoes for family and friends was particularly popular during the 18th century among the poorer sorts in Britain. While the ruling elite and middling sorts offered loved ones gifts of luxury objects or commissioned elegant portraits, the lower ranks resorted to using the materials they had to hand. Domestic items ornamented with personalised inscriptions and affectionate symbols were often given to commemorate important life events.

Similarly, silver and copper coins were rubbed smooth and re-engraved with names and idioms of love and offered to mark births, marriages and deaths. With so many silver pieces of eight in circulation, it is not surprising that examples of love tokens crafted from these coins survive. The reverse side of the coin (Figure 8) is unchanged, revealing it was minted in Mexico during the reign of Ferdinand VI (1746–59). The obverse side, however, has been rubbed smooth, and the new inscription shows the winged figure of Cupid carrying a bow and pointing at an altar of love on top of which sits a flaming heart – all familiar imagery symbolic of love and affection. The accompanying idiom reads ‘When this you see/Pray think on me/Thomas Harding’. Although Thomas’s story and why he is named on this token remain unknown, the words and picture speak of love and remembrance. The desire to be remembered is frequently found on love tokens, suggesting they were used as parting gifts at moments of separation. Indeed, these emotionally



Figure 7. Charles III piece of eight from 1782, minted in Mexico and countermarked with the stamp of Ballindalloch Cotton Works in Scotland (courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).

charged objects became important in the customary practices of British families and communities.

The piece of eight made the world go round in more ways than one. Spanish American dollars were minted as a means of exchange within and beyond the vast *plus ultra* realm of Hispanic monarchy and the empire of the Indies. Produced in huge volume and with remarkable consistency, the coins quickly flowed around the world, supplanting poor coinage and filling the need for cash far beyond the site of production in Peru and New Spain or Mexico. The three cases briefly examined here suggest that the coins not only moved goods but shaped networks of people and things, affecting the private lives of individuals across the globe.



Figure 6. Charles III piece of eight from 1801, minted in Mexico and countermarked with the stamp of Cromford Mills in Derbyshire (courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).



Figure 8. Ferdinand VI piece of eight, minted in Mexico (possibly), altered into a love token (courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).

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