

Italian Coins in Medieval England after the Norman Conquest

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Abstract

This is a survey of the use of Italian coins in medieval England from the Norman Conquest in 1066 to c. 1520. There is only one recorded find of an Italian coin in an English hoard of 1066-c. 1400, but single finds provide evidence of the limited use of a wide range of Italian coins in this period. Documentary evidence for the use of Italian gold coins in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century England is reviewed. There were two periods of extensive circulation of Venetian *soldini* in the early fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. In 1999 Barrie Cook published a survey of the evidence for the use of foreign coins in medieval England which is still an essential starting point for any work on the subject¹. Cook demonstrated that foreign coins were normally only a very minor part of the English currency, as they were usually converted into English coins at the mints when they were imported, although there were occasional episodes of greater use of particular kinds of foreign coins². In the quarter of a century since the publication of Cook's survey our knowledge of the circulating currency of medieval England has been greatly enhanced by the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) established under the terms of the Treasure Act of 1996. It is now possible to offer a fresh survey of the use of Italian coins in medieval England from the Norman Conquest in 1066 to the end of the second of two major incursions of Venetian *soldini* into England in about 1520.

The list of English hoards containing medieval Italian coins in *Appendix 2* (p. 302)³ shows that there are no known hoards with any Italian coins dated between 1066 and 1279, and that the only hoard of 1279-c. 1400 with an Italian coin was the Dover find of 1955 (deposited in about 1295), which had a single *grasso* of Brescia in a very heterogeneous group of 686 coins probably connected with foreign exchange activities at the port of Dover⁴. There are no

1 COOK 1999, publishing a paper originally presented at the Second Cambridge Numismatic Symposium on "Local Coins, Foreign Coins: Italy and Europe 11th–15th Centuries", organized by Lucia Travaini in March 1997. At that time Lucia Travaini was a Research Associate on the Medieval European Coinage project of the Fitzwilliam Museum, where the author was a member of the curatorial staff from 1997 to 2023.

2 ALLEN 2012: 346–376 surveys the currency circulating in England between c. 973 and 1544.

3 Dr Murray Andrews has provided very helpful advice on the listing of hoards in Appendix 2.

4 DOLLEY 1955–57.

fourteenth-century English hoards with an Italian element, and the Italian coins in the nine post-1400 hoards are almost entirely Venetian *soldini*, which circulated in England during two periods in the early fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries as “galley-halfpence” (see below).

Cook was able to list various English finds of Italian coins dated between the mid-eleventh century and *c.* 1300, in contrast to the almost complete absence of hoard evidence in this period. There were two Sicilian *follari*, of Robert Guiscard (1076-77) and Roger II (dated 1141-42); a Sicilian *denaro* of Frederick II (1198-1250); *denari* of Pavia and Lucca; and a half-*denaro* of Piacenza (1140-1313)⁵. A Sicilian gold *tari* of the Fatimid dynasty, temp. al-Mustansir (1036-94), dated to *c.* 1050-72, was found at St Leonards-on-Sea, East Sussex in 1986⁶. The summary of single finds recorded since the publication of Cook’s survey in 1999 in *Appendix 1* (p. 299)⁷ includes ten coins dated between the mid-eleventh century and *c.* 1350: four *denari* of Lucca from the period 1056-1125, single *denari* of Sicily and Genoa, a *grosso* of Venice, a *grossetto* or *denaro* of Siena, and two gold florins of Florence.

There is considerable documentary evidence for the presence of Italian gold coins in medieval England at various times from the 1240s to the mid-fourteenth century. King Henry III (1216-72) assembled a gold treasure between 1243 and 1253, used to fund his Gascon expedition of 1253-54, and a further treasure from 1254 to 1258. The first treasure included a few of the gold *augustales* of the Emperor Frederick II (1220-50) minted in Brindisi and Messina from 1231. Only fourteen *augustales* are specifically mentioned in the records of the treasure, being acquired in 1243/4 and 1247/8, and there are no recorded finds of *augustales* in England⁸.

The florin of Florence achieved a much wider circulation than the *augustale* after its introduction in 1252, and its first known appearance in English records is in 1285, when an official of the royal household was compensated for three florins spent on the king’s behalf⁹. The English Exchequer’s Memoranda Roll of 1326/7 records debts to be collected by the constable of Dover Castle in 1326, including 252 florins owed by John de Pykeryng to Hugh le Despenser; 600 ‘small florins of Florence’ paid by a Devon knight; and details of the settlement of a debt of 3,000 florins to the Crown from the estate of the late bishop of Exeter, with the payment of 2197 actual florins¹⁰.

5 COOK 1999: 271, nos 90-95; KELLEHER 2012: 155, 166, 178, 360 (Fig. 6.10). The *follaro* of Robert Guiscard, found at St Augustine’s Abbey in Canterbury, was pierced and probably worn as a pendant.

6 BLACKBURN, BONSER 1986: 92-93, no. 124; DAY 2021: 104.

7 I am grateful to Dr William R. Day for his advice on the descriptions of finds in *Appendix 1*.

8 CARPENTER 1987: 106-107, 109; CARPENTER 1996: 108, 132-133; COOK 1999: 248; DAY 2021:104

9 *Records of the Wardrobe and Household 1285-1286*: 19, no. 187; COOK 1999: 255; DAY 2021:111.

10 *Memoranda Rolls 1326-1327*: 115, 212, 232-233; COOK 1999: 255.

In 1331 Edward III (1327-77) prohibited the circulation of foreign gold, and exchange tables were established at ports to exchange foreign money. At first a large number of gold coins (mainly florins and French coins) were exchanged for English sterling, but business quickly diminished and the exchange tables were abandoned in 1336¹¹. Florins were still being brought to England by Italians after 1336, as shown by the theft of 160 florins from some Florentine merchants on the road from Romford to Brentwood in Essex in 1338¹². Italian bankers operating in England maintained an exchange rate of 3s. 0d. sterling to the florin from 1339 to 1344, but there were complaints about the high price of florins in the parliament of 1343, and a parliamentary enquiry established that their intrinsic value was only 2s. 6½d¹³. In the parliament of 1343 there was a proposal (not implemented) to allow florins and French *écus* to be current at their market value for transactions over 40s. in value¹⁴. In 1344 a new English gold coinage based upon a florin of 3s. 0d. was abandoned before the end of the year, to be replaced by a much more successful coinage of gold nobles pegged to the French *écu* at 3s. 4d., and the English government's use of loans in florins from Italian bankers ceased¹⁵.

The introduction of an English gold coinage did not immediately completely eliminate the use of florins in England. There were further thefts of florins in 1348 and 1350, and in 1351 a monk of Westminster borrowed 800 florins from the Malbayl Society in London¹⁶. The role of foreign gold coins did, however, quickly diminish after 1351, as the use of the English noble became more prevalent¹⁷. Until recently there were no English finds of florins from this period, but there have been two finds since 2019. A florin dated between about 1285 and 1290 was found near Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk in 2019 (Fig. 1)¹⁸. A second florin, with the mark of the mint-master Tommaso Peruzzi (1319/II), was found near St Mary in the Marsh, Kent, in 2021¹⁹.

11 MATE 1978: 127.

12 *Close Rolls 1337-1339*: 571; COOK 1999: 258.

13 STRACHEY *et alii* 1767-77, II: 137, 143; FEAVEERYEAR 1963: 27-28; ALLEN 2012: 359.

14 STRACHEY *et alii* 1767-77, II: 105; FEAVEERYEAR 1963: 27; COOK 1999: 256; ALLEN 2012: 359.

15 FEAVEERYEAR 1963: 30; ALLEN 2012: 359.

16 *Patent Rolls 1348-1350*: 173, 586; *Close Rolls 1349-1354*: 405; COOK 1999: 258.

17 COOK 1999: 258-259.

18 PAS SF-53A0BE; BNJ *Coin Register* 2020: 269, no. 134; DAY 2021.

19 PAS KENT-B32899; DAY 2024.



Fig. 1. Florence, florin (c. 1285-90), CNI XII: 8, no. 23; 105, no. 759; found near Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, 2019, actual size 19.88 mm (Portable Antiquities Scheme, PAS SF-53A0BE, used under Creative Commons licence: CC BY attribution licence, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/legalcode>).

There is no hoard evidence for Italian coins in England in the second half of the fourteenth century, and only two of the single finds in *Appendix 1* (nos 12 and 14) can be confidently be dated to the period between 1354 and 1401, but Venetian coins had a significant role in the English currency in the first two decades of the fifteenth century. From 1400 to 1415 Venetian *soldini* (Fig. 2) were brought to England by the fleets that came from Italy every year to London, Sandwich and Southampton, becoming widely used as substitutes for English halfpence as ‘galley-halfpence’ (*galleyhalfpens*)²⁰. A parliamentary petition of 1402 complaining about the shortage of small change refers to the circulation of Venetian *soldini* as an alternative to English coins²¹. The unofficial circulation of foreign coins was unacceptable to the English government, and in 1400 and 1401 instructions were sent to officials in London, Sandwich and Dover ordering the seizure of imported *soldini*²². Records of the seizures show 251 *soldini* taken at London in 1401/2, 476 in 1402/3 and 411 in 1403/4, falling to 135 in 1414/15, while the numbers seized at Sandwich fell from 49 in a period of less than five months in 1402 to only 9 in 1415-20²³. A statute of 1415 required the surrender of all galley-halfpence at the mint by Easter (31 March) 1416, and in February 1416 the Venetian Senate responded to English concerns about the issue by banning the export of *soldini* in the galley fleet sent to England²⁴. The circulation of *soldini* seems to have ended by about 1420. Adam Daubney assembled data on 119 single finds recorded with the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) from this first period of the use galley-halfpence in 1400-c. 1420, showing

20 SPUFFORD 1963: 132-137; DAUBNEY 2009: 186-190; ALLEN 2012: 363-364.

21 STRACHEY *et al.* 1767-77, III: 498; ALLEN 2012: 363-364.

22 SPUFFORD 1963: 133.

23 SPUFFORD 1963: 133-135; DAUBNEY 2009, 187-188.

24 LUDERS *et al.* 1810-28, II: 258; SPUFFORD 1963: 135-136; DAUBNEY 2009: 188; ALLEN 2012: 364.

their wide geographical dispersal throughout England²⁵. This analysis was confirmed by Richard Kelleher, using a larger corpus of 152 finds taken from PAS and other sources²⁶. Additional evidence for the circulation of Venetian *soldini* in the early fifteenth century is provided by their presence in hoards from South Walsham, the York area, and Highbury (*Appendix 2*, nos 3-5).



Fig. 2. Venice, Michele Steno (1400-13), *soldino*, found Laxfield, Suffolk, 2021, actual size 15.46 mm (1.5 × actual size) (Portable Antiquities Scheme, PAS SF-E0CIE1, used under Creative Commons licence: CC BY attribution licence, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/legalcode>).

From about 1500 there were fresh imports of Venetian *soldini* into England, brought by Venetian galleys docking at Southampton and by commercial couriers²⁷. Daubney recorded 117 English finds of *soldini* from this period²⁸. Kelleher increased the corpus of finds to 144, 78.5% of which were coins of Leonardo Loredan (1501-21) (Fig. 3), and there was only one recorded find of a *soldino* of a later doge, supporting the supposition that the incursion had effectively ended by about 1520²⁹. *Soldini* have been recorded in four English hoards of the first half of the sixteenth century: three coins in the Blakeney and Maidstone hoards and one coin in the Fonthill Gifford and Wanswell hoards (*Appendix 2*, nos 7-10).

25 DAUBNEY 2009: 187-190.

26 KELLEHER 2012: 179-181, 371 (Fig. 6.43), 468 (Map 6.23).

27 SPUFFORD 1963: 137-138; CHALLIS 1978: 214-215; DAUBNEY 2009: 191-194.

28 DAUBNEY 2009: 194-198.

29 KELLEHER 2012: 187-188, 374 (Fig. 6.52), 470 (Map 6.28).



Fig. 3. Venice, Leonardo Loredan (1501-21), *soldino*, found Luckington, Wiltshire, 2023, actual size 12.30 mm (Portable Antiquities Scheme, PAS WILT-EAE688, used under Creative Commons licence: CC BY attribution licence, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/legalcode>).

The Venetian *soldino* was not the only Italian coin present in England in the fifteenth century. Cook listed two finds of the *grosso* of Bologna, one from the hoard found at Hooe in East Sussex (*Appendix 2*, no. 6) and the other a single find from Norfolk, a post-1446 Bolognese *grossone*, a Venetian *grossetto* of Francesco Foscari (1423-57), *quattrini* of Genoa and Pisa, a *petachina* of Genoa (1436-42), and a ducat of Pope Eugenius IV (1431-47)³⁰. Fourteen further single finds of Italian coins of the fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries include three finds of the Ancona *terzo di grosso* of Pope Paul II (1461-74) and six gold coins: ducats of Genoa, Naples, Rome and Venice, and a double-*bolognino* of Bologna (*Appendix 1*, nos 15–28). Italian gold coins were clearly being imported into England in the fifteenth century, although no English hoards of the period provide any evidence of this.

Single finds provide much more comprehensive evidence of the wide range of Italian coins available in medieval England after the Norman Conquest than hoards, but both of these sources of evidence confirm the assumption that they had no more than a very minor role in the English currency most of the time. Notable exceptions to this generalisation are the two periods of circulation of Venetian *soldini* as galley-halfpence in the early fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, with hundreds of recorded single finds, supplemented by hoard evidence. Italian gold coins also had a presence in the English currency at various times from the mid-thirteenth century, with the documentary evidence for the use of florins being recently confirmed by two single finds, and a small but growing corpus of finds from the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

³⁰ COOK 1999: 263, 276-277, nos 262-267.

Appendix 1 - English single finds of Italian coins of 1056-c. 1500

This is a summary of finds recorded since the publication of Cook's survey in 1999, by the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) (<http://finds.org.uk>), the Corpus of Early Medieval Coin Finds AD 410-1180 (EMC) (<http://www.emc.fitz-museum.cam.ac.uk>), and the annual Coin Register of The British Numismatic Journal (BNJ). The summary does not include Venetian *soldini*.

1. Lucca, in the name of Henry IV/V (1056–1105/6–1125), *denaro*
South Ormsby cum Ketsby, Lincolnshire, by 2004.
EMC 2005.0101; BNJ Coin Register 2005: 198, no. 262.
2. Lucca, in the name of Henry IV/V (1056–1105/6–1125), *denaro*
Pentney, Norfolk, 2013.
EMC 2014.0171; PAS NMS-A68307; BNJ Coin Register 2014: 269, no. 117.
3. Lucca, in the name of Henry IV/V (1056–1105/6–1125), *denaro*
Larling, Norfolk, 2018.
EMC 2018.0356; BNJ Coin Register 2019: 284, no. 138.
4. Lucca, in the name of Henry V (1105/6–1125), *denaro*; MATZKE 1993:
190-191, H4a type (c.1129-60)
Damerham, Hampshire, 2018
EMC 2018.0138; BNJ Coin Register 2019: 284, no. 139.
5. Genoa, Commune (1139-1339), *denaro*; CNI III: 6, no. 21 (1190s-c.1236)
Lower Rainham, Kent, 2003
BNJ Coin Register 2003 (BNJ 2004): 228, no. 360.
6. Brindisi, Frederick II (1198-1250), *denaro*; MEC 14: 555-556
Enford, Wiltshire, 2018.
PAS WILT-F4E9E3; BNJ Coin Register 2019: 284, no. 141.
7. Venice, Ranieri Zeno (1253-68), *grosso*
Brant Braughton, Lincolnshire, 2022.
BNJ Coin Register 2022: 232, no. 107.
8. Siena, Commune, half-*grosso* or *grossetto*; CNI XI: 357, nos 71-75 (c.1275-1350), or *denaro*
Bottisham, Cambridgeshire, 1989.

BNJ Coin Register 2003 (BNJ 2004): 228, no. 361.

9. Venice, Giovanni Dandolo (1280-89), *grosso*; CNI VII: 47-50, nos 5-39
Found Dunkeswell parish, Devon, 2022.
PAS DEV-620EEB

10. Florence, Commune, florin (c.1285-90); CNI XII: 8, no. 23; 105, no. 759
Near Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, 2019.
PAS SF-53A0BE; BNJ Coin Register 2020: 269, no. 134; DAY 2021.

11. Florence, Commune, florin, 1319; CNI XII: 25, nos 142-144, 146
Near St Mary in the Marsh, Kent, 2021.
PAS KENT-B32899; DAY 2024.

12. Milan, Galeazzo and Bernabò Visconti (1354-78), *sesino*
Luckington parish, Wiltshire, by 2024.
PAS WILT-0FF251.

13. Perugia, Commune, *bolognino* (1395-1506)
Rumburgh, Suffolk, 2003.
BNJ Coin Register 2003 (BNJ 2004): 228, no. 364.

14. Genoa, Waleran III of Luxembourg (1397), *soldino*; CNI III: 83-84, nos 2-10
Plumpton, East Sussex, 2011.
PAS SUSS-A584F5; BNJ Coin Register 2012: 264, no. 123.

15. Milan, Filippo Maria Visconti (1412-47), *grosso*
Cosgrove, Northamptonshire, by 2023.
PAS SUR-36E2EE.

16. Venice, Francesco Foscari (1423-57), ducat; CNI VII: 131-133, nos 60-74
Gate Helmsley, North Yorkshire, 2016.
PAS LVPL-522A86; PAS LVPL-522A86; BNJ Coin Register 2017: 287, no. 115; DAY 2021: 105.

17. Bologna, Sante or Giovanni II Bentivoglio (1446-1506), double-*bolognino*
Framlingham, Suffolk, 2003.
PAS SF10432; KELLEHER 2007: 221, no. 1; DAY 2021: 105.

18. Chieti or L'Aquila, Ferdinand I of Aragon (1458-94), *cavallo*
Limehouse, London, by 2018.

PAS LON-94CDB6.

19. Ancona, Pope Paul II (1461-74), *terzo di grosso*
Bossal, North Yorkshire, 2011.
PAS LVPL-6A35B6.

20. Ancona, Pope Paul II (1461-74), *terzo di grosso*
Barton-le-Street, North Yorkshire, 2021.
PAS SWYOR-B976E1.

21. Ancona, Pope Paul II (1461-74), *terzo di grosso*; BIAGGI 1992: no. 50
Thorncombe, Dorset, 2021.
PAS DEV-C34C5D; BNJ Coin Register 2022: 232, no. 111.

22. Bologna, Giovanni II Bentivoglio (1463-1506), *grossetto* (1472-90)
Long Ashton, North Somerset, 2010.
PAS GLO-0EB726; BNJ Coin Register 2011: 281, no. 135.

23. Bologna, Giovanni II Bentivoglio (1463-1506), *grossetto* (1472-1506)
Torbay, Devon, by 2017.
PAS PUBLIC-CA7CED.

24. Rome, Pope Sixtus IV (1471-84), ducat
Praa Sands, Cornwall, 2001.
PAS CORN-9C4FD4; DAY 2021: 105.

25. Naples, Ferdinand I of Aragon (1458-94), ducat (1472-88); MEC 14: 972
Near Margate, Kent, April 2017.
BNJ Coin Register 2018: 237, no. 166.

26. Sardinia or Sicily, Ferdinand II of Aragon (1479-1516), *reale minuto*; CNI
II: 443, no. 16
Greenwich, London, by 2018.
PAS KENT-71071C.

27. Genoa, Louis XII of France as lord of Genoa (1499-1507), ducat
Admaston, Staffordshire, 2017.
PAS WMID-01D66A; DAY 2021: 105.

28. Ancona, *quattrino*, 15th century; CNI XIII: 37, no. [106?]
Salisbury Cathedral, Wiltshire, 2008.
BNJ Coin Register 2009: 287, no. 452.

Appendix 2 - English hoards containing Italian coins of 1066-c. 1520

1. Dover, Kent, 1955 (dep. *c.* 1295)
686 AR including 1 *grosso* of Brescia.
ALLEN 2012: 481, no. 279; ANDREWS 2019: DOV.
2. Highley, Shropshire, 2022 (dep. 1400-*c.* 1420)
2 AR *torneselli* of Venice: Antonio Venier (1382-1400) and Michele Steno (1400-13).
ANDREWS, GHEY 2023: 286, no. 108.
3. South Walsham, Norfolk, 2001 (dep. 1400-*c.* 1420)
3 AR Venetian *soldini*, Michele Steno (1400-13).
ALLEN 2012: 499, no. 422; ANDREWS 2019: SWN.
4. York area, North Yorkshire, 2004 (dep. 1400-*c.* 1420)
2 AR (folded together) including 1 Venetian *soldino*.
ANDREWS 2019: YRA.
5. Highbury, London, 1868 (dep. *c.* 1415-20)
c. 7,000 AR including 12 Venetian *soldini*: Andrea Contarini (1367-82) (1), Antonio Venier (1382-1400) (5), Michele Steno (1400-13) (6).
ALLEN 2012: 499, no. 426; ANDREWS 2019: HIG.
6. Hooe, East Sussex, 1991 (dep. 1433-64)
8 AR including 1 *grosso* of Bologna.
ALLEN 2012: 512, no. 454; ANDREWS 2019: HOO.
7. Fonthill Gifford, Wiltshire, 1861 (dep. *c.* 1520s)
9 AR including 1 Venetian *soldino*, Leonardo Loredan (1501-21).
ALLEN 2012: 512-13, no. 541; ANDREWS 2019: FGW.
8. Wanswell, Gloucestershire, 1997 (dep. *c.* 1520s)
3 AR including 1 Venetian *soldino*, Leonardo Loredan (1501-21).
ALLEN 2012: 513, no. 542; ANDREWS 2019: WAG.
9. Blakeney, Norfolk, 2004 (dep. 1519-44)
3 AR Venetian *soldini*, Leonardo Loredan (1501-21).
ALLEN 2012: 512, no. 540; ANDREWS 2019: BKN.

10. Maidstone, Kent, 1952 (dep. 1534-44)
 5 AV + 498 AR including 3 Venetian *soldini*, Leonardo Loredan (1501-21).
 ALLEN 2012: 514, no. 549; ANDREWS 2019: MAI.

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