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## The Alberese hoard. Seventy-six gold florins of the second half of 13<sup>th</sup> century

The gold florin of Florence was one of the most important and well-known coinages of medieval Europe and the Mediterranean, thanks also to the so-called *Fiorinaio*, a detailed register of activity in the Florentine mint that makes it possible to date most issues to a single semester. Information on the first fifty years of the gold florin is nevertheless almost completely absent from the register; this period is thus referred to as that of the unknown mint-masters (1252-1303). For this period the *Fiorinaio* reports only a list of the privy marks that appeared on the earlier florins on the basis of the early coins still in circulation, documents no longer available and perhaps also accounts from mint personnel. The early florins are therefore datable only within relatively broad parameters based on the few recorded hoards; any further hoards from this period therefore hold the potential of adding new data.

### 1. The discovery

The Alberese hoard was found in 1932 near the small village of the same name in southern Tuscany (Grosseto-Italy) on a hill alongside the Roman via Aurelia by farm labourers while removing the roots of an old oak tree. The hoard contained seventy-six gold florins of Florence without any trace of a container or any other objects. It was recovered in its entirety and immediately brought to the National Archaeological Museum in Florence, where Giuseppe Castellani studied the hoard and published it a year later. He dated the hoard to the mid-14th century, closing in 1348-1349 on the basis of what appeared to be the most recent privy mark represented in the hoard<sup>1</sup>.

A recent reconsideration of the Alberese hoard has clearly established, however, that it contained only florins of the period of unknown mint-masters, struck before 1303<sup>2</sup>. Very few hoards of this period are known and probably it is the only one recovered in its entirety. Since the complete study of the hoard has already been published, attention here focuses on the reconstruction of a possible chronological sequence of the gold florins for the period of the unknown mint-masters, based on hoard evidence and stylistic criteria.

### 2. Periodisation of «*segni*» in the Alberese hoard (1252-1303)

In his study of the coinage of the Florentine Republic, Bernocchi identified four different series of florins for the earlier period (1252-1303), describing 101 privy marks (the *Fiorinaio* lists only 72 privy marks). The coins of the first three series are characterized by Saint John the Baptist depicted in an archaic style, while the coins of series IV show a saint in a more evolved style. Bernocchi provided a precise chronology only for the coins of series I, which bear no privy mark and supposedly show the saint with a smooth nimbus; he dated these coins to around 1252. Coins of the Alberese hoard can be divided mainly in two groups. Twelve of the florins bearing eight different symbols show the saint in the archaic style, while the majority of the coins with twenty-four different privy marks belong to the more evolved style of Bernocchi's series IV<sup>3</sup>.

Only one of the privy marks represented in the hoard can be dated more precisely within the period of unknown mint-masters. Based on the account of the 14th-century Florentine chronicler Giovanni Villani, florins that carry a small trefoil to the right of the saint's left foot were struck in the field at San Jacopo al Serchio in 1256. In the absence of any archaeological context or other numismatic evidence related to the Alberese hoard, determining the relative chronology of the coins in the hoard depends on other hoard evidence. Only four other hoards of the second half of the 13th century that contain gold florins are known: Pisa (c. 1266), Aleppo and Acre (both c. 1291), Pavia (1290-95)<sup>4</sup>. All but two of the privy marks represented in the Alberese hoard also appear in the other hoards. The two that are missing from the other hoards are nevertheless early issues on the basis of style; one belongs to Bernocchi's series III and one to series IV, similar to those in the Pisa hoard. This makes it possible to establish the closing date of the Alberese hoard *ante* 1290s.

Based on comparison with the other known hoards, the privy marks represented on florins of the Alberese hoard may be divided into several groups (Fig. 1).

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<sup>1</sup> Castellani 1933.

<sup>2</sup> De Benetti 2015. I would like to express my gratitude to William Day for the continuous help during the study of the hoard.

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that that Bernocchi saw the florins of the Alberese hoard and described some of the coins in the CNF among those of the Archaeological Museum of Florence (MAF).

<sup>4</sup> Pisa (Lenzi 1975), Aleppo and Acre (Kool 2006), Pavia (Phillips 1997, pp. 326-327; De Benetti 2015, pp. 71-72).

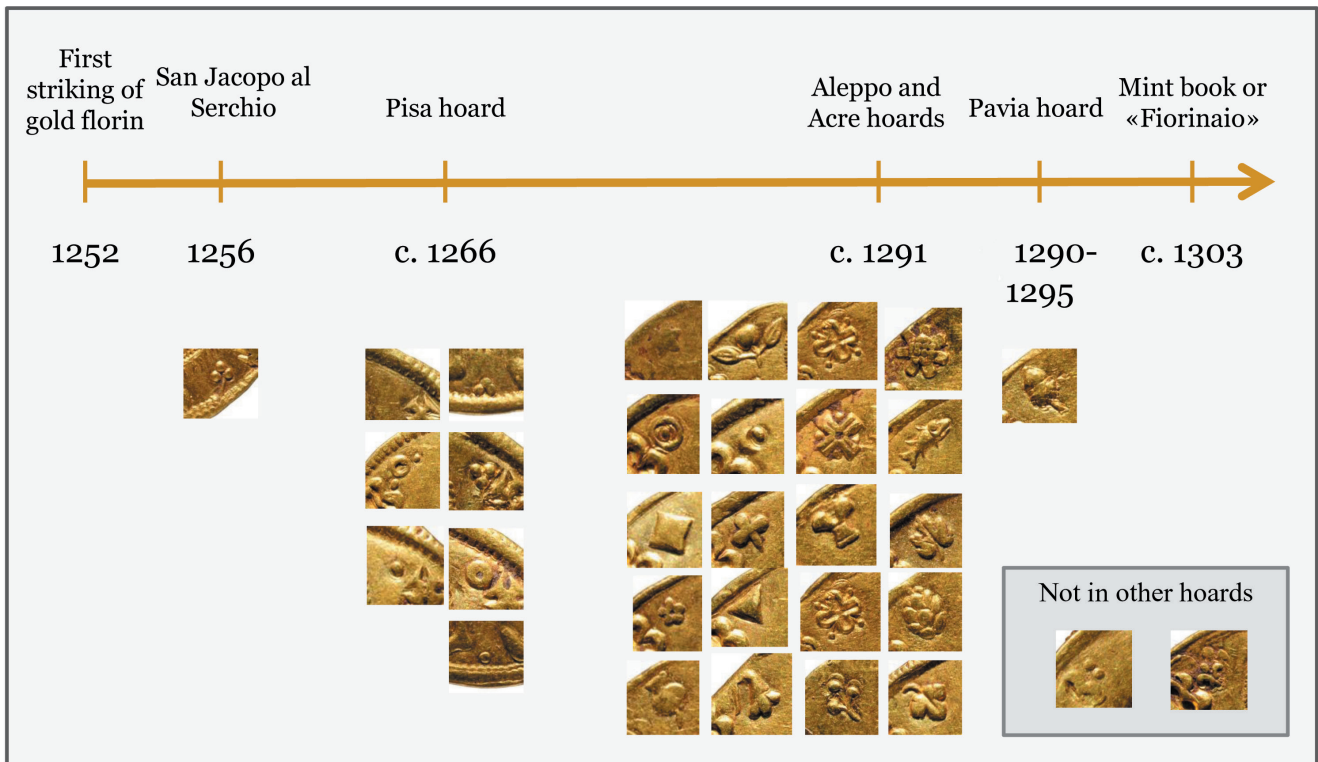


Fig. 1 Periodisation of «segni» in the Alberese hoard (1252-1303).

**Catalogue of coins in the Alberese hoard**

Bernocchi series II – St. John in archaic style, no symbols (*1252-ante 1256*)

cat. 1 – no symbols (*sine aliquo puncto*)

Bernocchi series III - St. John in archaic style, small symbols (*post 1252-ante 1266* on evidence from the Pisa hoard)

cat. 2 – two pellets at the end of the reverse legend (*duorum punctorum*)<sup>5</sup>

cat. 3 – letter O with pellet at the end of the reverse legend (*signo unius .o.*)

cat. 4 – One pellet before the reverse legend (*unius puncti*)

cat. 5 – Annulet before the reverse legend (*ruota*)

cat. 6-9 – Cluster of three pellets before reverse legend (*trium punctorum*)

cat- 10-11 – Cluster of three pellets between saint’s feet

Bernocchi series III – Attributed to a portable mint in the field at San Jacopo al Serchio (1256)

cat. 12 – Trefoil with stem right of saint’s left foot

Bernocchi series IV – St. John in a more evolved style, with small symbols (*post 1256 – ante 1266*, from the Pisa hoard)

cat. 13 – Pellet between saint’s feet (*cum uno puncto al piede signatos*)

Bernocchi series IV – St. John in a more evolved style (*post 1256- ante 1291*, from the Aleppo and Acre hoards)

cat. 14-15 – Ring with pellet

cat. 16-17 – Small crescent with pellet

cat. 18 – Square (*puncti quadrati*)

cat. 19-20 – Trefoil with stem (*trefogli*)

cat. 21-22 – Rosette with five petals (*rose*)

cat 23 – Small lily (*lilii*)<sup>6</sup>

cat. 24 – Six-pointed star (*stelle*)

cat. 25-27 – Triangle pointed downwards

cat. 28-29 – Violet (*viuole*)

cat. 30-31 – Grapevine leaf (*folee vitis*)

cat. 32-35 – Voided cross with pellet in each angle (*crucis cum quattuor punctis circum circa crucem*)

cat. 36-37 – Cross

cat. 38-39 – Flower with four petals with stem

cat. 40-44 - Pine cone (*pine*)

cat. 45-46 – Upside down leaf

cat. 47-48 - Turnip with leaves (*rape cum foleis*)

cat. 49-56 – Rook (*rocchi*)

cat. 57-63 – Fish (*piscis*)

cat. 64-65 – Fruit with two leaves=apple (*mela*)

cat. 66-67 – Voided cross over small cross pommée

<sup>5</sup> This symbol does not appear in the Pisa hoard but it has been possible to show clear similarities with cat. 1, showing the striking of the two coins probably took place in semester not far one from another; De Benetti 2015, p. 111.

<sup>6</sup> This privy mark does not appear in other hoards, but it can be assigned to the first issues of gold florins in the more evolved style on the basis of lettering and style.

cat. 68-69 - Three little fruits  
 cat. 70-72 - Flower with seven petals and checkered heart

Bernocchi series IV – St. John in a more evolved style  
 (post 1256- ante 1290-95, on evidence from Pavia hoard)  
 cat. 73-76 – Acorn (*ghiande*)

The examination of the florins in the Alberese hoard has made it possible to propose some new identifications of the 72 drawings and descriptions of the privy marks contained in the *Fiorinaio* for the period of unknown mint-masters, and not previously identified on coins. For instance, the symbol traditionally described as “letter O with pellet” (cat. 3) may be identified as the *signo unius .o.*<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, the annulet at the beginning of the legend on another florin (cat. 5), may be identified as the symbol *ruota* or “wheel”<sup>8</sup>. With respect to the series IV florins, the privy mark in shape of a square (cat. 18) may be recognized as the *punctus quadratus* described in the mint book. The rosette with five petals (cat. 21-22) has been clearly identified with the privy mark *Rosa* and it has been shown that coins with a larger rose may be in fact identified as issued during the first semester of 1340. There is also an alternative identification for the privy mark *rape cum foliis* or “turnip with leaves” (cat. 47-48), since the symbol “fruit with two leaves” may be identified with the *mela* or apple (cat. 64-65) as described in the *Fiorinaio*<sup>9</sup>.

Moreover, other privy marks not listed in the *Fiorinaio* may now be assigned to the period of the unknown mint-masters. Two coins (cat. 36-37) bear a symbol that Bernocchi described as *segno 3* and classified as belonging to the period 1252-1421<sup>10</sup>. Three other coins (cat. 70-72) bear a flower with seven petals, which may be identified among the symbols of Bernocchi series X (1348-1367)<sup>11</sup>. The hoard evidence now shows that they were all struck before 1290s.

**3. Evolution of style: new data for the classification of early florins**

The Alberese hoard offers a good sample of the earlier florins, providing the opportunity to understand better the evolution in style during the period of «unknown mint-masters». In addition to hoard evidence, details of design may be used to build up a relative chronology and to define sub-groups of Bernocchi’s series I-IV.

Among the gold florins of series III, it is possible to identify different sub-groups that shows identical

characteristics in style and lettering. An example is given when we compare florins bearing a privy mark of a trefoil with stem to the right of the saint’s foot (cat. 12) with coins that have a cluster of three pellets at the beginning of the reverse legend (cat. 6-9) or between saint’s feet (cat. 10-11). These coins show peculiar characteristics: the fleur-de-lis on the obverse shows a “thorn” at the top and the saint on the reverse shows an oblique forearm and beaded nimbus that reaches the shoulder; the dies for these coins were evidently also prepared using the same punches with double crossbars on the A, H and N. If the trefoil with stem to the right of the saint’s foot distinguishes the florins struck at San Jacopo al Serchio in 1256, then the other two privy marks belong to the immediately preceding or succeeding years.

The Pisa hoard, even if only partially recovered, is of great importance because it is the earliest hoard containing gold florins and it shows that florins of Bernocchi’s series IV were already in circulation at the time that the hoard was closed (c. 1266)<sup>12</sup>. The evidence of the Aleppo and Acre hoards (*ante* 1291) and the Pavia hoard (1290-95) establishes a *terminus ante quem* for dating the privy marks on the series IV florins of the Alberese hoard, but this is no great help in reconstructing a chronological sequence within the period; it is better to rely on stylistic criteria as an aid to their dating. A closer examination of the florins in the Alberese hoard makes it possible to identify elements that change over time. On the obverse of the series IV florins, there is a little pellet at the bottom of the flower lily that was absent from florins of series I-III, with saint in the archaic style, and it becomes more evident over the years. This change over time is evident in the pellets at the end of the pendants and on the stamens. The lettering also shows differences, especially in the letters S and A, that became more refined, with the S growing thinner and the tapering on the A more pronounced at the bottom (Fig. 2).<sup>13</sup>

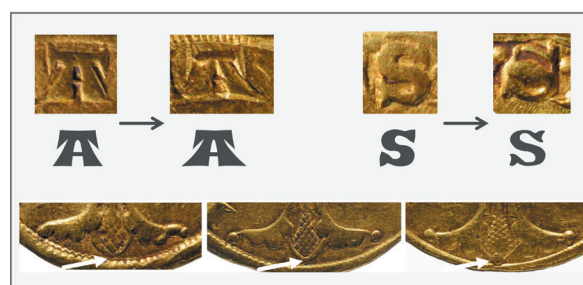


Fig. 2 Changes in lettering and design in florins series IV.

<sup>7</sup> C.N.F. table I, 21-22 and table III, 25 probably all describe the same privy mark.

<sup>8</sup> The privy mark is shown in C.N.F. p. 28, n. 322, with no coins described.

<sup>9</sup> Detailed information about all these identification are in De Benetti 2015, pp. 81-109.

<sup>10</sup> The two coins of the Alberese hoard are described by Bernocchi in C.N.F. p. 47, nn. 537-8. Florins with the same symbols are in Aleppo and Acre hoards ; Kool 2006, pp. 319-320, nn. 27-28.

<sup>11</sup> C.N.F. p. 37, nn. 431-433; tav. V, 24. The same symbols appeared also in the Aleppo and Pavia hoards.

<sup>12</sup> The closing date of the Pisa hoard is still a matter of debate and varies from 1260 to 1266. The presence of series IV florins in the hoard shows that the changes in the reverse design occurred already before its closure, which must have been between 1260 and 1265. The roughly eighty privy marks known for the series IV coins indirectly confirms this dating, since mint officials and their privy marks were changed on a semesterly basis; eighty privy marks thus cover a period of about 40 years up to 1303.

<sup>13</sup> These changes over time are confirmed when comparing the oldest issues of series IV found in the Pisa hoard (with “pellet between saint’s feet” and “small cross”) with florins bearing the first dated privy marks, belonging to the year 1300.

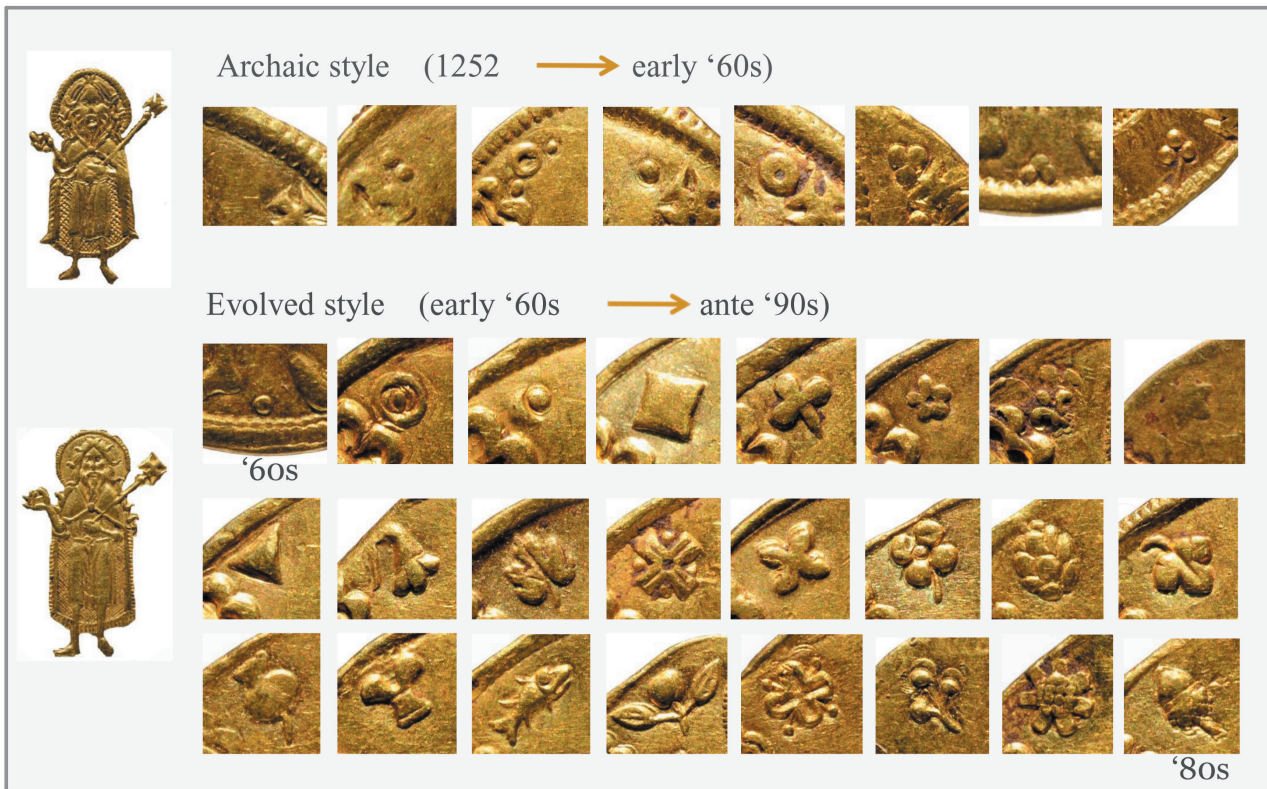


Fig. 3 A proposal of a chronological sequence of «signi» in the Alberese hoard.

On the basis of these characteristics, it is possible to identify the earliest of the series IV florins in the Alberese hoard. The privy marks on this sub-group of series IV florins (cat. 13-23) include a pellet between saint's feet, a ring with pellet, a small crescent with pellet, a square, a trefoil with stem, a rosette with five petals and a small lily<sup>14</sup>. Florins bearing these symbols were issued within a narrow range of semesters. In addition to similar characteristics in lettering and style, these coins were struck from dies prepared with the same punches. They may be referred to as "florins of series IV with small symbols"; on the basis of the Pisa hoard, they can all be dated to the 1260s. For the succeeding period, until 1291, the only available criteria for constructing a possible chronological sequence of these privy marks on the remaining series IV florins (cat. 23-76) are stylistic in nature. The sequence of privy marks for the period before 1291 represented in the Alberese hoard may be tentatively arranged as follows (Fig. 3).

#### 4. The possible origins of the hoard

A survey carried out over the area where the Alberese hoard was recovered has confirmed the absence of any archaeological evidence that could be related to the hoard. This reinforces the hypothesis that the coins were buried in an emergency, as suggested by the find

spot (a hill just beside a crossroad) and the fact that no traces of any container was found. It is interesting to note that the closest road to the find spot connected the main "via Aurelia" with the Benedictine abbey of Santa Maria all'Alberese, situated less than three miles away, which perhaps provides a clue about the possible place of origin or destination of the florins. At the time, the abbey was the most significant settlement in the sparsely populated territory, which was under its jurisdiction. According to Farinelli,<sup>15</sup> the abbey owned a treasure formed in part through donations made by local noblemen. When he died in 1284, Count Ildebrandino XII of Sovana bequeathed 300 *lire pro dampnis datis* to the abbey of Alberese<sup>16</sup>. The testament also mentions *florenos de auri* that were probably disbursed in the execution of his will. Considering that the value of the gold florin oscillated between 1.5 and 2 *lire* in the 1280s-1290s, the hoard might have comprised up to half the value of this donation. Moreover, the records of the ecclesiastical tithe preserved in the *Rationes Decimarum* show that the abbey of Alberese paid 154 *lire* to the Holy See in 1276-77. Records for the following years are missing but it is probable that the amounts were comparable. The amount due from the abbey thus might have been almost equivalent to the value of the hoard recovered near Alberese.

<sup>14</sup> Florins with *segno* small cross, which were present in the Pisa hoard, but not in the Alberese hoard, can also be assigned to this sub-group.

<sup>15</sup> Farinelli 2015.

<sup>16</sup> ASFi, Archive Capponi, 159, parchemin 2, testament of Ildebrandino XII, May 6th 1284.

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