

Becker the Counterfeiter

(the follow is abridged from George F. Hill's *Becker the Counterfeiter*, published in Great Britain, 1924. It is intended only to make collectors aware of the study. Hill's monograph contains illustrations of some 360 examples of Becker's work and should be examined closely.)

Carl Wilhelm Becker was born at Speyer on 28 June 1772. His father, Councillor Johann Wilhelm Becker, owned a vineyard and wine-business, and held an honourable position in the city as Syndic. His mother was Maria Magdalena Tremelius. As a youth, Carl showed a taste for art rather than the wine trade, but his father would not hear of his studying to become a sculptor, as he wished, and sent him to a wine-merchant's at Bordeaux. Here, according to his daughter's statement, he already began to make drawings of ancient coins and to cut dies. How long he stayed in Bordeaux we do not know. But by May 1795, when he married Maria Catherina Tremelius of Mannheim, he was already in business as a wine-merchant at Frankfurt. From 1798 to 1802 or 1803 he seems to have been established in Mannheim as a draper. This business failed in 1803; one can imagine that Becker's heart was not in it. He used in later days to praise the opportunities for a life of artistic culture in Mannheim under the Elector Palatine Carl Theodor, and it is suggested that his talent first matured in these circumstances. After his failure he seems to have lived partly at Speyer, partly at Mannheim, with a passing visit to Munich. It was here, at the Royal Mint that he obtained a training in the art of engraving steel dies; and it is to this period that we must attribute a pleasing story which tradition has preserved. According to this, Becker's incentive to making imitations of ancient coins was due to a trick which was played upon him by a certain Baron von Sch***m of Munich. Becker acquired from the Baron a false gold coin of the Emperor Commodus. When he discovered its falsity and complained of the swindle, the Baron coolly replied that it serve him right, for meddling with what he did not understand. Becker then set to work to obtain the necessary training, and eventually had the pleasure of making and passing off on the Baron a gold coin, no less rare than the one which the Baron had passed off on him.

Becker's Technical Methods

Becker's work was done entirely freehand; that is to say there was no mechanical copying, nor did he cast dies. Where he could not obtain an original to work from, he copied a cast in sulphur or plaster. It is possible that some of his less successful copies were made from drawings or engravings. The preliminary labour of turning the die and other purely mechanical work he usually got some one else, such as Deibel of Vienna or Bertold at home, to do for him; and he would purchase alphabet-punches (for the inscriptions on medieval coins) ready-made from a maker such as Zeichner of Vienna. He sometimes himself carved the smaller types or details in relief as punches. The material of the dies was steel, embedded in soft iron. The metal for his coins was melted down for him by others (sometimes out of ancient coins); Deibel did this for him in Vienna, Girard (and after Girard's death his widow) in Homburg, an attempt by Madame Becker to help her husband in this matter having apparently failed in spite of the invocation of God's blessing on her endeavour (14 Nov. 1829). The blanks were delivered in the shape of 'Kügelchen' 'boulettes' or 'globules' for coins in high relief, like most of the Greeks, or 'Platten' for the flat ones. The blanks for one of the Napoleon medals were made by Rompel in Oberursel to the measure of a wooden model which had been turned by Bertold. Better however for Becker's purposes than freshly made blanks were ancient but not rare coins; and when he could get them he was glad to use them. Hence we find such entries as (5 Mar. 1825): Fuchs ordered the following Emperors and Empresses struck on old coins" and (I Jan. 1829) "Collin promised me bronze

Roman coins for re-striking”.

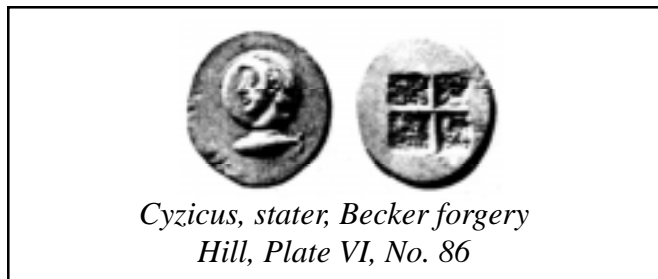
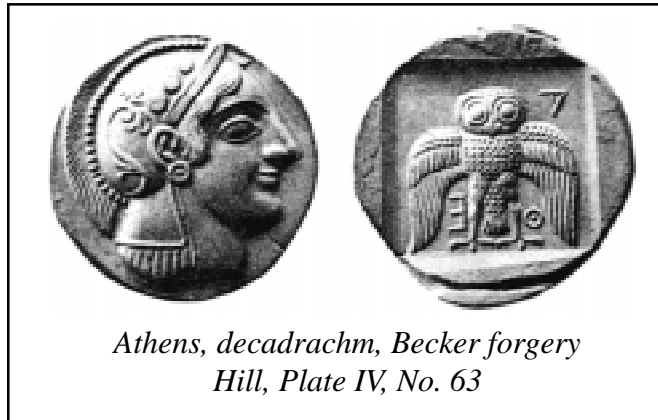
The use of ancient coins as blanks had several advantages. The metal was of the right colour; the coins was of the right weight, supposing that the dies represented the same class of coin as the blank belonged to—although it is true that, metrology being in its infancy, Becker (in spite of what Steinbüchel says to the contrary), did not take trouble to get his weights right. Above all, the edge, which is usually the most tell-tale part of forgery, looked antique. It has been asserted that he sometimes took genuine coins and restruck them on one side only, supplying a rare type on that side instead of the banal one which was offered by the original. So far as I know, this was never done by him, at any rate not in his Greek series. It is indeed an excessively difficult thing to do. The sledge-hammer blows required to bring up the relief can hardly fail to obliterate the other side of the coin. The only way to avoid this would be to make matrix, to restrike the other side with the newly prepared die. This was equivalent to restriking both sides. I suspect that the cases of supposed restriking of one side only can be explained in this way, and that, if examined, they would be found to show minute variations from the original on the side supposed to be left intact.

It has also been asserted that he restruck ancient plated coins, consisting of a core of copper plated with silver, so that to suppose that ‘subaerate’ coins are necessarily genuine is a delusion. I have not seen any specimens of such plated coins that have been under Becker’s dies.

The striking was done with a sledge-hammer, in the ancient manner, not with a press. Steinbüchel makes the statement that in order to counterfeit the appearance of double-striking which is caused by the blank having shifted its position between successive blows, so that parts of the design show a double contour, the ingenious Becker actually engraved some of his dies with such a double contour, so that the impressions had the appearance of being double-struck.. If so, his ingenuity verged on stupidity. Still, if the youthful Newton made a small hole for the kitten to issue from as well as a large one for the cat, Becker may have made a special die for ‘double-struck’ coins, when he could have attained the same effect with much greater verisimilitude by shifting the blank slightly between two blows. This certainly did occasionally, either on purpose or, more probably, by accident. Thus the Athenian decadrachm, no. 63 on Plate IV, shows the double contour along forehead and nose and under the neck. But this is not visible on another impression, proving that the double contour is not in the die. The same is true of the Cyzicene stater, no. 86 on Plate VI; the doubling of the contour of the shield is not visible on all specimens. So far as my experience goes—and I can speak for the Greek counterfeits only—there is no evidence in favour of Steinbüchel’s assertion.

The striking of coins with a sledge-hammer is a laborious process, and how Becker managed it without assistance it is difficult to understand. He reckoned in 1827 that it took him about eight weeks to strike and get out a complete set of his coins.

Becker’s total authenticated output comprised the dies for little under 340 different coins and medals. Doubtless he made some others for the attribution of which there is no direct evidence. Pinder observes that it is a remarkable record, considering that, although some of his dies for medieval coins could have been made in a day by a practised engraver, those for his Greek coins must often have taken



him from eight to twelve weeks apiece. It is even more remarkable than Pinder supposes. The diary does not often state the exact time spent on cutting a die. But in July 1825 we have the following extraordinary record:

13 July. I began today on the Agrigentum M(aximi) M(oduli) and worked at it 3 hours.

16 July. I worked 4 hours at my medallion of Agrigentum.

17 July. I worked 7 hours at the M. M. Agrigentum.

18 July. I worked 4 hours at the Medallion and finished the same before dinner.

That (if he has not omitted anything) is a total of eighteen hours only for a die. It was the obverse die of the decadrachm illustrated on our first Plate, no. 15. How much time he spent on the reverse, which he began to cut on 28 August, he does not say; it was not finished until 6 September 1826, the first specimen being struck next day; but he had been very busy with other things in the interval. The completion in eighteen hours of such a die as the obverse of the Agrigentine decadrachm is almost incredible; but the figures are explicit. And Zindel seems to have worked no less fast.

Becker must sometimes have worked on his dies, making slight modifications, after he had struck off a certain number of pieces. Friedländer gives a very interesting example of a denarius of Tiberius and Drusus Caesar on which Becker corrected a mistake which he had made in the tribunician year of Tiberius. The current lead impressions therefore represent the last stage only of his work; and the uncomfortable feeling is aroused that some pieces which differ in only very minute details from those impressions may be, not genuine coins, but earlier states of his work.

As to his methods of taking the rawness off his newly finished products, the tradition is that he enclosed them with iron filings in a box attached to the axle of his carriage—“taking his old gentlemen for a drive” he called it, according to the report of Collin, one of the Offenbach Jews who acted as his agents. For once tradition is entirely confirmed by Becker’s own words. A constant entry in his diary is in the form “sodann kutschirte ich meine Münzen—then I took my coins for a drive”. At Homburg his usual course for this process was to Bonames and back. Occasionally in estimating the cost of a consignment he reckons in the cost of such a drive. When he was at Nuremberg on 11 April 1826, he bought an old Dutch tobacco-box of copper and brass which, he says, will make an excellent box for “driving” coins in (Kutschirbüchse). The tradition that he also buried his products in dung is said by Quilling to be without foundation.

The treatment of bronze, with the object of giving it an antique appearance, is a difficult matter compared with that of the silver, and it has been asserted by Steinbüthel that, for that reason, Becker never attempted to counterfeit bronze coins. Nevertheless an entry already quoted shows that he had, at any rate, the intentions of restriking ancient bronze coins; and his series were sometimes issued in bronze. His diary also preserves a recipe (given him by Rettig in Vienna) for patinating bronze, though it does not follow that he proposed to use it for coins.

Becker’s estimate of the value of his work as a die-cutter was modest in comparison with modern ideas. It is true that he charged Fejervary 20 ducats for the die of the large medal Michael the Vaivode; but he sold him the dies of the “small Michael” and the “Issabella” for 60 florins, and agreed to make the “Hungarian medal with the raven” for 30 florins; and he charged Appel only 20 florins for a pair of dies for the coin of bishop Melchior. As he paid Zindel at the rate of something like 15 florins, he cannot be accused of sweating. It took him about eight weeks to strike and finish a set of his coins. To make a complete set in silver he required silver to the amount of 400 florins; with 150 florins for making and finishing, he reckoned the cost at 550 florins. He charged purchasers 300 ducats (equivalent to 1,350 florins)

