

A HEBREW LETTER ON THE NEW WORLD'S FIRST COINS?

by David L. Nathan, M.D.

Throughout the Middle Ages, Jews were involved in the minting of coins. At various times, they worked as assayers, die makers, or proprietors in the mints of nearly every European country, including Spain, England, France, Germany, Austria, Hungary and Poland. There is extensive documentation of Jewish minters' activities, as royal edicts granting them privileges are still found in many medieval archives. Occasionally, Medieval coins themselves contain clues to Jewish involvement in the form of Hebrew letters or Jewish names. Such evidence may have been identified on the very first coins minted in the Western Hemisphere. The inscriptions of nearly all the early coins of *Nueva España* ("New Spain") lack the usual symbol of a cross potent (✠), and instead contain what appears to be the Hebrew letter א (*alef*). If these unusual features are more than coincidental, then the coins represent the earliest first-hand expression of a Jewish presence in the New World.

"New Spain" was the name given to the vast region of North America claimed by Spain in the early 16th century, including nearly all of Central America, Florida, and what is now the southwestern United States. Its capital was in Mexico City, where the famous (and infamous) *conquistador* Hernando Cortés had defeated the Aztecs of Teotihuacán in 1521. Soon after the conquest, a stream of colonists flocked to the area, and a civil government was established in 1535-6.

Among the early European settlers were large numbers of "New Christians" or *conversos*, former Jews that had chosen to convert to Christianity rather than leave Spain during the expulsion of the Jews in 1492. During the early decades of the Spanish Inquisition, thousands of these converts were put to death amid accusations of practicing Judaism in secrecy. While some denunciations were certainly false, there were indeed many "crypto-Jews" throughout Spain.

Some of the persecuted *conversos* saw opportunities for greater tolerance in Mexico, where the Inquisition did not begin systematic persecution of Jews until 1571. A number of authoritative sources conclude that Judaism was practiced openly for most of the time before the Church's crackdown. The historian Alfonso Toro asserts:

"In spite of the legal prohibitions we found that many Israelites went to the New World, that they had a role in its conquest and discovery, as also in the foundation of the colonial society; thus one finds them in all social classes and playing a role in the professions and offices." (*Los judíos en Nueva España*, translated in Liebman's *The Jews in New Spain*).



Mexican 4 reales, c. 1538 (Nesmith 6a). The piece is a double strike, the die having been twice impressed on the silver planchet. This resulted in shifting and doubling of some design elements on both sides. Note the purported alef at the top of the reverse as well as (rotated and flattened) between words on both sides. The “R” minter’s mark is found between the base of the pillars on the reverse. Obverse inscription:

KAROLVS: S: ET: S: IO[H]AN[A]

Reverse inscription: HISPANIE: S: ET: S: INDIARVM: S:

Diameter=42mm.

The first viceroy of New Spain, don Antonio de Mendoza, arrived in Mexico City in 1535. He brought equipment for producing coins, along with a royal decree from Queen Johanna authorizing him to establish a mint and appoint qualified officials. The first officials of the mint were:

Treasurer (1535-38): García Manrique, Count of Osorno, appointed by King Charles

Vice-treasurer (1537-41): Alonso de Mérida, appointed by Manrique

Assayer (1536-38): Francisco del Rincón, appointed by Mendoza, also known as the “R” assayer for the minter’s mark he placed on his coins

Scribe (1535-?): Pedro Juárez de Carabajal

Die maker (1536-38): Antón de Vides

Workman (1536-?): Alonso Ponce

The bulk of the actual coining depended upon less skilled employees, low-paid Indian peasants and African slaves. Typical for most professions of that time, women were rarely employed in the minting of coins.

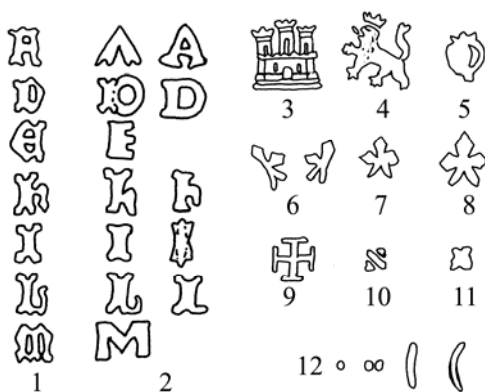
While none of the relevant mint officials are known to have been Jewish, and *conversos* often took the names of their Christian neighbors, a few similarities are noted between these mint officials and known Jewish families in the New World. The scribe shares a surname with a prominent Mexican *converso* family. The poet Luiz de Carvajal, nephew of an early governor in Mexico, was burned at the stake with most of his family and a number of other crypto-Jews on a single day in 1596.

The surname of the die maker, Antón de Vides, is similar to de Vidas, the surname of one or more prominent Jewish families in Spain. There was a 14th century Spanish Jew named Samuel ben Habib de Vidas, who was a scholar and possibly also a physician. Rabbi Ephraim de Vidas of Segovia left Spain in 1492, while his son Gabriel chose to remain and convert to Christianity. According to the Sephardic scholar Dr. Albert de Vidas, the family comes from Lalueña, not far from Zaragoza, in Aragon. One branch of the family went to the Ottoman Empire in 1492, and another to Holland by way of Italy. A *converso* branch went to Bordeaux, France three generations after the Expulsion and some were found in what would later become Haiti.

In order to consider whether a Jew was involved in early Mexican coin manufacture, the minting process must be understood. During the early days of the Mexican mint, coins were produced manually by hammering a blank silver planchet between two dies. Nearly all of the few dozen surviving coins were produced from unique dies, indicating that the dies were frequently replaced. Each die needed to be hand crafted, using letter and design punches that were driven into the steel surface one at a time. Every detail on a coin needed to be carefully planned, and no two dies or coins were alike. Thus, designs and inscriptions varied greatly even among coins that were intended to be identical.

In 1955, Robert Nesmith published the seminal text on early Mexican coins, *The Coinage of the First Mint of the Americas at Mexico City: 1536-1572*. He describes all known die varieties of the so-called

“Early Series” of Mexican coins (made between 1536 and 1542). He also catalogues most of the punches that were used to produce these coin dies.



Die punches used in coins of Francisco del Rincón (the “R” assayer), after Nesmith:

1. Examples of original Gothic letter punches from Spain.
2. Replacement Gothic and Latin letter punches.
3. Castle.
4. Rampant lion.
5. Pomegranate.
6. Side finials for crown.
7. Small finial.
8. Large finial.
9. Cross potent.
10. Purported *alef* punch.
11. Worn version of (10).
12. Examples of ornamental and geometric punches.

There were several groups of punches used during the tenure of the “R” assayer, del Rincón:

1. A pomegranate, castle, and rampant lion used in the Spanish coat of arms;
2. Crown finials;
3. A cross potent (☩);
4. Latin letters used in the inscription;
5. An ornamental design used as a word separator; and
6. Small geometric shapes used together to impress borders, pillars and other complex designs onto the die.

The first coins minted under del Rincón’s supervision were silver coins of ¼, ½, 1, 2, 3 and 4 reales. The varieties of each denomination can be placed in roughly chronological order according to the fraction of letters made from the original Gothic letter punches that Mendoza brought from Spain. As those punches wore out, they were replaced with crudely made punches produced locally. When the second assayer succeeded del Rincón in 1538, an entirely new set of punches was used.

Among the earliest coins from del Rincón’s tenure were two varieties of 3 reales coins that featured a cross potent. Perhaps that punch broke or it was simply no longer preferred, but in either case *not one* of the other twenty varieties of coins from the “R” assayer



*A one real coin dating to 1542-1572. The cross potent is at the top of the reverse, but in this off-center example only the base is seen.
Diameter=22mm.*

(del Rincón) shows a cross of any kind. This disappearance is not seen with letter punches (also integral to the inscription), which were replaced whenever needed.

By contrast, virtually all 16th century coins from the Spanish Empire contain a cross in the inscription, in the central design, or both. Nearly all the coins produced in Mexico after 1538 follow this pattern as well, exceptions being a few small coins that perhaps could not accommodate the design. This trend is consistent with the Spanish monarchy's close alliance with the Catholic Church. The relationship with the Vatican was so close that Pope Alexander VI conferred upon Ferdinand and Isabella the collective title of "*Los Reyes Católicos*" [the Catholic Kings].

Might the cross have been omitted from the early Mexican coins because of a Jewish connection? The evidence for this is, for the moment, purely circumstantial. The use of a cross may have been intolerable to a nominally converted Jew. We know that the Mexican Inquisition identified some alleged crypto-Jews by their witnessed disrespect for the cross, avoidance of Mass or pork, or fasting on Jewish holidays. Thus, there were at least some features of Christianity that certain *conversos* shunned, and some rituals of Judaism that they perpetuated.

In place of a cross potent on the top of the reverse of early Mexican coins, there is a symbol that looks strikingly similar to a letter *alef*. It was clearly produced from a punch specially designed to create this shape. With the exception of two tiny ¼ real varieties, every known coin of del Rincón uses this punch at the position of prominence. It is also frequently used between words in the inscriptions.

The presence of the purported *alef* and the absence of a cross make these coins quite different from the vast majority of 16th century Spanish and Mexican coins. The *alef*-like ornamentation is not seen on any other coin produced at Spanish mints, unlike other word separators and ornaments that were frequently reproduced.



*A Hebrew letter alef (א) on a
one obol coin of King
Stephan of Hungary, c. 1270.
Diameter = 10-11mm.*

There are a number of precedents for the use of Hebrew letters on otherwise Latin Medieval coins. The best known of these is a series of 13th century Hungarian coins, described by Daniel Friedenberg in *Jewish Minters & Medalists*. Several mint masters put their marks upon tiny coins using an

alef, *chet*, *tet*, or *shin*. They represent Jewish officials at the Hungarian mint, for example, *alef* for Altman and *chet* for Chenokh.

So, if this is indeed an *alef*, why is it there? A lack of corroborating information precludes a definitive explanation. There are, however, several possibilities, ranging from the merely coincidental to the highly symbolic.

The unidentified maker of the die punch may have produced a shape that innocently looks like a Medieval Spanish *alef* but is devoid of any Jewish connotations. Or perhaps he had a Jewish connection and intended the shape to be an *alef*, but other mint officials were ignorant of this when they inserted the *alef* repeatedly into the coins' inscription. Both of these explanations seem contradicted by the unusually extensive use of that punch, documented by Nesmith, even when it was worn down to a fuzzy blob of metal.

In fact, given the subtle variation in this shape on different coins, there may have actually been more than one purported *alef* punch used during del Rincón's tenure. Other design elements, such as a cross or crown finial, could have been used in place of the *alef*, but for some reason they were seldom chosen.

Perhaps the figure is indeed a Hebrew letter, but was placed there by a Christian for unknown reasons. There is at least one apparent precedent for this: a *shin* found on a 1590 coin from France has no known Jewish connection.

Another interpretation is that this was a minter's mark like those used in the Hungarian coins already discussed. The *alef* could have been the first letter of a name, such as Abraham. Such marks, usually Latin or Gothic letters, are found on the majority of Medieval coins and all of the 16th century coins of Mexico. Was de Vides, del Rincón or another early mint official a crypto-Jew who wanted to slip a symbol of his faith onto these historic coins, while omitting the cross? Did several Jews or sympathizers need to collaborate in a kind of conspiracy? While there is no historical corroboration yet known, I suspect that the die maker Antón de Vides had the best opportunity to insert the *alef* on the coins, and the *alef* may be related to his name rather than del Rincón's. Answers might



Examples of the Hebrew letter alef (א) from a neatly inscribed 13th century Spanish manuscript (Sirat 1976).

someday be found if undiscovered records exist about the backgrounds of the first mint officials.

An argument against the *alef* being a minter's mark is that this punch is frequently used multiple times on del Rincón's coins between words of the inscription. A minter's mark generally appears only once or twice on a coin. However, other than at the top of the reverse, the purported *alef* often appears rotated 90° and somewhat poorly struck. If the design element is truly an *alef*, then the perplexing use of the punch may have been intentional. Any crypto-Jew or *converso* who chose to put a Jewish element onto a coin would probably have had the good sense to make the reference a subtle one. Certainly it was subtle enough to have gone unnoticed for nearly five hundred years of numismatic study. One might expect that crypto-Jews would keep their faith well hidden, and that *conversos* would not want to call attention to their Jewish heritage. This may be the ultimate reason why a definitive interpretation of these coins proves difficult.



Close-up of a purported alef used on the Mexican 4 reales, c. 1538 (Nesmith 6a). Note the resemblance to the examples of the letter alef from a Medieval Spanish manuscript (above).

When the next assayer took office, the purported *alef* design element abruptly and permanently disappears. The cross is given a place of prominence on Mexican colonial coins, where it would remain for hundreds of years. The change would appear to correlate with del Rincón's and de Vides' departures, but it is unknown whether other mint employees may have left at the same time. Also, when del Rincón returned for a second two-year term in the 1540s, the cross potent was in its usual place on his coins.

There are clear differences between del Rincón's coins and other 16th century coins of the Spanish Empire, but the case of the missing cross and mysterious *alef* is far from solved. There *may* have been a Jew in the employ of the Mexican mint during the 1530s, and that individual *may* have wished to make his hidden presence known to future generations. If so, he has finally succeeded.

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