Counter Box Made of Elizabethan Shillings

This small counter box was made in 1712 using silver Elizabethan coins dated from 1562, which were originally identified as shillings. Upon closer examination of the figure of Queen Elizabeth I, one can see the image of a rose behind her head. The rose symbol was only included on sixpence, threepence, and three-farthing pieces as a means of identifying the smaller unit coins (Borden and Brown 114). With a diameter of 2.4 cm, the counter box looks to be made from sixpence coins (Savage 12). At the top of the coin is the mint mark in the star symbol, identifying the coin from the mints within the Tower of London (Shields). Within the Tower, there were both hammering mints and England's first coining press. Without a dotted border between the portrait and legend, the box's coins are recognizable as milled, machine-pressed coins (Borden and Brown 109).

Crowned in 1558, Queen Elizabeth I faced the Great Debasement begun by King Henry VIII in 1540. Coinage debasing occurs when the intrinsic value of coins is lowered, usually through altering the material the coins are made from, while the coins are circulating at face value. Henry VIII's most extreme debasing was done to silver coinage. For four hundred years, England minted silver coinage following the sterling standard, 92.5% silver content. By 1551, the Great Debasement saw coins minted with 17% silver content, greatly damaging the currency's legitimacy (Deng 87). During the Great Debasement, foreign markets and traders charged more for English money because of their poor silver content (Deng 92-93). The cautionary tale of the Roman Empire's collapse, which began with the debasement of Roman coinage, informed the subsequent actions taken by Elizabeth I. When Elizabeth I acceded to the throne, she recognized the threat the Great Debasement posed to the Crown. To protect the Crown, she reestablished the value of England's currency by reinstating the sterling standard. Elizabeth I had the older debased coins collected, melted, refined, and reminted. This process began in November 1560, and by September 1561, reminted coins were in full circulation (Deng 94-96).

Counter boxes held disks - the counters, the predecessor of today's poker chips - typically depicting different English monarchs and were carried in anticipation of gambling. Gambling took many forms in eighteenth-century Britain, from lotteries to cricket, animal fights to card games. There was no singular gambling culture; approaches and opinions differed greatly from

game to game, especially when considering the socio-economic class of the gamblers (Harris 80-125). Some of the most popular games, regardless of class, were card games. Two of the most popular card games, Quadrille and Whist, employed counters. Quadrille used counters similar to how gambling chips are used today in Blackjack, establishing the stakes each round. In Whist, however, counters were used as a way to keep track of how many hands each player won. Counters varied in material, shape, and size, and it was generally expected for each player to bring their own counters to allow for easy identification. Many early European counters in the 1200s were made to resemble the circulating coinage (Holabird 2). By the 1600s, English counters were stamped with portraits of past British monarchs ("A Charles I Antique English Silver Counter Box, C. 1640"). Moral scruples about gambling abounded in the 18th century, yet the use of sovereign likenesses implies a system of honor within gambling circles. To use counters emblazoned with visages of historical monarchs was to appropriate sovereign authority, where the actions taken during the game would be perceived as having integrity. Not to say cheating did not occur; games where one could cheat to win were amply taken advantage of by those who knew how. However, cheating was betraying the honor of the game granted by the sovereign-decorated counters, and so a cheater would indirectly be disrespecting the sovereign's power and authority.

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