

VOLUME 9



JOURNAL OF THE
NUMISMATIC ASSOCIATION

OF AUSTRALIA INC.

<http://naa-online.com/>

THE ROLE OF A FRENCH ÉCU IN THE COLONIZATION OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

by Walter R Bloom

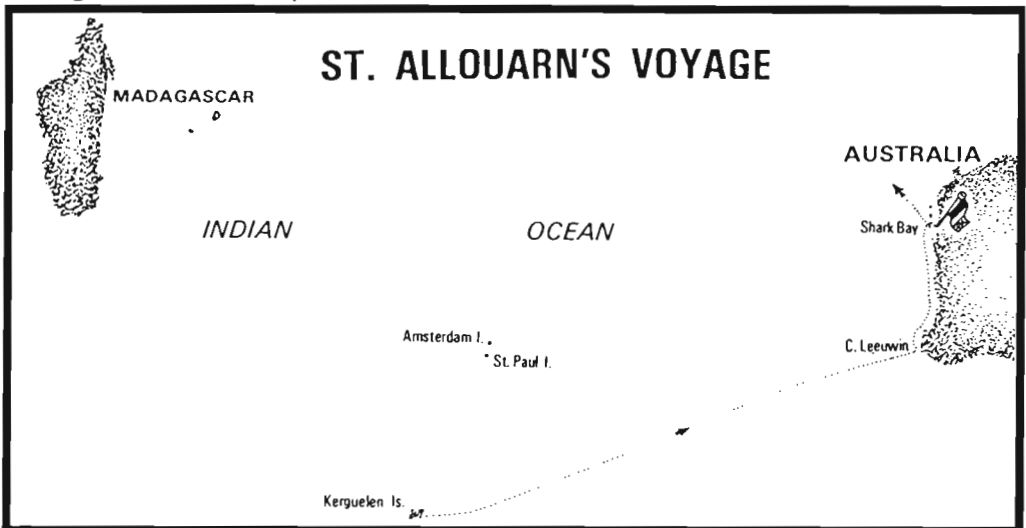
French exploration of Western Australia

In 1772 the French explorer François Alesno, Comte de Saint Allouarn sailed his ship *Gros Ventre* from Mauritius to Kerguelen Island in the Indian Ocean, and then on in search of *Gonneville Land*, named after the French explorer Binot Paulmier de Gonneville who had discovered an unknown land in 1503. Saint Allouarn in fact reached Flinders Bay at Cape Leeuwin on 17 March 1772 where he anchored, but he had no success in making it ashore. The following day he turned northwards and sighted land again on 28 March, at Shark Bay off the coast of Dirk Hartog Island. On 29 March Saint Allouarn dropped anchor in Turtle Bay at the northern end of Dirk Hartog Island^[8].

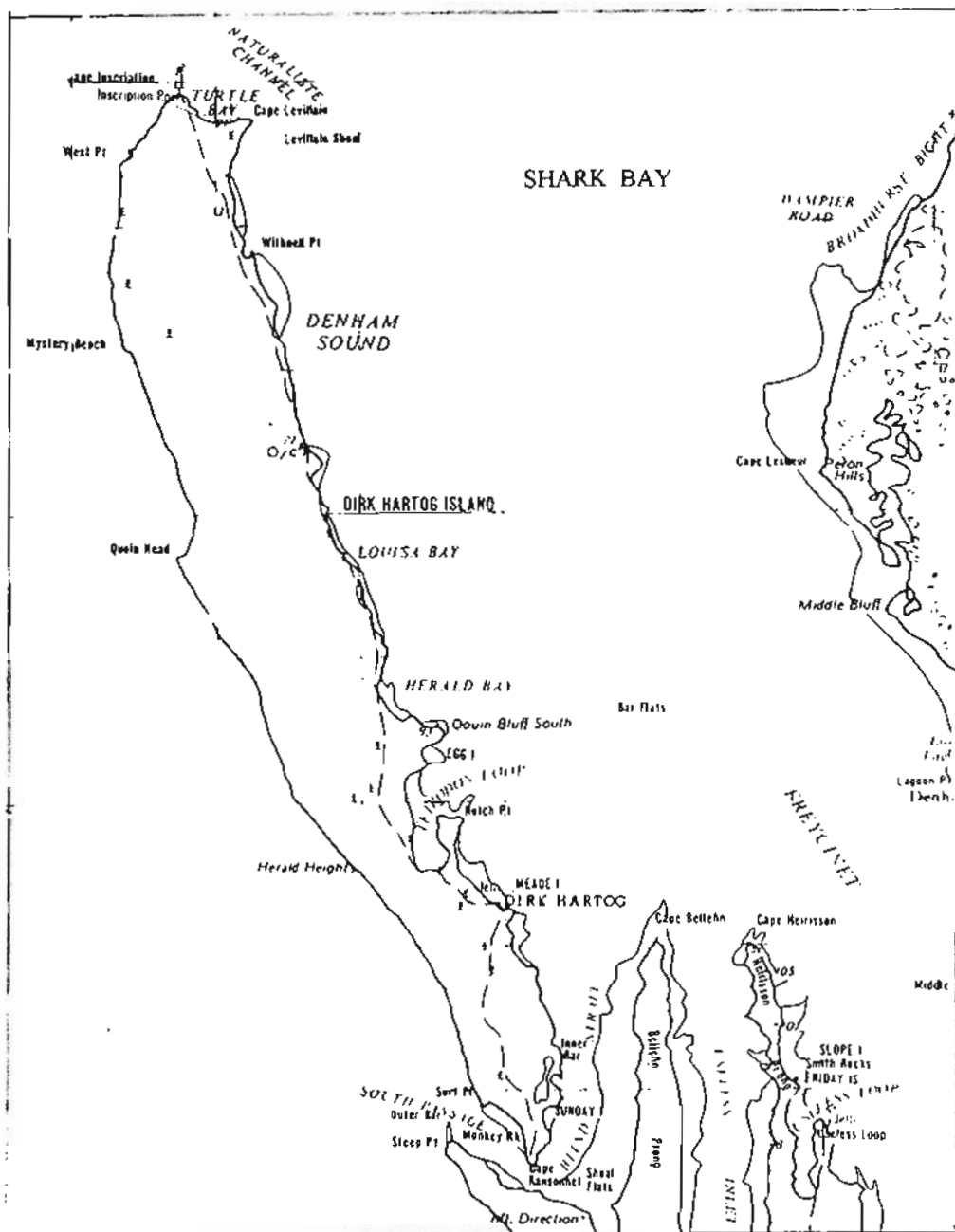
The claiming of Western Australia by France

On the morning of 30 March 1772, Saint Allouarn sent part of his crew ashore with instructions to proceed at least 10 kilometres inland and to take possession of the land for France^[7]. On return to the coast they claimed possession of the land by burying an annexation parchment document in a bottle at the foot of a small tree and nearby placing two coins. According to Leslie Marchant, the claim is inchoate as it was not followed by effective occupation to make it valid.

In private discussions with the author Professor Marchant has pointed out that such claims of French explorers accompanied by burying bottles,



DIRK HARTOG ISLAND WESTERN AUSTRALIA



parchments and coins were widespread, especially in the Pacific.

Expeditions to locate the French sites on Dirk Hartog Island apparently date back to around 1920 when the main occupation of the area was by lighthouse keepers. More recently there were expeditions in the 1970s and 1980s searching for the coins and bottle, led by Leslie Marchant and George Lucas.

Finding of the coin

On 16 January 1998 an expedition led by Max Cramer of the Batavia Coast Maritime Heritage Association and Phillipe Godard found a lead capsule bottle seal at Turtle Bay, and subsequently discovered that there was a coin inside^{[1],[2]}. This turned out to be a French écu (6 livres) of 1766 minted in Bayonne. However, the bottle was not located. Unfortunately, the finders in removing debris from the coin scratched the surface, as is evident on the accompanying photographs. Areas of bright scratching, particularly on the raised areas, are referred to in the report by Richardson^[11].

It is interesting to note that the find was only made possible through the use of a new generation of modern highly sensitive metal detectors, and indeed the finders reconstructed the burial site and then tried an earlier model of detector which failed to pick up any sign of the capsule.

Description of the coin

The coin is an écu blanc or écu d'argent minted in .917 silver (these nicknames were used to distinguish it from the gold

écu). The measurements are (see Richardson^[11]):

- Mass 29.1717g
- Diameter (average) 42mm (approx) - ranges 41.78, 41.92, 41.94, 42.10 mm
- Thickness 2.47-2.62mm

These should be compared with the "official" weight of 29.488g and diameter of 41mm.

The coin is partially corroded with some areas of various types of deposits consistent with it being buried in such a site over a long period of time.

(fig.1) The obverse legend reads:

LUD.XV D.G.FR.ET NAV.REX

which is an abbreviation for

**LUDOVICUS XV DEI GRATIA
FRANCIAE ET NAVARRAE REX**

and which translates as

**Louis XV By the grace of God, King
of France and Navarre.**

The obverse shows the bust of Louis XV facing left (Louis XV reigned from 1715 to 1774). The hair on the King's head is encircled by a headband, with the end ribbons reaching the lower part of the hair curls. This is a little worn on the coin itself. The piece found in Turtle Bay was known as écu bandeau, because of the headband.

The cursive initials JCR on the nape of the King's neck (not visible on this coin due to wear) stand for Joseph Charles Roettiers (sometimes spelt Roettier), who was the Engraver General (Chief Engraver) at the Paris Mint from 1727 to 1768 and 1768 - 1772 (his son Charles-Norbert Roettiers helped him in his work from 1753 and actually became Engraver General in 1768); even on unworn coins the initials are difficult to read. Roettiers was the Engraver of the type bandeau^[10].

The pair of crossed tulips stem down below the bust of the King, between two points, is the signature of the Bayonne Mint Director (an administrative officer), Pierre d'Arripe de Casaux, who held this post from 1759 to 1777.

(fig. 2) The reverse legend reads:

**SIT NOMEN DOMINI
BENEDICTUM 1766**

which translates as

The name of the Lord is praised.

Also there is the letter **L** at the bottom between **DOMINE** and **BENEDICTUM**

The letter **L** is the mintmark for the Bayonne mint; Bayonne is a town in France close to the Spanish border and the Atlantic Ocean. Incidentally, Navarre is part of Spain, but used to be a kingdom at one time under French rule. (By coincidence this is just south of Bayonne.) The five petal rose just before the date is the "signature" of the Mint Engraver (the technical scientist in the drawing and coining process), Christophe Rossy, who held this post from 1743 to 1770^[10].

The edge inscription:

DOMINE SALVUM FAC REGEM

which translates as

Keep the King alive, o Lord

The denomination *écu* was used over many years, from 1641 to 1793, and was the standard silver crown-size coin of France, in parallel with the British crown, German thaler, Spanish dollar and later the United States silver dollar. It was tariffed at 6 livres and had an average weight of about 29.5 grams, the diameter varying from 38 to 41 millimetres. The silver fineness of .917 was somewhat higher than that of the Spanish dollar

(.903) which was used throughout the world including Australia, but less than sterling (.925). However the amount of silver in the commonly circulating crowns favoured the *écu*:

French <i>écu</i>	0.8695g
British crown	0.8409g
Spanish dollar	0.7859g

Rose^[12] in his book on chopmarks has a photograph of a chopmarked *écu*, so they were to be found in the Far East. It is quite possible that some would have been lost in shipwrecks in Western Australia *en route* to the Far East, or simply used in Australia during the currency shortages of the last century.

The word *écu* comes from *escusson* (old French) which derives from the Latin *scutum*, meaning shield. Similarly derived words are *escutcheon*, *escudo* and *scudo*. This was one of the standard motifs on these coins, usually sporting *fleurs-de-lis*. There was a further refinement of the name relating to some aspect of the design. The shield on this coin is surmounted by a crown and surrounded by olive branches.

The *fleur-de-lis* apparently dates back to the Frankish King Louis-Clovis (c. 466-511) but was adopted as the French royal arms by Louis VIII, remaining up until the French Revolution. The term means "lily flower".

The first *écu* was struck under Louis XIII in 1641. During the reign of Louis XIV there were 24 different types of *écu* struck. The *écu au bandeau* (replacing the *écu au laurier*) was produced over the period 1740 - 1771 in 28 different mints, and as such represented the longest running series of the *écu* in France. It seems that measures were taken during the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) to

THE 1766 FRENCH ÉCU

FOUND AT TURTLE BAY ON THE 16TH JANUARY 1988



fig. 1 enlarged, actual size 42 mm



fig. 2 enlarged, actual size 42mm

increase the production of coinage by exhorting the public (through a decree of 26 October 1759) to bring in their household silver; this was not successful^[9]. However the southern mints (which included Bayonne) continued to produce coinage through the importation of Spanish silver^[13].

Towards the end of the eighteenth century the French écu was in extensive circulation outside the borders of France, especially in Germany. It was minted in very large numbers because the French gold/silver ratio favoured silver. During the French Revolution in the 1790s many écus were exported as people escaped from France, and these entered circulation in Great Britain and elsewhere as evidenced by the Wellington Bridge Hoard^[4] from Ireland, which had 19 écus and 2 half écus out of a total of 342 coins. Generally speaking, they did not circulate as widely as the Spanish dollar because of their higher silver content^[5].

The écu was replaced first by a crown with no denomination showing (1792-1793) and of higher silver content (0.8842g), then a 6 livres piece (1793 and 1^{er} An II), and subsequently by the 5 francs piece (1^{er} An IV -), but did in fact circulate alongside its replacements up until the 1830s.

George Sobin^[13] lists the issues of Bayonne as the most common mintmark of the year 1766; among issues of the Bayonne mint, 1766 is shown as the fifth most common year after (in decreasing order) 1765, 1764, 1767 and 1768. (These figures are based on auction records; there are virtually no mintage records over this period).

As can be seen in the photographs the coin is partially corroded, which means

its value on the coin market is quite low. One dealership with a large collection of écus is Compagnie Générale de Bourse^[10] in Paris. Catalogues can be found on the website at <http://www.cgb.fr/> where a similar coin (without scratches) is advertised for \$60. Of course the coin in question would have a greater value if it could be conclusively identified as part of the reported French declaration, but this will require much more work.

Articles on this coin find have appeared in newspapers throughout the country, including the West Australian (which had the original rights to the story)^{[1],[2]}.

It is quite possible that the coin's origins are those claimed by the finders. It is also possible that the coin was dropped there (or purposely buried in a lead seal) subsequent to the claimed discovery by Saint Allouarn. There were many opportunities with visits by a French whaler, visits by other nationalities who would have used the écu, or simply someone wanting to leave a time capsule. The only chance of a positive identification is through exhaustive chemical and physical analysis.

Further developments

An exciting development took place on 1 April with the finding of a bottle believed to contain a parchment and lead capsule seal with possibly a coin enclosed. This was the result of an expedition led by Myra Stanbury of the Western Australian Maritime Museum. The bottle is currently being investigated using non-invasive scientific analysis; it has not at this stage been opened.

French mintmarks

A	Paris	G	Poitiers	S	Troyes
AA	Metz	H	La Rochelle	T	Nantes
AR	Arras	I	Limoges	U	Turin
B	Dieppe	K	Bordeaux	W	Lille
B	Rouen	L	Bayonne	X	Amiens
B	Beaumont-Le-Roger	M	Toulouse	Y	Bourges
(b)	Brussels	MA	Marseilles	Z	Grenoble
BB	Strasbourg	N	Montpellier	&	Aix
BD	Pau	O	Clermont	9	Rennes
C	Castelsarrasin	O	Riom	9	St Malo
C	Saint Lo	P	Dijon		Besanon
CC,CL	Genoa	P	Semur	Cow	Pau
CH	Chalons	Q	Narbonne	Flag	Utrecht
D	Lyon	Q	Perpignan	Crowned R	Rome
E	Tours	R	London	Thunderbolt	Poissy
F	Angers	R	Orleans	Star	Madrid
G	Geneve	R	St Andre		

Mintmarks for the 1766 écu: A, AA, C, D, H, K, L, M, N, Q, R, T, &, 9, COW

Bibliography

- [1] Amalfi, Carmelo *Coin tosses up an adventurous tale.* West Australian, 24 January 1998, pp. 6 - 7.
- [2] Amalfi, Carmelo *The coin that claimed Australia for France?* West Australian, 28 February 1998, Big Weekend, pp. 1 - 2.
- [3] Duplessy, Jean. *Les monnaies Françaises Royales de Hughes Capet à Louis XVI (987-1793).* Paris, Maison Platt, 1988-1989. 2v. illus. 25cm. Contents: V.1. Hughes Capet - Louis XII. -V.2. François I - Louis XVI.
- [4] Kenny, M and Callagher, C *The Wellington Bridge Hoard in Small Change.* Papers on post medieval Irish Numismatics in memory of Michael Dolley MRIA, Numismatic Society of Ireland Occasional Papers Nos. 29 - 38.
- [5] Kleeberg, John M *Internet discussion with the author,* 29/30 January 1998
- [6] Lane, Peter *The Baudin medals of King George Sound. Western Australia.* J Numismatic Association of Australia **8** (1995), 21 - 30.

- [7] McCarthy, Mike *The Turtle Bay Coin*. Maritime Heritage Site Inspection Report No. 138, Department of Maritime Archeology, WA Maritime Museum, February 1998.
- [8] Marchant, Leslie R. *France Australe. A study of French explorations and attempts to found a penal colony and strategic base in south western Australia 1503 - 1826*. Artlook Books, Perth, 1982.
- [9] Mayhew, Nicholas. *Coinage in France from the Dark Ages to Napoleon*. London, Seaby, 1988. viii, 164p. illus. French coinage from "disintegration of the Roman Empire in Gaul to the rise of Napoleon" (circa 476-1800).
- [10] Prieur, Michel and Schmitt, Laurent *France V*, Compagnie Générale de Bourse, Catalogue, 1998.
- [11] Richardson, Geoff *Preliminary examination of a silver coin*, Materials Institute of Western Australia report MIWARP221, 5 March 1998.
- [12] Rose, F.M. *Chopmarks*. Numismatics International, Dallas, 1987. 54pp. illus.
- [13] Sobin, George, Jr *The silver crowns of France, 1641 - 1973*. Richard Margolis, Teaneck, New Jersey, 1974. 259pp. illus.

MURDOCH UNIVERSITY
 WESTERN AUSTRALIA
 bloom@murdoch.edu.au