

An Introduction to the “Star of Lima” Coinage of 1659-1660

By Daniel Frank Sedwick

This is a case of “it’s easier to ask forgiveness than it is to get permission.”⁴ The city of Lima, Peru, was short of silver coinage and needed to remedy the situation before the king could be asked. For 67 years the Lima mint remained closed while coins were struck at a furious rate in Potosí, the source of the silver. To avoid heavy taxation, wealthy mine owners were shipping their coins and even whole ingots back to Spain, sometimes even using contraband eastward routes to Buenos Aires. The situation was no doubt exacerbated by the Potosí debasement scandal and subsequent recall of coinage in 1649-1652. When the Lima town council suggested re-opening the Lima mint in 1658, the Viceroy, Count Alba de Liste⁵, considered it within his authority to allow it, without Philip IV’s permission up front. Forgiveness eventually came, but permission did not.

Documents show that the Lima mint began striking this unauthorized coinage in January 1659 and ceased in April 1660. One of the great mysteries of Spanish colonial numismatics is why the mintage continued for so long when the king clearly did not approve. One theory is that the first samples for the king were lost on a shipwreck, for the remains of the *San Miguel el Arcángel*,⁶ sunk in 1659 off Jupiter, Florida, have yielded many round and well-struck presentation examples⁷. In fact this wreck has become the primary source for “Star of Lima” coins, but only for the year 1659. As we shall see, the coins that are not from the wreck, presumably struck later, had slightly different designs.

The design is where the moniker for this series of unauthorized coinage becomes obvious, for the central element on the obverse of each coin is a large star⁸, which symbolized Lima from its founding as *Ciudad de los Reyes* (City of the Kings).⁹ In much smaller form the star was used on Lima’s previous coinage under assayer Diego de la Torre, from 1577 to 1588 (with one more year of recorded production in 1592), placed interchangeably with the P mintmark, the oD assayer-mark and the denomination around the central obverse element (shield or monogram). The new version of Lima’s star used in 1659 and 1660 was large and prominent.

The other distinguishing elements of design are the date, the denomination, the assayer-mark V and the mintmark LIMA, LM or L, which are placed around and among two pillars under a large crown and above some flat waves, in accordance with a requirement for all the South American mints (the others being Potosí, Bogotá and Cartagena). The issues of 1660 also show the motto PLVS VLTRA. We can categorize the coins into three Series (in chronological order) by their mintmark, as follows:

Series IA: Mintmark LIMA, single assayer and denomination (1659)

The first Series, beginning with the coins from the *San Miguel*, displays a big star above the full word LIMA above the date 1659 inside the pillars. The *San Miguel* coins, which comprise Series IA, show a vertical •V• to the left and •8• (for the 8 reales) to the right of the pillars, sometimes lacking the dots in the lower denominations, which either have 5-point stars (2 reales) or no stars (1 real). The 2 reales show the word LIMA with the last two letters in monogram.¹⁰



4 This phrase was coined by Rear Admiral Grace Hopper in 1986.

5 Alba de Liste was Viceroy of Peru from 1655 to 1661; prior to that he was Viceroy of New Spain (Mexico) from 1650 to 1653.

6 This wreck, also known simply as the “Jupiter wreck,” is sometimes referred to among the salvage community erroneously as “San Miguel de Archangel” (as opposed to the proper Spanish *San Miguel el Arcángel*).

7 One hesitates to call these “Royals,” as we do for the round presentation strikes outside this series, because they are generally not perfectly round and centered, nor are their axes aligned, but they are clearly superior to regular issues.

8 In most cases this star is eight-pointed, but in some cases it has only six or even just five points.

9 Popular belief holds that Lima’s original name, given by Pizarro himself, refers to its founding on the day of the Epiphany (January 6), but a new article by Herman Blanton explains that on that date it was decided to enlist three local “magi” (like the Biblical three kings) to select a site for the new city. The city was actually founded on January 18.

10 *San Miguel* is not the only source for coins of Series IA.

Series IB: Mintmark LIMA, double assayer and denomination (1659)

Still with mintmark as LIMA, the Series IB 8 reales differ from the *San Miguel* coins mainly by having •8•V• flanking each pillar, but also by having a horizontal line above the date and a star with 5 points instead of 8. No known minors match this design. Probably a brief type, ss Series IB is generally rare.

Series II: Mintmark L-M (1659)

The second Series, which is rife with die varieties (particularly the number and placement of dots on the pillars side), is defined as having just L-M for its mintmark, with the star still above but basically bisecting the two letters. Below the mintmark is the date, sometimes with a line above. The 8 reales in this series show •8•V• outside each pillar, but the lower denominations show just assayer to left and denomination to right (like the *San Miguel* coins above). The star is always 8-pointed. Curiously, the 2R and 1R sometimes show the date as 165 instead of 1659.



Series III: Mintmark L (1660)

The third Series, which was used only in 1660 and is therefore much rarer than the first two Series, is defined by both a simplification down to a single-letter mintmark L and the incorporation of the motto PLVS VLTRA into the design. For the 8R and 4R the design shows L-8-V or L-4-V outside each pillar and PLVS above a 6-point star flanked with dots above VLTRA above the date 660 (lacking the first digit), with placement of dots and horizontal lines as noted varieties. There is also a variant of the 8 reales that lacks the date altogether. The 2R shows the three-digit date either above or below the denomination. In the 1R, the date is either above or below the star and denomination (which can appear as either denomination-star-denomination or star-denomination-star, the star always being 5-pointed), with PLVS VLTRA in two lines below that; the mintmark and assayer appear singly outside the pillars.



Other issues: Half reales and gold

“Star of Lima” coins of the half-real denomination are known, both from the *San Miguel* and later, but do not bear any attributes that would assign them to any particular series, for their design is the usual (but distinctive) monogram and cross-lions-castles. At least one is known with a 1659 date in the legend on the cross side. I have also heard of a ½ real with a design like the higher denominations, but I have not seen it to confirm its design or authenticity. Intriguingly, mint records show that quarter reales were struck as well, but nothing attributable to this issue has come to light.



The gold coins struck under the “Star of Lima” issue are controversial. Only two specimens are known—one 8 escudos of each date (the 1660 actually overdated 1660/59)—both held by the Banco de España in Madrid, Spain. Mint records indicate that “Star of Lima” gold cobs were made, in the denominations of 1 and 8 escudos only, in VERY small numbers, from September 1659 to April 1660. The controversy, however, is due to the fact that NONE of the die elements on the two known 8 escudos (lions, castles, pillars, crowns and letters) matches the style of any of the silver coins. Therefore, either both coins are fantasies or the gold was designed by a totally different engraver at the Lima mint (an unprecedented, albeit possible, occurrence).



(digitized rendering with color added)