

THE GOLD COBS OF MEXICO 1679-1732



Part 1: The Jeweled Cross Series of 1679-1699

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1.1 The First Gold Coinage of Mexico: the Jeweled Cross Issues of 1679-1699



A woman did what her husband would not and granted Nueva Espana a gold coinage. On February 25, 1675, the widow of Philip III, Mariana of Austria, acting as regent for the 13 year old disabled Carlos II, issued a cedula granting New Spain the long-sought privilege of a gold coinage. The Mexico City mint had been in operation 140 years at that point. The Colombian mints had struck gold for more than 50 years, but the Spanish crown had been unwilling to license a gold coinage in the viceroyalty of New Spain despite the inconveniences to commerce this entailed. Philip III had continued to decline a Mexican gold coinage even after domestic Mexican gold production had become significant from the mines at San Luis Potosi, Guanajuato, and Guadalajara.

Pradeau tells us (NH p. 46) that there was rejoicing in the streets of Mexico City when the Queen's order was read in May of 1675. After the celebration, things did not move forward quickly. A year passed before in May of 1676 the viceroy of Nueva Espana, Fray Payo Enrique de Rivera, ordered the Mexico City mint to strike a gold coinage in denominations of eight, four, two and one escudos. Inexplicably, three and a half more years pass before the eagerly awaited new coinage begins to trickle out of the mint. On December 23, 1679 the Viceroy and members of the Audiencia visit the mint to witness the first striking of a Mexican gold coinage. In the last week of December the mint reportedly strikes 63 marks of gold, equivalent to 4,284 escudos. None of this first issued apparently was saved or has survived from circulation. We are told of no special strikings presented to the Viceroy or sent back to Mariana and Carlos.

Correspondence between the Spanish crown and Mexico City has yet to be searched for an explanation of the three and half year delay in implementing the viceroy's order. It is a surprising delay for several reasons. Remember that the Mexico City mint is a long established mint operation, producing a substantial silver coinage. No new building, no new staff, minimal new equipment was needed, beyond new dies and punches for the gold coinage. It is very hard to imagine technical problems delaying the Mexico City mint for three and half years. This is speculation at this point but one key

development in Spain could well explain at least two and half of the three and half year delay. In November of 1675 Carlos' regency officially ended, but the disabled 14 year old king continued to cede control of the government to his mother. Mariana was opposed politically and sometimes militarily by the respected Spanish general Don Juan Jose de Austria, himself an illegitimate son of Philip IV. In early 1677 Mariana lost control of the government to Don Juan Jose in the wake of a corruption scandal linked to one of her favorites. Mariana was exiled to Toledo and Don Juan Jose took the reins of power, promising to reverse the corrupt and incompetent policies of Mariana's regime. Among the policies that may well have fallen under suspicion and been put on hold by the general was Mariana's approval of a Mexican gold mint, especially if that approval was linked to one of Mariana's corrupt favorites (Valenzuela). Don Juan Jose died suddenly in September 1679 and Mariana immediately returned to power. A little over three months later the Mexican gold coinage was back on track. The circumstances of the late December first mintage suggest a hasty start after a long delay. We can imagine a letter from Mariana arriving on a December aviso, pointedly asking the viceroy asking whether the coinage she had approved nearly 5 years ago was yet in production. Several weeks later a small coinage bearing a 1679 date is hastily produced to show Mariana that things were as she had ordered.



Don Juan Jose de Austria



Carlos II

1.2 The Jeweled Cross Designs

The archives have yet to yield any documents (1675-1679) discussing how the designs for the new Mexican gold coinage won approval from Spain. The Spanish Crown was always very concerned about the designs used on the coinage of its New World mints, and pattern dies were sometimes made in Spain for a new colonial coinage. We do not know whether the first Jeweled Cross dies were engraved in Spain. What is clear from the coins themselves is that very distinctive designs were mandated. Jeweled Cross issues are recognizable at arm's length as unlike any peninsular escudos. This is surely no accident. The problems that Philip III had had with Potosi and Cartagena and Lima were remembered by his wife. If there was going to be a similar problem with the Mexican gold coinage, the Spanish Crown wanted that coinage to be immediately recognized as different from the peninsular issues of Barcelona or Madrid or Seville.

The Jeweled Cross design certainly accomplished this. On all denomination a broad Jerusalem cross displays a series of holes on all the arms and end bars. On the onza 33 or 35 holes are most frequent, on the media onza 29 to 34 holes are seen. These holes are intaglio, not raised features, so perhaps "jeweled" cross is not the most apt description. Presumably some numismatist thought that name was better than "holed" cross. Surrounding the Jerusalem cross is a tressure in the rectangular shape of a large cross. This rectangular shape is completely

different from the arcing tressures of the contemporary Spanish (and Colombian) escudos. Dotted cross and rectangular tressure made it certain that even at arm's length no one would confuse a Mexican gold coin with an issue of Seville or Madrid or Barcelona.



Mexico, 1680, four escudos

For comparison, a Seville media onza of 1676 is below. Note the semicircular loops of the tressure. Peninsular Jerusalem crosses vary considerably in size and shape but are never "holed".



Photo credits: Rafael Tauler

On the shield side the central device is a crowned Hapsburg shield in a unique Mexican style that emerged on the reales of Philip III and developed further on the coinage of Philip III. No escutcheon of Portugal is present, and the pomegranate of Granada, framed in a triangle, sits directly on a large cup-like enclosure holding the emblems of Flanders and Tyrol. On Spanish peninsular issues the device of Flanders & Tyrol is smaller, squarish, and sits lower on the shield, separated by at least 2 mm from the shield of Portugal. Another obvious difference lies in the treatment of the fesse of Austria (left center of the shield). On Spanish peninsular issues it is a single thick centered bar, often with thin lines radiating from its corners. On Mexican escudos of Carlos II it is represented by two thin horizontal lines.

A feature we will discuss presently is the changing shaping of the crown on Carlos II Mexican gold issues. It may be of some use in providing some (sadly lacking) internal chronology for the series.



**Mexico, 1680, four escudos
(possibly an overdate?)**



Seville, circa 1690, four escudos

Photo credits: Rafael Tauler

1.3 The Jeweled Cross One Escudo

The Jeweled Cross one escudo was struck continuously (as far as we know) from 1679 through 1695. Thereafter the Jeweled Cross is known on dated issues of 1697 and 1698, though it may well have continued in regular use throughout the 1695-99 period. It is also possible that Jeweled Cross appear only intermittently after 1695, struck from surplus Jeweled dies produced in 1695 or earlier. Plain or "jewelless" crosses were introduced at Mexico City in 1695, but, curiously, no dated Plain Cross one escudos are known from the period 1695-99 and no undated Plain Crosses are certain either. Dated Jeweled Cross one escudos are known for 1689, 1694*, 1697, and 1698(four). The 1694 is pictured to the right. It is marked with an asterisk * because it seems possible that its last digit is a 5, or a 5/4, not a 4. No opportunity to examine the coin in person has presented itself.

The cross on this design is 8 mm wide and on well struck issues shows an average of 25 holes. The shield is 10 x 12 mm. Jeweled Cross one escudos vary considerably in shape but roundish ones average about 17 mm. Alan Craig gives the average weight of Fleet-era Mexican one escudos as 3.37 gm. No Jeweled Cross one escudo in the Gold Cobs Census weighs less than 3.38 gms, which is the legally prescribed full weight. Besides the seven dated specimens noted above, seven undated or partially (169x) dated specimens, six of them recovered by Real 8,

are known to the Gold Cobs Census. Several undated non-Fleet specimens are known.



Mexico, Jeweled Cross one escudo



1694 or 1695?

Photo credits Rafael Tauler

1.4 A 1679 Jeweled Cross 1 Escudo?

The Mexico one escudo pictured to the left is catalogued in ORO MACUQUINO as a 1679 issue , and it has come to auction under that description. It would be wonderful to have a sole survivor of the Christmas coinage of 1679, but there are some reasons to be concerned about that attribution. Notice first the doubled upper loop of the base of the crown. This feature is not associated with any datable one or four escudos until 1694, with any two escudos until 1698, and with any onzas before 1691. No 1680's issues have it. It seems to be a stylistic feature that became established late in the Jeweled Cross series.

The width of a Mexico 1 escudo legend is typically 3 mm. Measurement of the height of the last digit on the "1679" tells us that we are seeing only the bottom half of that digit, assuming it is normally placed. What we see in that bottom half is a small closed circular loop. Only the digits 6 or 8 have such a loop. The assumption that the last digit is normally placed could be challenged: perhaps we have a 9 punched in very low. This is possible but the problem is that we see no trace of the tail of the 9 impinging on the border or the mint mark directly below. If we have a low 9, we should see tail!

The penultimate digit of the "1679" seems to be about 60% present, with the top of the digit sharply truncated. Fortunately, we have a dated Mexico 1697 one escudo to give us some idea what a 7 looked like on a nearly contemporary Mexican issue. Judge



Mexico one escudo Tauler 92a

for yourself. Notice the sharp straight lines of the down stroke and cross stroke on the 7. The strokes on the penultimate digit of the "1679", by contrast, are noticeably curved and rounded. Look at the 9 in the 1697 to the left. Imagine the top 40% of the digit cut off. That shape seems to be the shape we see on the "1679". The penultimate digit on the "1679" is more likely a truncated 9.

The conclusion to which we are being lead is that the "1679" is in fact a 1698 (or 1696) issue. Thanks to the 1715 Fleet we have five or six dated 1698 one escudo, including Tauler 95. Tauler 95 is pictured directly to the left. Too much critical detail has been lost on both the "1679" and Tauler 95 to permit a definitive die comparison, but several key features seem to have the same shape and positioning. Notice that O above the M in the mint mark and the bottom half of the last digit (8) are positioned exactly the same on both coins. Notice also the irregular bent shape of the dividers in the castles and lions section of the shield. Tauler 92a seems to duplicate this distinctive die feature.

Finally, all these details are repeated even more clearly and conclusively on a 1698 in the Florida Collection (#1367). The crown and shield and mint mark are identical in fine detail to those on Tauler 92a. Tauler 92a seems likely to be an issue of 1698.



Mexico one escudo 1697



Mexico one escudo 1698 Tauler 95



Mexico one escudo 1698 FL#1367



Photo credit: Rafael Tauler

1.5 A Jeweled Cross 1 Escudo Royal?

The Mexico one escudo pictured to the left is catalogued in ORO MACUQUINO as a 1689 Royal or redondo issue (Tauler 92). As such it would be the only Jeweled Cross Royal. No doubt Mexico City struck some Royals in the Jeweled Cross period. Unfortunately, this is not one of them. It is not a Royal, or even a failed attempt to strike a Royal ("near-Royals" as they are called). It is not even an issue of the Mexico City mint. Look at the crude shield, which is farrago of missing detail and incorrect detail. No shield like this came out of the Mexico City mint. On the other side, the tressure and fleurs are also obviously wrong. Detail after detail condemns it.

We mention this coin to alert collectors. More than one example may exist and it does not seemed to bet published as a counterfeit. Its weight is unrecorded but it is 21 mm in diameter. The average diameter of an early Mexico one escudo is 17 mm, the largest authentic one escudo known is slightly under 19 mm.

(Special thanks to Mike Dunigan for information about this coin.)

1.6 The Jeweled Cross 2 Escudos

The Jeweled Cross two escudos was struck continuously (as far as we know) from 1679 to 1695. Thereafter the design is known to re-appear on a 1697 issue and on an overdate 1698/x issue. The 1697 and 1698 escudos may be struck from dies prepared in those years or possibly from surplus dies produced in 1695 or earlier. The Plain Cross design was introduced in 1695. Dated Jeweled Cross specimens are known for 1680 (two), 1681, 1691, 1692*, 1695, 1697 and 1698. The 1692 is marked with an asterisk * because that date is not certain. Tauler 194a, catalogued as a 1693 two escudos, has a 13 mm cross and a 24 mm planchet. It is a four escudos.

The cross on this denomination is 9 mm wide and on well struck issues shows an average of 29 holes. The shield is 10.5 x 13 mm. Jeweled Cross two escudos vary considerably in shape but roundish ones average about 20 mm. Alan Craig gives the average weight of Fleet-era Mexican two escudos as 6.75 gm. Jeweled Cross two escudo in the Gold Cobs Census weighs from 6.75 to 6.78.

Besides the 8 dated specimens noted above, fourteen undated specimens, eleven of them recovered by Real 8, are known to the Gold Cobs Census.



Mexico, 1680, two escudos
(possibly an overdate?)



Photo credits: Rafael Tauler

1.7 The Jeweled Cross 4 Escudos

The Jeweled Cross four escudos was struck continuously (as far as we know) from 1679 to 1695. Thereafter the design is known on a 1698 issue and on an overdate 1699/8/X issue, possibly from dies produced in 1695 or earlier. The Plain Cross designs were introduced in 1695.

Dated Jeweled Cross specimens are known for 1680, 1693, 1694(two), 1696(two)*, 1698, and 1699/8/X. Some numismatists believe that Tauler 84 and 81, the two 1696's, may actually be 1695's issues. The 1693 four escudos is misclassified as a two escudos in Tauler's *Catalogo*.

The cross on the four escudos is 13 mm wide and shows an average of 32 holes (at least on well struck issues). The shield is 14 x 17 mm.

Jeweled Cross four escudos vary in shape but roundish ones average about 25 mm. Alan Craig gives the average weight of Fleet-era Mexican four escudos as 13.52 gm. All Jeweled Cross four escudos in the Gold Cobs Census have weighed 13.60 gms or more.

Besides the 8 dated specimens noted above, nine undated specimens, four of them recovered by Real 8, are known to the Gold Cobs Census.



Mexico 1699/8/X four escudos



Photo credits: Rafael Tauler

1.8 Did Mexico City strike a Plain Cross 4 Escudos in 1693?



Mexico 4 escudos Tauler 81



Mexico 4 escudos 1695 BdM Col.



Mexico 4 escudos 1695/6 Tauler 84

Real 8 believed they had found one and brought it to auction in November of 1972 as lot 38 in Schulman's SPANISH GALLEON TREASURE (where it fetched an impressive \$1400). In oversize bold type the Schulman catalogue described the coin pictured to the left as a "unique ½ doubloon of (169)3" and as such "the Earliest Dated Mexican Gold Coin in the 1715 Disaster." The definitive catalog of the gold cob coinage, ORO MACUQUINO (2011), also dates the coin as 1693. (Tauler 81).

An opportunity to re-examine the coin recently presented itself. The last digit of the date is somewhat hard to read—but clearly it is not a 3. Fortunately, there are two other dated Plain Cross 4 escudos whose dies match present coin and confirm its correct dating. To the left is a four escudos in the Banco de Mexico Collection. Through its date is truncated, we clearly see the bottom of the 695.

Below that coin is another (Tauler 84), this one with a full three digit date. Tauler reads this date as 1695, though it appears that the last digit is an overdate, very likely a 6/5. In any case, Tauler 81 is not 1693 issue, but a media onza struck with a shield die cut in 1695 and perhaps reused in 1696. Plain Cross issues began in 1695, not 1693.

Photo credit: Rafael Tauler

1.9 The Jeweled Cross 8 Escudos

The Jeweled Cross eight escudos was likely struck from 1679 to 1695 without interruption. No dated example exists after 1695 but at least one onza with a Jeweled Cross pairs with 1697/6 shield (Florida St. Collection # 11.00230). Plain cross designs were introduced in 1695.

Dated specimens are known for 1691(two), 1694/2, and 1695.

The cross on this design is 15.5 mm wide and on well struck coins shows an average of 34 holes. The shield is 16 x 20 mm.

Jeweled Cross eight escudos vary in shape but roundish ones average a large 35=36 mm. Alan Craig gives the average weight of Fleet-era Mexican eight escudos as 26.75 gm. The Jeweled Cross four escudos in the Gold Cobs Census range from 26.6 to 27.1 gms.

Besides the four dated specimens noted above, nine undated specimens, three of them recovered by Real 8, are known to the Gold Cobs Census.



Mexico (16)94/2 eight escudos

Photo credits: Rafael Tauler

1.11 Barely Jeweled Escudos: the last Jeweled Cross Issues?

Recently the Jeweled Cross MXo L onza pictured below came to auction. At first glance we might think it just has a worn cross die from which much detail has been lost. No so. Careful examination of the cross side reveals that the die was in good condition. The reason why most of the holes in the cross are missing is that they were never punched into the die. And the ones that are present are ill spaced and badly mispunched. It's hard to count but perhaps 13 of the normal 34 are present. Is this just a terrible job by the die sinker?



Even on the one and two escudos Jeweled Cross issues there was usually care taken to fully “jewel” the cross.

A single issue like this by itself would need no further explanation than an incompetent die sinker (whose defective product somehow passed review), but it is now clear that there exists a group of these “barely jeweled” escudos in all denominations. See the 4 escudos to the right. None of these yet has offered a date to securely anchor the group, but by style they are 1690's issues, most like the 1694-95's (or later) and least like 1680's issues. One possible explanation for this group is that as we

approached the inauguration of the Plain Cross issues in 1695, it was no longer felt necessary to carefully and fully “jewel” the cross. The concerns that had mandated the selection of the very distinctive Mexican Jeweled Cross 20 years earlier may have no longer been felt. A second factor pushing for an ad hoc simplification of the dies could have the high mintage of 1694-95. In 1695 Mexico City minted nearly 300, 000 pesos in gold, approximately six times the average mintages of the 1680's and early 1690's. Mexico City was no doubt pushed to produce enough dies to accommodate this ballooning coinage. If these barely jeweled cross dies were engraved at late notice in 1694 or early 1695, when a completely plain cross was already imminent, there would have been no compelling reason for an over-busy die cutter to finish a jeweled cross in traditional detail. This view would have us regard these barely jeweled crosses as the last stage in a process of cross simplification that led to the completely plain crosses first manufactured in 1695. This view may be correct but until we have a dated (or die matched) example of the barely jeweled coinage, it also remains possible that these coins were struck from dies produced 1696-97, simultaneously with



the fully jeweled and plain issue of that period. Purely stylistic factors do not compel us to date these coins to 1694-95.

Photo cr: D Sedwick

1. 12 When did the Jeweled Cross series end?

We do not know whether Jeweled Cross dies were manufactured after 1695, when Plain Cross dies were introduced. That Mexico City simultaneously produced jeweled, partially jeweled, and plain cross dies for 5 years would be unprecedented if the mint saw these as distinct series. The Jeweled Cross dies used on 1695-99 escudos could all be surplus dies from the big coinage of 1694-95, pressed back into service when current dies failed, but there are problems with that view. The years 1696-99 all saw a substantial gold coinage at the 200,000 peso per year level. If there were surplus 1695 dies, we would expect them to be used (and used up) in the first years of that period. But we see crisp two and four escudos fully jeweled dies coming into use with the 1698 and 1699 coinage. Moreover, most of the surviving Mexican escudos datable to 1695-99 seem to be Jeweled Cross issues. That Mexico City struck most of its substantial gold coinage for four years with surplus dies is difficult to believe.

The story of the design changes that took place in the Mexican gold coinage in the period 1695-1700 is a complicated one. It would be gratifying if we could say, unifying the complexities, there is a general tendency to move toward a simpler design. Once the jewels are gone, the arms and crossbars of the cross tend to get thinner. Once the crossbar have become as thin as the tressure lines, it becomes simpler to

connect crossbar and surrounding tressure into the rectangular boxes we are familiar with on the classical Box-End Cross issues of 1700-1710. The problem with this story is that changes just mentioned do not occur in 1695 or gradually over the 1695-99 period. They appear abruptly in 1700. The only change datable to 1695 is the appearance of the plain cross. Tressure, fleurs, and the shape of the cross remain the same until 1700. Below is the Plain Cross Royal of 1695. Notice how similar it is in all other features of the cross side to later Jeweled Cross issues. There is no hint of a classic Box-End Cross. Compare the 1695 Royal with the Box-End Royal of 1702. Notice how much has changed by 1702 in the cross and tressure and fleurs. These changes originate in 1700-02.



Mexico, 1695, 8 escudos Royal



Mexico, 1702, 8 escudos Royal

1.13 Some Observations on Collecting the Jeweled Cross Series

The rarity of this series was first noted in the pre-Fleet monographs of Lopez-Chavez Sanchez (1961-63). Since 1963 salvages of the 1715 Fleet have contributed new coins to the point where perhaps 80-90% of the Jeweled Cross coinage now comes from the Fleet. Unfortunately, that source now seems exhausted. Only a few Jeweled Cross escudos have come to Division in the last 30 years. We are left with a very small coinage to study and collect. Four dated Jeweled Cross onzas are known to our census, eight media onzas, and eight two escudos. In all, 27 dated Jeweled Cross escudos anchor the entire series spanning 21 years. (Six of these coins are impounded in state collections and permanently unavailable to collectors.)

A significant infusion of new Jeweled Cross coinage would be very welcome. Alas, nothing is on the horizon. A Mexican *aviso* lost while carrying payroll in the early 1690's is known but lies in a National Park. No commercial salvage of that vessel or a similar 1715 ship seems possible. The Vigo Bay wrecks of the 1702 Flota have been put off limits to salvage by the Spanish government. Several promising wrecks lie in the territorial waters of other governments that are now adamantly opposed to any commercial salvage of Spanish Colonial wrecks. There the matter rests for now.

Without the time capsules that shipwrecks provide, the survival of low mintage gold

issues becomes quite problematic. If Pradeau's numbers are correct, a typical 1680's gold mintage was 50,000 pesos. From the entire period of 1679-1690 it could be that just four dated Jeweled Cross escudos and 6-8 undated coins survive. Compute the survival rate if you like tiny fractions. Gold production at Mexico City spiked in 1694-1695. 299,200 pesos, four times that of the average 1680's mintage, were struck in 1695. Thanks to the Fleet, we now have a grand total of eight dated Jeweled Cross specimens from 1694-95 (and possibly a dozen more undated escudos). Not big populations!

From the perspective of having a decent supply for interested collectors, the surviving population of Jeweled Cross escudos remains disheartening small. As a comparison, consider the surviving population of 1714 Mexican two escudos. There are hundreds more 1714 two escudos than all the denominations of Jeweled Cross escudos combined. Likewise, there are more 1714 Mexican onzas than all Jeweled Cross denominations combined. The point is, unless we get lucky with an unexpected wreck or hoard, collectors and students of the first series of Mexican gold must be very patient people.

Appendix 1: Jeweled Cross Escudos in the Florida State Collection

The Florida State Collection, which contains 1168 Mexican gold cobs, has nine examples of the Mexican Jeweled Cross series. No two or four escudos are present. The collection has two undated 8 escudos and seven one escudos, two of which show a clear 1698 date. The column marked # gives the identification number assigned by the Florida State Collection (all such numbers begin with the prefix 11.0 which we have omitted).

#	denom	date	assayer	mint mark	type of crown	Other features
0230	8E	nd	L	MXo	5 crosses	same shield die as #1385 which shows a 1697/6 date
0073	8E	nd	L	MXo	5 crosses	same dies as Tauler 126a
1669	1E	1698	L			Photo in Craig. Different shield than Tauler 92
0222	1E	169X	L	MXo	nv	X is an 8 or 9. Not the same shield as 1367. well jeweled
0223	1E	nd	nv	MXo	Simple double loop	badly doubled
0225	1E	nd	nv	MXo	Simple double loop	
0226	1E	nd	L	MXo	Simple double loop	
0228	1E	nd	L	MXo	Simple double loop	
1367	1E	1698	L	MXo	Simple double loop	Die matches Tauler 92 "1679"

Appendix 2: Dated Jeweled Cross Escudos known to the Gold Cobs Census (Oct. 2012)

The Gold Cobs Census, now more than 20 years old and going strong, is an attempt to record the surviving Spanish Colonial escudos held privately and in public collections. For a rare series like the Jeweled Cross issues of 1679-1699, this is practical undertaking because the numbers are small. Our coverage of gold cobs at auction in the last 50 years is comprehensive. Division reports from the State of Florida record over 6500 gold cobs reported to the state by 1715 Fleet salvors since 1963. Private salvage reports from Real 8 and other groups supplement the state reports. The late Lou Ullian was of great assistance in refining and confirming Fleet coin populations. No doubt some important escudos remain uncounted, but the infrequency with which we now add new coins to the census suggests that our count is reasonably reliable.

date	8 escudos	4 escudos	2 escudos	1 escudo
1679				
1680		1	2	
1681			1	
1682				
1683				
1684				
1685				
1686				
1687				
1688				
1689				1
1690				
1691	2*		1	
1692			1*	
1693		1		
1694	1 (4/2 overdate)	2		1*
1695	1	2	1	
1696				
1697			1	1
1698		1	3	4
1699		1 (9/8/X overdate)		
1700				
<i>totals</i>	4	8	8	7

Issues marked * are unconfirmed. At least one 1691 onza seem likely to be correct

