

Finds of Swiss coins in Lithuania

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FINDS OF SWISS COINS IN LITHUANIA

Eugenijus Ivanauskas

There were no close cultural relations between Lithuania and Switzerland before the 16th century. With the Reformation, Lithuanians became influenced by John Calvin and came to Swiss universities for study¹. The Lithuanian chancellor Nicolaus Radvila «the Black», an ardent supporter of the reformation, corresponded with Calvin².

Economic ties between the two countries, however, were quite weak, owing to the trade restrictions in countries in Central Europe. Swiss coins had therefore only small chances of reaching Lithuania. The few specimens which were found in the country must have come with German, Dutch or Polish merchants who traded in coins. They only occur in hoards, not in single finds.

There was a first wave of speculation in foreign coins in Lithuania in the middle of the 16th century, when the country was flooded by German groats of lower value than the local groats. The 1641 memorandum on mintage and usage of coins of Johann Trilner, assayer of the Vilnius mint, reveals that two local reddish three-half-groats were the equivalent of one German groat³. The people apparently overrated these foreign, imported coins, and the assayer continues to explain the smaller value of the German coins. At the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century, there was a considerable import of German groats, 1/2 batzen, 3 kreuzers (Groschen) and körtlings, with a few Swiss coins of small denominations mixed in. The Ciudiskiai hoard contained 3 kreuzers (Groschen) of Zug of 1606 (*fig. 1*), the Suriskiai hoard 3 kreuzers (Groschen) of Zug of 1603 and 3 kreuzers (Groschen) of Schaffhausen of 1596 (*figs. 2 and 3*).

The number of Swiss coins found in Lithuania is very small compared with finds from Poland⁴; the Lithuanian finds are fewer and poorer in quality. The discrepancy may be due to the fact that the Lithuanian people were poorer and perhaps less educated than the Polish, so there was a larger part of the population which would shun unfamiliar coins.

However, we cannot rely solely on hoards to evaluate the circulation of these Swiss coins; they do not present a full picture. The coin evaluation tables which were compiled by the Polish assayer K. Rietker and which illustrated foreign coins circulating in Poland, and surely in Lithuania as well, list various Swiss coins which did not occur in hoards⁵, but must have been melted down at the local mints.

The German coins which were well known and appreciated in Lithuania came from the Central Western and Eastern part of Germany (Westphalia, Niederrhein, Kurrhein and Saxony) and probably reached the country by waterways. No coins from Southern Germany (Oberrhein, Schwaben) were found in Lithuania, so the few Swiss coins were strays. The question whether they were purchased in the country of origin cannot be answered.

¹ V. Biržiška, *Students from Lithuania in Foreign Universities during XIV–XVIII Centuries* (Chicago 1987), 167–169.

² P. Lukšaitė, *Radikalioji reform cijos kryptis Lietuvoje* (Vilnius 1980), 17. *Opera Calvini*, vol. 18 (1978).

³ Photocopy of a document from the library of S. Janušonis (Vilnius).

⁴ M. Męciewska, A. Mikołajczyk, *Skarby monet z lat 1500–1649 na obszarze. PLR Inwentarz* (Warszawa 1983).

⁵ K. Rytkier, *Wizerunek y szacunek mynic wszelakich cudzoziemskich, iakoktore w Koronie Polskiej y wydawyne bydź maia(...)* (Kraków 1600, Reprint Warszawa 1965).

With the Thirty Years War another wave of foreign coins flooded into Lithuania, among them Swiss talers and half talers. They occur in five hoards altogether, datable to 1643–1730: Salantai, Balninkai, Joneliai, Vilnius I and Vilnius II. They are mainly half talers from Zug (*fig. 4*) and talers from St. Gallen, Schaffhausen and Basel (*figs. 5 and 6*). As they were found together with Dutch talers and those of coastal states of Germany, we can assume that they reached Lithuania via Holland.

We have information on these foreign coins from the announcement of the Polish treasurer of 1650 which was made for Polish residents of Lithuania (*fig. 7*)⁶. Spanish kreuztalers (Albertus talers), the «bears», the «sheep», as well as similar types, were tariffed at 80 Polish groats. Imperial talers were assessed at 90 groats while the Dutch lion talers equated merely 66 groats. According to this announcement all the listed foreign coins could remain in circulation until St. Michael's Day 1650 only; afterwards, it said, the mint would purchase them. We can assume that only few people in Lithuania knew the real value of Swiss talers and half talers. Moreover, there was a shortage of talers in Lithuania, and every Swiss taler brought to the country generated a profit of approximative 10 groats. It was therefore not profitable to return them to the mint, and they continued to circulate as late as the 18th century.

Finds of Swiss Coins in Hoards of Lithuania

- 1 **Ciudiskiai**, Prienai district. Buried 1621/found 1941–43
Zug, 3 kreuzers (Groschen) 1606 (*fig. 1*, Wielandt 32b)
Ref.: War Museum of Vytaunas the Great.
- 2 **Surkiskiai**, Kėdainiai district. Buried 1624/found 1976
Zug, 3 kreuzers (Groschen) 1603 (*fig. 2*, Wielandt 28b)
Schaffhausen, 3 kreuzers (Groschen) 1596 (*fig. 3*, Wielandt 223a)
Ref.: Lithuanian National Museum.
- 3 **Salantai**, Kretinga district. Buried 1643/found 1903
Schaffhausen, taler 1620
St. Gallen, taler 1624
Ref.: Kretinga Museum.
- 4 **Balninkai**, Moletai district. Buried 1654/found 1989
Zug, half taler 1621
Ref.: M. K. Ciurlionis Art Museum.
- 5 **Joneliai**, Ukmerge district. Buried 1663/found 1988
St. Gallen, taler 162.. (*fig. 5*, DT 1400)
Ref.: Private collection.
- 6 **Vilnius I**. Buried 1705/found 1981
Basel, taler 1624 (*fig. 6*, DT 1336c)
St. Gallen, taler 1624
Zug, half taler 1620 (*fig. 4*, Wielandt 48a)
Ref.: Lithuanian National Museum.
- 7 **Vilnius II**. Buried 1730/found 1899
Schaffhausen and St. Gallen, talers 1621, 1624, 1632 (6 in all)
Ref.: The archive of the Institute of Archaeology of St. Petersburg. F. 1. 1895. D. 293.
LL. 160–161. 1899. D. 97. LL. 1–4, 8, 12, 20.

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⁶ Photo of the announcement from the library of S. Janušonis (Vilnius).



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



