

A Proposition: Minting and the Public Sphere in Preindustrial Italy

In his seminal book, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), Jürgen Habermas formulated the influential notion that social institutions which allow for open and rational debate between people generate public opinion, and, within that domain, the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*) is constituted by discourse that has political authority.¹ In considering the lineage of the public sphere, Habermas asserted a position about its emergence. Looking to the early mercantile capitalist system of thirteenth-century Italian city-states as genealogical forerunners to the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas focused on the structure of the late medieval Italian political economy.² The continued constraint that seemed endemic to feudalism, according to Habermas, precluded nascent Italian city-states from fully encouraging the development of the public sphere. During the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, feudalism began to dissolve. Though this development was revolutionary and progressive according to Habermas, in his eyes the mode of governance that replaced it still relied on old methods of labor production, arresting the birth of the public sphere, which would only come to fruition in the eighteenth century.

In recent years, a group of scholars have upheld Habermas's central assertions, but challenged his temporal schema, demonstrating that opinion mattered in early modern Europe.³ In this line of thought, the early modern public sphere was composed of new types of association that enabled people to relate by means of shared interests, commitments, and lines of desire instead of through blood ties, social position, or vocation.⁴ Likewise, other research has demonstrated that particular sites in the early modern city—street corners and piazzas, for example—were nodes where information was exchanged, mediating and encouraging a type of communication that expanded participation in the public discourse well before the coffee house culture that Habermas described took hold.⁵ Although the reevaluation of the burgeoning of the public sphere has been welcome, scholarship that considers modes in which it flowered has not, thus far, fully considered the way that secrecy

¹ I delivered a version of this essay at a conference session held during the Society of Architectural Historians annual meeting in 2014. I wish to thank Janna Israel for organizing that session and for discussing my paper with me, and Adam Foley for his illuminating comments on an earlier version of this text.

² Hohendahl and Russian 1974: 46-47; Habermas 1989: 14-16.

³ Wilson and Yachnin 2010.

⁴ Ibid.: 1.

⁵ Burke 2000: 389-419.

and the manipulation of information developed in conjunction with changes within late medieval and early modern European societies. In applying a new type of evidence to the question of the manner in which the public sphere developed, this essay draws on the premise that secrecy is a component of any open society, and maps the way that the manufacture and engineering of money, surprisingly, helped to promote elements of the public sphere during the preindustrial era.

Bronwen Wilson and Paul Yachnin are among those who have challenged the chronological progression assigned to the public sphere by Habermas. Among their many acute observations, Wilson and Yachnin make three points that are touchstones for this essay. First, they argue that in contrast to ancient societies where the public realm enabled the public, the early modern public could be subversive. Though it needed not resist the dominant political structure, they observe that it came into being “in the interstices of institutions that claimed to represent the commonweal.”⁶ Within the public sphere, citizens who were excluded from the administration of power found a shared place for critical reflection and action directed toward the commonweal.⁷ Second, they emphasize that conceiving of the public as a singular object misconstrues its complexity. There were, in reality, overlapping publics in early modernity.⁸ And finally, they stress that early modern publics were in part predicated on an intensified mobility of material objects and that they were constituted by the international traffic of cultural goods.⁹ One thing that made such increased traffic of goods possible was the making of money, a process that has received considerably less attention from scholars of the public sphere. This essay helps to remedy the imbalance by focusing on the ways in which money was actually made in buildings used as mints (*zecca* in the singular, *zecche* in the plural) for the manufacture of coins in late medieval and Renaissance Italy. Because money in the contemporary world is often thought of as a politically neutral instrument with merely functional value, this essay supports an unorthodox position. That position is the idea that during the preindustrial period, the process of making money and the mints that produced coins were integral parts of the public sphere.

Drawing on this journal’s provocation to engage Georg Simmel’s writing about secrets as articulated in *Sociological Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms* (1908), I also nurture the idea that secret practices, or in Simmel’s words, ones that involve the “hiding of realities by negative or positive means,” were evident in places where money physically was made.¹⁰ Simmel argues that secrecy and the manipulation of information function in tandem. Discussing secret societies, he notes that entities organized around a secret (or a number of them) can either be entirely invisible or open, as in the case when some elements of the society are known publicly.¹¹ In considering how this applies to the early modern period, it is productive to think about secrecy as defined by Pamela O. Long in her work on intangible property and inventiveness. Long emphasizes that the etymology of the word “secret” is rooted in the Latin *secernere*, “to sift apart, separate as with a sieve,”

6 Wilson and Yachnin 2010: 13.

7 Rospocher 2012: 11.

8 Wilson and Yachnin 2010: 4, 6, 14.

9 Ibid.: 2, 9.

10 Simmel 1950: 322-324.

11 Hazelrigg 1969: 324.

thus she notes that secrecy, as opposed to privacy, entails intentionally concealment.¹² As Long would have it, a desire to counter secrecy and to maintain openness during the late medieval and Renaissance eras is witnessed in the way techniques used to manufacture mechanical arts were openly recorded and purveyed. In this way, making things and political praxis gradually came to reinforce one another.¹³ A tight relationship was formed during the early fifteenth century in a matrix that brought together technical arts, political power, and knowledge.¹⁴ As Long observes, for the historian, tracing secrecy raises basic issues of assessing the meaning and cause for concealment or revelation; moreover, if secrecy is evinced—or not, one should question what is being protected and why is it being sequestered or made explicit.¹⁵ Such things should be asked of buildings like Rome’s early sixteenth century mint, and other edifices built in the same mode for similar purposes, which cloaked the process of making money with architectural monumentality, thereby asserting the bureaucratic aspect of making money while hiding its material process (fig. 1). More specifically, this essay suggests that a mode of monumental architecture emerged to designate places where money was produced in the early sixteenth century in particular areas in Italy. This occurred in parallel with a state-managed interest in staging money as a public project—one imbricated in the public sphere—while concealing certain elements of that production. In order to understand how the public sphere and the production of money might be thought of as being intertwined in the pre-industrial European world, it is necessary to grasp how money was manufactured in that orbit, an issue to which we now turn.

Money Making and the Public Sphere

In areas of Europe, late medieval money shifted from a single silver coinage that was both the unit of account and the medium of exchange to a bimetallic monetary system. The transition to bimetallism occurred when gold coinage was introduced in 1252, first in Genoa and then in Florence. These currencies delicately threaded together a complex relationship between government interests and private ones. In other words, bimetallic coins as objects enabled a specific set of economic and social communal relationships, arguably enabling and compelling an incredible range of contact and deliberations between different people—or an array of publics.

Making coins in Medieval Italy—and Europe more broadly—was bound to issues concerning the supply of and demand for bullion, which was purchased at competitive rates by minters from individuals (or sometimes “corporations” of bankers).¹⁶ At times the state would decide the price point for metal; for example, in the case of Venice, the state occasionally set the amount that would be paid for bullion.¹⁷ In other instances and places the state did not intervene. The mutation of metal to coin involved a fee, called seigniorage, that profited minter and government alike. To enhance trade, a government could set a mercantilist policy that favored narrowing the minter’s profit, as well as making coins as fine and heavy as possible.¹⁸ Or, it could decide to de-

12 Long 2001: 7.

13 Ibid.: 14.

14 Ibid.: 2.

15 Ibid.: 7.



Fig. 1 Antonio da Sangallo the Younger, papal mint, Rome, ca. 1525, source: author.

16 Stahl 2000: 99.

17 Stahl 2000: 101.

18 Ibid.: 100.

base coinages for a profit, an activity that occurred routinely; during the years 1298-1299, the French monarch Philip IV, known as the Fair, received roughly half of his total income from this practice, and in 1349 Philip VI Valois generated around 70 percent of his revenue from it.¹⁹ His successor also enjoyed a similar level of revenue from debasement. Resisting debasement meant that other revenue streams, including taxation, would be needed to fund the state and its policies. Least favorable for the state was carrying the costs of minting undervalued coins, even less so was issuing coins that did not rake in profit. Free minting, as it is called, was not literally free of charge, but freely available to anyone who wanted metal they possessed turned into coinage. Hauling old coins, raw material, or metallic objects to the mint, various individuals and consortiums would have those objects melted down and coined.²⁰ It was the resource of liquidity—the variability of metallic content in coins—that brought metal to the mint so that it could be coined. Free minting depended on individuals to determine when to melt or hoard coins to make use of the advantages of liquidity. Metal transformed into change, into money, was made through a political act, in which several operatives were involved, including the person bringing money to the mint and the mint officials. When coins were manufactured, it was people who anointed metal as the common medium of their community, as Christine Desan has observed.²¹

There are then two related points to be made about the process of free minting and the public sphere. First, if one aspect of the public sphere is that it is an intermediary between the realm of the state and private interests of individuals, the mint might be thought of as an early locus of its production. The manufacture of coins, their worth, and their use value as objects depended on convertibility.²² Within this system, governments were a coordinating instrument, providing the conduit for individuated actions performed at the *zecca* and in other places where metal meant for coining was collected.²³ Second, free minting turned on a discourse in which a variety of figures engaged in discussion about issues, like debasement, that impacted it. Competing for the supply of a commodity material, structuring relationships between denominations, figuring out how to maintain enough small coinage for everyday use, producing coins themselves, and abetting fraud, were enormous, debated challenges.²⁴

This type of public sphere is evident in *De Moneta* (On the Coinage), a tract by Nicholas Oresme (ca. 1320-1382) written in the mid-fourteenth century. Oresme, who eventually became the Bishop of Lisieux in 1377, was attached to both the University of Paris and the French court of Charles V, to whom he dedicated the text, which discussed the manipulation of currency. *De Moneta* was meant both to proffer advice, and to serve as a warning about the ways power could be abused in the production of money. Oresme composed it to try to abet the nearly continual debasement that occurred in France during his lifetime. He outlined how monarchs or other forms of government might profit from seignorage: “I am of the opinion that the main and final cause why the prince pretends to the power of altering the coinage is the profit or gain

19 Wood 2002: 102.

20 Cipolla 1983: 42-43, 63-64, 88.

21 Desan 2010, particularly 398.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.: 367-68

24 Ibid.: 368, 370.

he can get from it.”²⁵ Moreover, Oresme articulated the position that currency belonged to the public for the purpose of goods exchange. Departing deliberately from the view of coinage as a feudalistic instrument of authoritarianism, Oresme wrote that money is a common instrument of exchange that brings collective benefits. In response to the self-imposed question, “Who owns the Money?,” Oresme stressed that it is the community: “Although it is the duty of the prince to put his stamp on the money for the common good, he is not the lord or owner of the money current in his principality. For money is a balancing instrument for the exchange of natural wealth.”²⁶ Oresme’s theory had tangible parallels. Considering a monetary reform that would involve debasement, in 1368 the Florentines recognized the importance of coinage for perpetuating the reputation of the communal body or *buon governo*.²⁷ Since preindustrial money itself was not possessed or made exclusively by the city-state or the sovereign, and because money was not a neutral field, but in fact was constituted by diverse actors who utilized information exchange to coordinate its making, its production became a mechanism that mandated various kinds of open negotiation. In this sense, the process of minting fostered elements of the public sphere.

25 Oresme 1956: 24.

26 Ibid.: 10.

27 Bernocchi 1974: 156; Cipolla 1983: 90.

Mint Architecture and Secrets: Concealing Making

If making money and discourse surrounding that process fostered a type of public sphere, the buildings used to house minting activities symbolically embodied those qualities. This representational register is seen in the urban positioning—in other words, the location—of *zecche* within many Italian city-states, which emphasized the project of money making as one that was essential to the very being of the public. Late medieval mints established in the age of the Italian communal governments commonly were situated near the real and representational seat of government or in a main square (although that was not exclusively the case).²⁸ Whereas, in the early Middle Ages, the mints at Pavia, Milan, and Verona operated near the historical forum, which, in each city, had become one of the city’s chief places for marketing.²⁹ The late medieval *zecca* in Siena was situated near the communal palace, beside the custom’s house. Although scores of other examples could be detailed, it will suffice to mention only a few of them. Venice’s *zecca* for coining gold and silver was located opposite Palazzo Ducale in Piazza San Marco by the early fourteenth century.³⁰ Documents indicate the ground floor of Prato’s Palazzo del Popolo was used for minting as early as 1336.³¹ Florence’s mint was moved to a site adjacent to what is now the Loggia dei Lanzi, a stone’s throw from the communal palace, in the 1370s.

28 Travaini 2001: 72.

29 Ibid.: 70-72.

30 Howard 1975: 38; Travaini 2001: 72.

31 Bernocchi 1974: 153.

In their location and in their function, these mints physically engendered the complex balance between interests of the state and individuated actors, as well as corporate bodies, therein instantiating a type of public sphere. Yet, while the mechanism of coining produced discourse that fostered facets of the public sphere, over the course of the sixteenth century a set of new mint buildings were erected that might be said both to embolden the public sphere,

but also to undermine it in that the monumentality of the buildings bolstered the real and perceived ability of government to dictate money making. Examining the historical development of the sites where minting took place in Rome, Castro (a papal province), and Venice allows us to study extreme instances of this process.

Like mints in many other cities, the physical location of the medieval Roman mint peripatetically hop-scotched around the city's boundaries until the early sixteenth century.³² Textual evidence indicates it was situated near the arch of Septimius Severus, close to the Capitoline Hill, the seat of Rome's secular government, during the late medieval period.³³ With the post-Schism restoration of the papacy to Rome, Eugenius IV (1431-1447) moved the *zecca* in 1431 to a site near the Vatican's *campanaria turris*, a locale also described as "next to the entry to the [Vatican] palazzo" by Flavio Biondo.³⁴ A few months later, the old *zecca* near the Campidoglio was destroyed, probably for symbolic as well as practical reasons. The communal government officially released control of minting to the papacy in 1188, but it continued to mint sporadically through the first half of the fifteenth century.³⁵ The destruction of the mint near the city's secular seat coincides with the end of civic coinage issues in Rome, which was indicative of a broader tightening of papal control over secular Roman politics.

Eugenius's successor, Nicholas V (1447-1455), enlarged the papal *zecca* before 1453, perhaps as part of his largely unrealized plans for Rome's urban renovation as recorded by his biographer Gianozzi Manetti.³⁶ But despite an increasing awareness of the propagandistic potential of situating buildings with important crossovers between civic and ecclesiastical functions (such as hospitals and orphanages, like the multipurpose Ospedale di Santo Spirito in the Borgo) at prominent topographic sites, it did not remain there for long. During the second half of the fifteenth century, the mint was moved around and housed in various nondescript locales.³⁷

Following a papal coinage reform that standardized Roman coins, the newly elected della Rovere pope, Julius II (1503-1513), moved the papal mint in Rome as early as 1504 from a rented house in the Ponte neighborhood to a pronounced intersection in the city's Rione di Ponte district (fig. 2).³⁸ Situated at the crossroads of the via Papale and via del Pellegrino, the site selected by the papacy marks a notable change in the tradition of situating the mint in Rome. Whereas the mint previously was nestled close to the Vatican, or housed in relatively humble rented spaces, the site in the Rione di Ponte was at an important intersection in the heart of what was then the Florentine banking community in Rome. The minting facility, often attributed to Donato Bramante, was ready for production (on some level) at the time of its claimed first minting in 1508, probably with a coin (the *giulio*) named in honor of the pope (fig. 3, 4).³⁹

The papacy's capacity to mint clearly was something Julius II wanted to display. The feast of the Annunciation, which celebrated the Immaculate Conception annually on the 25th of March, involved a procession inaugurated

32 Stahl 2000: 33.

33 Travaini 2001: 73.

34 "Alcune Notizie Storiche" 1912, 75-77; Romano 1939: 66; Coffin 1946: 46.

35 "Alcune Notizie Storiche" 1912, 75-76; Coffin 1946: 46.

36 Müntz 1884: 223; Romano 1939: 66.



Fig. 2 Aerial photograph with the site of the papal mint highlighted, map data: Google, Google Earth.

37 Romano 1939: 67.

38 Müntz 1884: 223-24; Travaini 2001: 73.

39 Müntz 1884: 223-24; Travaini 2001: 73. See Antonucci (2008b): 42 n. 7 for the relevant literature on the attribution.

at the end of the seventh century and held sporadically until its full revival in the fifteenth century.⁴⁰ The traditional route led supplicants along the via Recta to the Dominican church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva where the pope would donate dowries to young virgins. Julius II changed the processional route, however, to stress his new interventions in the city, including his inauguration of a new building for the papal mint.⁴¹ In 1507 and 1508 he ordered processors to go along via Papale and then cut back up via Recta in order to see the widening of the streets and construction of the new mint. In 1509 Julius again used via Papale, but then instructed people to walk along the new, straight via Giulia, which would have enabled them to marvel at the *zecca*.

Pope Clement VII (1523-34) commissioned Antonio da Sangallo the Younger to complete the building several years later in time for the Jubilee of 1525 when throngs of pilgrims flocked to the *caput mundi* to express piety and receive indulgences.⁴² Sangallo designed a monumental façade for the building (fig. 1). The lower part of the building is comprised of alternating courses of semi-dressed stone. Massive pilasters resting on a podium subdivide the upper zone of the building, where a central arch is made all the more apparent by the void of the aperture below. As Michela Antonucci noted, the arch can be read as a barometer of the “triumph of money.”⁴³ Sangallo’s reference to a triumphal arch stressed that the building was a secure repository for precious metal and celebrated its status as a place where money was produced. Slightly over a decade after Sangallo crafted the façade of the Roman *zecca*, the theorist and architect Sebastiano Serlio recommended juxtaposing rusticated and smooth treatments on fortresses and military buildings, raising the possibility that Sangallo intended the composition of the mint’s façade to be likened to such edifices.⁴⁴ Serlio also, in a text concerning Roman casamata, advised that rustication ought to be used for the areas surrounding doors that lead to secure places where precious metal was to be stored.⁴⁵ Even though free minting still provided the mint with raw material for the production of coins—an open process that deeply involved the public—in its architectural articulation, Rome’s mint symbolically asserted a different message. The building signaled that the creation of coinage transpired in a deliberately fortified space, and one that was explicitly controlled by the papacy.

Concurrent to the placement of the *zecca* in a densely populated area central to the public life of Rome, other Italic cities decided to establish, relocate, or embellish their mint so as to make it a noteworthy landmark. In the third year of his pontificate, Paul III Farnese (1534-1549) commissioned Antonio da Sangallo the Younger to renovate the now destroyed city of Castro, located to the west of Lake Bolsena, and which was part of the Farnese territorial stronghold outside of Rome. Sangallo erected fortifications there and designed other buildings in the town for Farnese’s son, Pierluigi.⁴⁶ As part of that endeavor, Sangallo created a mint (fig. 5). Like the *zecca* in Rome, Castro’s mint was given a significant position topographically: Sangallo located the *zecca* on the border of the town’s main square, Piazza Maggiore. It was placed opposite the Palazzo del Podestà, the site of local, secular power.



Fig. 3 Obverse of a silver coin minted in Rome under Pope Julius II (1503-1513), ©Trustees of the British Museum, 1854,0721.5.



Fig. 4 Reverse of a silver coin minted in Rome under Pope Julius II (1503-1513), ©Trustees of the British Museum, 1854,0721.5.

40 Ingersoll 1985: 122-128.

41 Ibid.: 125-126.

42 Frommel 1988: 60; Partridge 1996: 25.

43 Antonucci 2008a: 236.

44 Ibid.

45 Hart and Hicks 2001: 452-453.

46 Solari 1968: 38.

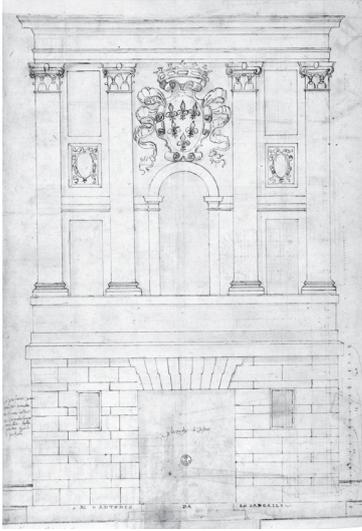


Fig. 5 Antonio da Sangallo the Younger, design for the facade of the mint in Castro, source: Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, dis. U 189 Ar.

47 Howard 1975: 38.

48 Ibid.: 39.

49 Ibid.: 40. The building was initially only two floors in height. The third story was added between 1558 and, at the latest, 1566.

Fig. 6 Jacopo Sansovino, the mint with his Marciana Library pictured to the right, Venice, 1537, ©Vanni Archive/ Art Resource, New York.

A drawing by Sangallo for the façade of Castro’s *zecca* reveals that the mint shared many features with Rome’s one. The massing of the building, its fenestration, the rustication at ground level, the arrangement of the pilasters and the central arch on the *piano nobile*, and the thick cornice used as a horizontal organizing element between the upper and lower stories all echo Sangallo’s work in the eternal city. At Castro, Farnese domination was iterated by their large coat-of-arms (*stemma*), which adorned the *zecca*’s façade. In Rome, as the building was completed under a Medician pope, the Medici’s *stemma* bedecked the building before the coat-of-arms was removed in the early seventeenth century. In doubling the formal composition of the mint in Rome, the papacy insisted on its power to control minting in Castro, which was a right in Rome, but a privilege in the subject town.

While on the one hand, the prominent, monumental façades of the mints in Rome and Castro asserted and defined a space where free minting occurred, they also glossed the practice of coining as one that was specifically papal. Similarly, Jacopo Sansovino’s building for the mint in Venice emphasized the power of the Venetian state to manufacture money (fig. 6). As Deborah Howard has observed, the mint, built between 1537 and 1547, was a state commission overseen by the *Proveditori di Zecca*, who were authorized by a council charged with guiding matters related to security and finance.⁴⁷ Funding for it came from state controlled human trafficking. To raise the 21,000 ducats needed to finance the new mint, Venice’s Council of Ten hatched a plan to sell freedom to an estimated 23,000-24,000 slaves, descendants of Barbarian invaders conquered by the Byzantine Empire, who were then living on Venetian-controlled Cyprus.⁴⁸ In the creation of the new mint, the former *zecca*, a ramshackle, fire prone building was demolished, giving way to a brick building faced with Istrian stone that had ground floor shops.⁴⁹ Silver and gold were refined in rooms on the upper floor. While the mints in Rome



and Castro shared a formal vocabulary with fortified buildings, the connection took a more concrete tenor in Venice. In 1561, Francesco Sansovino published a guide to the city in which a fictive Venetian shows a foreigner around the city. Discussing the mint, the visitor remarks that the mint seems to be a fortress, “a worthy prison for the most precious gold” (*degnà prigione del prestiossimo oro*).⁵⁰

50 Sansovino 1561: 24.

To sum up, for Habermas, the public sphere is constituted when people rationally discuss issues concerning the common good, in a mode that resists the state and the market. Following this line of argumentation, it would seem that late medieval and Renaissance mints would be antithetical to the public sphere as the very objects they produced instrumentalized and reified both market and state. Yet, this essay has underscored that the process of coining itself and therein the market was *not* already constructed, as some kinds of materialist and Marxist criticism might insist. Instead the production of money constituted a realm where the monetary system itself enabled shifting chains of social association and fostered spaces that in some senses helped to generate the public sphere. However, the architectural monuments built to house the process of minting at points complicated the openness of such procedures. With Sansovino’s monumental mint, as with such facilities in Rome and Castro, the production of money was sequestered, buried behind a monumental façade, and thereby coded as secret. The processes of refining metal and stamping flans with punches to turn slugs of metal into money were nestled inside of architectural forms explicitly related to governing bodies, thus placing the public sphere in a delicate balance, at least in terms of architectural representation. Such structures obfuscated the process of moneymaking, foreshadowing a type of architectural expressionism that would eventually become synonymous with the bureaucratic state.

Author

Lauren Jacobi is on the HTC faculty at MIT (Cambridge, MA). In 2015-16 she held a Rome Prize at the American Academy. The Kress Foundation, the ACLS, and other institutions have supported her research. Her publications include work on the conceptualization of money and labor in medieval Europe to the spatial organization of banking in Renaissance Rome.

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