

Money, Senses, and Temporality in Renaissance Italy

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The definition, function and purposes of money seem clear today: according to mainstream economic theory, money is a means of exchange, store of value and unit of account to facilitate financial transactions. While convincing, this description provides only a partial explanation of the social, political and cultural lives of coins beyond the realm of economic transactions. As well as being artefacts of monetary production and circulation, coins are primarily material objects, items which are handled every day by common people, who imbue them with additional values, thus transforming them into amuletic, symbolic and ritual objects. The common practice of throwing coins into fountains for the fulfilment of a wish is just one example of their non-monetary life. The transactional value of money is therefore subjective and multifaceted: economics is but one element, political propaganda and symbolism another, and rituals connected with religious beliefs yet another.

Ambivalent attitudes towards coins existed in the past as much as they do in contemporary society. Between the medieval and renaissance periods, coins were often placed in graves or in the foundations of new buildings, worn as amulets or bent and offered to holy shrines: the coins adorning the bell under consideration here are part of these planned rituals. This artefact was created in 1423 in a little village in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region to announce the death of fellow citizens to the community. It is known today as the bell of Dante since it carries the first triplet of the Canto XXXIII of Dante Alighieri's *Paradiso*, namely an invocation to the Virgin Mary, all around its neck. At the bottom, it shows the symbols of the Four Evangelists, which alternate with the emblem of Christ on the cross. Around them, and in the spaces between Dante's lines, there are a total of fourteen impressions of gold and silver coins from different cities, including Venice, Genoa, Florence, and Aquileia.

Both the nature of this object and the combination of these elements hint at a hitherto uncharted use of coins in rituals and a new role of money in Renaissance culture. Why did people place coins on a bell? What cultural practice did this imply? Indeed, the physical material of coins and their iconography – usually bearing Christian symbols such as crosses or holy figures – may explain the 'sacred' value of money in this case too. Yet, why were the majority of bells not decorated with coins? In other words, how might their presence have represented an added value? And who benefitted from it? One should also consider that those coins could not be touched or exchanged, but seen and heard only: they became accessible through a new sensory experience, sound, thus turning into *moneta sonante*, that is, coins animated by the chiming of the bell. Thus, what kind of impact on/interaction with the community around them did those coins and the bell have?

Through the analysis of the bell of Dante and the comparison with other contemporary customs involving coins, this paper aims to offer the first known academic attempt to explain and contextualise the habit of reproducing coins on Christian bells. The results will provide a broader understanding of money, its role and value as a material object in Renaissance culture, will enhance our understanding of people's behaviour, religious beliefs and *mentalités* towards money, and crucially, will shed light on a hitherto rather neglected aspect of money: its sensorial dimension.

Finally, since bells were, of course, deeply linked to temporalities in late medieval communities – and money had its own time –, this paper will also historicise (and diversify) our understanding of the relationship between money and temporality more broadly.