

Special exhibit

Albrecht von Wallenstein – In spite of envy



Invita invidia (“In spite of envy” or, literally, “envy invited”) – Albrecht Wenzel Eusebius von Wallenstein, nobleman, soldier and statesman, (born 24 September 1583 in Heřmanice, Bohemia) lived by this motto all his days, experiencing much envy and hostility on account of his enormous military and political power, his rise through the ranks of the nobility and, not least, his accumulation of wealth – altogether “a lone wolf” (G Mann 493) and, therefore, ultimately without effective protection against his enemies.

He acquired his estates on favourable terms and then managed them skilfully and extremely profitably, drawing from them an annual income of some 700,000 gulden, tolerating no slackness when it came to maximising profit. He gained further significant income from the production of war materials and goods in his estates and from being a partner of a syndicate that had the sole right to issue coins. These pieces were issued at less than their previous par value, which yielded vast sums from the progressive debasement of the coinage. Wallenstein’s invariably well-stocked coffers allowed him to lend money to the Habsburg emperor and to raise his own troops, which he repeatedly placed at the disposal of His Imperial Majesty. In return, Wallenstein was given the right to levy contributions and requisition crops, livestock and fuel in enemy territory.

He rose to the position of commanding general of the armies of the Holy Roman Emperor, Ferdinand II, during the Thirty Years’ War, ultimately holding the powers of a sort of vice-emperor. It was at this point that Wallenstein’s ambition got the better of him when he treasonably convoked the army commanders to swear allegiance solely to him and not to the Emperor – his host of enemies now saw their chance. His meteoric rise was followed by a decline into the abyss

due to his own arrogance, vengefulness and lack of political foresight. Ferdinand II signed a letter patent that secretly deposed the generalissimo and ordered his capture "alive or dead". "Alive" was, to all intents and purposes, never a practical consideration. So it came that, in Eger on 25 February 1634, men loyal to the Emperor followed the order "to eliminate" Wallenstein "from the number of mortals" (G Mann 797). For a time, he had been the second-most powerful man in the empire; the confiscation of his and his allies' wealth and estates brought a total sum of between 10 and 20 million gulden into the imperial treasury; Wallenstein's share of this alone amounted to more than 8.5 million.

Despite Wallenstein's eventful and turbulent life, he left no remarkable traces in numismatic terms. Across all the denominations we know only this single basic type.



1.5 : 1

To the vexation of others, Wallenstein had his own money minted in good quality – in fact, he paid more than usual for the silver needed for minting coins. In exercising his right to mint and issue coins he was impatient: "See that the minting proceeds and that I have no reason for reproof. It stinks in my nostrils to hear how what I have commanded is not complied with. I am not accustomed to uttering orders more than once." (G Mann 235-236); the master of the mint was to supply 1,000 ducats every month. Nevertheless, this accelerated production of coins – 682,000 groschen were struck in one year alone – was not designed to yield a profit but solely to enhance the "image" of issuer. The coins served as mass medium depicting the ruler on one side in a form that flattered him. On the other side, below the princely hat as the insignia of power, the coat of arms lists Wallenstein's possessions; the lion stands for Waldstein, the eagle for Friedland, followed by the bull's head for Mecklenburg, and the angel for Sagan. The inscriptions complete the presentation. After Wallenstein's death and the extinction of the dukedom of Friedland, many of his gold and silver coins were melted down either because of their high quality or to remove evidence of the duke's existence.

Further reading

Wallenstein, his life narrated by Golo Mann, Frankfurt 1971 (English translation 1976, André Deutsch Limited, London).
Biographisches Wörterbuch zur deutschen Geschichte, second edition (1975), volume 3, 3025-3031 (in German only).