For a man who cast a sometimes bemused, sometimes caustic, eye on literally all the activities of his fellow mortals, both living and dead, it is not surprising to discover that Rabelais interspersed his writings, from time to time, with references to mankind’s most common means of conducting commerce, to wit, his coins. Following the pattern of his passion for learning in general, he allowed his monetary interests to range exuberantly through many epochs and many lands. In order to examine his references chronologically, we begin with currency associated with the classical world.

The first and perhaps the most exotic of these coins is the besant. This gold piece, originally called a solidus, was first minted for Constantine the Great. It endured as an important element in the currency of the eastern Roman empire until its collapse. However, the coin persisted much longer in western Europe where, because of its association with the Byzantine civilization, it became known as the bezant or byzant. Rabelais writes of it in Book I during the scene of the banquet offered by Grandgousier to the victorious Gargantuans after the Pichrocolian war. The elated host, in an excess of joy, gives
his guest the very ornaments of his sideboard which weighed "dis huyt cent mille quatorze bezans d'or."

An original Roman coin which is associated with a celebrated classical anecdote is the sesterce. During the description of the temple of the priestess Bacbuc, Rabelais has occasion to mention the famous repast given by Cleopatra for Anthony when she dissolved one of her priceless pearl earrings in vinegar and water and then swallowed the concoction. Rabelais estimated that the pair of pearls was valued at many sesterces. This coin was first minted as a small Roman silver piece which bore on its obverse side the head of Minerva. Under the Empire, it was struck in bronze and it is no doubt this coin to which reference is made here.

The talent d'or which is often treated as a coin was never really a minted piece at all but rather a measure of weight used in metrology. The Roman talent was a money of account. However, the name was frequently applied to coins. Rabelais puts the word into the mouth of Dindenault during his hearty verbal exchange with Panurge over the suitable price for a sheep. He claims, with considerable exasperation, that the finest of these animals would have commanded a talent d'or in the old days.

The final piece of currency affiliated with the ancient world that is mentioned by Rabelais is the shekel or sicle. In the prologue to Book V, as he mocks himself and his art, the author observes that "a l'édification du temple de Salomon chacun un sicle d'or offrir, a plaines poignées, ne pouvoit." The sicle is the term utilized by the French for the siglos. Originally this was the name for the early Persian skekel which was of gold and was known popularly as the "archer" because of the representation of a Bowman on the obverse side.
Jewish shekel to which Rabelais makes allusion in the above passage was similar to the Persian coin in name only. Since, in Biblical times, the shekel was, in all probability, a unit of weight before it became an actual coin, the reference to it made by the author would likely mean a certain weight of precious metal rather than a minted piece.

Moving from the currency of classical times to that of an epoch nearer to Rabelais' own, we discover types of coins which reflect, in part, an unhappy segment of French history: the English occupation which terminated with the appearance of Jeanne d'Arc. Very shortly after her victories and the departure of the enemy from the greater part of French soil, the money which had been issued in France under English sponsorship was décrié. Curiously enough, however, it gained a new lease on life for literary purposes, as can be witnessed in the poetry of Villon, where this valueless money became a kind of satirical device for the representation of useless bequests bestowed on the poet's foes. It is to be suspected that Rabelais often had a similar purpose in mind when he utilized these Anglo-Gallic coins.

The first of these, the angelot, was a gold coin, having as ancestors the English angel, first struck in 1470 by Edward IV, and the angelet, a coin of half its value. The name was derived from the figure of the archangel St. Michael who was represented on it in the act of slaying a dragon. The first angelot was struck by Henry VI in 1427. In a decree on July 12, 1436, after Henry's departure from France, Charles VII, the new French king, withdrew these Anglo-Gallic coins from circulation. Under Louis XI (1461–1485), a new series of angelots appeared, issued to commemorate the foundation of the Order of St. Michael, but the most celebrated coins of that name
were those of the ousted monarch. This piece is found several times in Rabelais, notably during the confrontation of Panurge and Her Trippa. Among the gifts offered by Rabelais’ hero to this sage are “cinquante beaulx angelotz,” no doubt a quite valueless present.

The salut, a gold coin, was minted by Henry V of England in 1422 by virtue of his authority as Regent of France. The obverse side of the coin depicted the Annunciation and the shields of France and England. Between the shields was the word ave. This coin was also among those withdrawn from commerce by the order of July, 12, 1436. Rabelais mentions it frequently. One amusing occasion occurs after the banquet given by Homenaz for Pantagruel and his friends. The principal guest generously offers, in response to the hospitality, “neuf cent quatorze salutz d’or” to each of the serving girls as a dowry. Quite naturally a coin bearing such a design would augur well for the maternal prospects of these maidens. However, since the money was long since décrié the good wishes rang somewhat ironically.

The noble à la rose, also a gold coin, is identified by some critics as being Anglo-Gallic. It first appeared in 1344 during the reign of Edward III of England. Its name was said to come from the noble quality of the metal used in its minting, possessing as it did only one-half of a grain of alloy. Henry IV in 1412 reduced the quality of the coin, but Edward IV in 1465 restored it to its former weight. He also caused a rose to be stamped on each side of the piece to distinguish it from its predecessors. He himself was of the house of York; but having placed a rose on both sides of the coin, he removed any stigma of discrimination against the house of Lancaster. The nobles
that were décriés in 1436 were not noble à la rose, which were not struck, as we have seen, until 1465. The noble à la rose was a much imitated coin, variations of it being found in Burgundy, Austria, and the Low Countries. Rabelais makes mention of it during the discussion of the money to be paid for the construction of the Abbaye de Thélème. He writes: "... Pour la fondation et entretenement d'icelle donna à perpétuité vingt Troyes cent soixante neuf mille cinq cents quatorze nobles à la rose. ..."

Leaving money which was partially foreign, we move to examine coins cited by Rabelais which were totally alien on French soil. The first of these is the ducat. Probably the most celebrated of gold coins, it is believed to have been first issued by Roger II of Sicily about 1150. Its name arose from the final word of its inscription "Sit tibi Christe datus, quem tu regis iste ducatus." Virtually every European country copied this coin. One of the occasions when it is mentioned by Rabelais occurs during Panurge's attempt to seduce the noble lady of Paris. He offers her, as a supreme inducement to yield to his wishes, cloth or ornaments up to the value of "cinquante mille ducatz." 

Another coin from the area of Italy mentioned by Rabelais is the florin. The first of these gold coins were said to have been made in the Republic of Florence in 1252. They bore the figure of St. John the Baptist on the obverse side and the lily and arms of the city on the other. The coin was much imitated abroad, and the Florentine lily which gave it its name was frequently replaced by armorial shields of the foreign country or the mintmaster. Panurge, in the long catalogue of his accomplishments before his meeting with Pantagruel, men-
tions the coin when he says that he was able to feather his nest by means of “plus de six mille fleurins” acquired during the Crusades.22

Another coin of Italian origin was the teston, the name deriving from the portrait or testa of the monarch represented on it. As with so many coins from affluent Italy, this one was copied by other countries, among them France. As a consequence, the version of it that was, in all probability, known to Rabelais was the silver piece called a teston first issued by Louis XII of France in 1514.23 One appearance of it in Rabelais occurs in the prologue to Book IV. Here the author has Couillatris exchange his silver hatchet for “beaux testons et aultre monnoye blanche.” 24

Of oriental origin is the seraph, a Turkish coin. Its name derives from the Arabic word sharif meaning “noble and glorious” that was given to the descendants of Mohammed through his daughter Fatima, and which also became the title of certain Arabic princes. In the countries where the Muslim faith was dominant, such as Turkey, Egypt, and the Barbary States, the coin was called the sequin, a word related to the Arabic sikka (“a coining die”).25 Rabelais referred to the coin several times, the most delightful occasion being during Panurge’s account of his escape from the Turks, during which his rescuer, in despair over the failure of his special devils to prevent the burning of the house, begs Panurge to kill him. To accomplish this task, he offers the former prisoner a purse containing “six cens seraphz.” 26

A gold coin that bore a Flemish (Dutch) name was the ridde or rider, so called because it bore the figure of a knight on the obverse side. It was first minted by Philip the Good of Burgundy in 1433,27 and was called a cavalier or philippus in
Burgundy proper. It was still allowed in legal commerce in France following the currency reforms of Charles VII. Like the teston, the ridde is mentioned by Rabelais in connection with the activities of Couillatris, who this time sells his golden hatchet for some "belles riddles" and other coins.  

The malvedi, as Rabelais describes it, was a Spanish coin of low value, the maravedi. Its origins were not so humble as its worth in his day would indicate, however. Its name is derived from the Almoravidian dinar, which was a gold piece introduced into Spain by the Moors. Sancho I of Portugal (1151–1211) was the first non-Arabic monarch to manufacture it as his own currency, in which issue he was represented on it in an equestrian pose. Alfonso VIII of Castile also minted a gold coin bearing the same name, on which the inscription was still in Arabic, though it was adapted to the title of that particular king. From the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, the metal used in its manufacture gradually declined in value until the time of Philip II, who had it minted in copper. Rabelais mentions it, in Book III, as the fantastic price, "600,000 malvedis," that was paid for a flea contained in the earring that Panurge had made for his newly pierced right ear. 

This brings us to coins of purely French origin. One of the most difficult of these to identify is the pinard. Sainéan claimed that it was a foreign piece originating in Italy. Ste.-Palaye believed it to be the same as the "denier de cuivre," which was called pinos by the mountain people of the Haut Dauphiné and which the Italians called pinatella. Frey speaks of a French coin called the pignatelle, a piece of base silver, which was originally struck in the sixteenth century.

Nor is the origin of the coin's name clear. Ste.-Palaye spoke of a coin called a pinatelle that was named after a mintmaster
who was later hanged for producing false currency, but it appeared too late in the sixteenth century (1572) for Rabelais to have known it. Cotgrave recorded both terms, describing the pinard as "an exceedingly small piece of money" and the pinatelle as "a copper coin having small quantities of silver in it, worth about 5 liards."  

Rabelais writes of the pinard in a famous scene in Book II in which he describes the unusual behavior of celebrated men of the past as they wait in Limbo. Villon, for example, is observed in testy disagreement with Xerxes concerning the price of a "denrée de moutarde," and when the latter claims that it is worth a denier, a basic type of currency in billon or silver which had been known in western Europe since the time of Pepin the Short (the eighth century), the furious poet cries that "La blanchee n'en vaule qu'un pinart!"  

The mention of blanchee, that is, "a blanc's worth," provides a convenient entry into a discussion of that form of tender. It gained its title, of course, from the color of its refined silver, for when it was first struck, as the blanc au K in 1365, it was of the finest quality. It was usually distinguished by a cross, the inscription "Benedictum sit nomen Domini," and such symbols as suns, stars, and lilies. These symbols were frequently used to characterize different issues, and as the number of emissions was increased, the quality of the blanc deteriorated. It is probably to the coins of Charles VIII and François I that Rabelais refers when he speaks, as he so often does, of blancs.  

Sometimes Rabelais mentions a blanc that was also known as a douzain. This was the grand blanc au soleil, first issued by Louis XI in 1475, which was stipulated precisely as equaling twelve deniers, hence its name. There is, moreover, another
special blanc, the *grand blanc à la couronne*, which also received a special name, the *onzain*, because it was worth eleven deniers. It came into existence by proclamation on January 4, 1474. It is mentioned only once by Rabelais, but this single instance occurs at a very crucial stage in Book I. It is the offer of this coin to one of the cake bakers of Lerne and his vigorous refusal of it that precipitates the Picrocholian Wars. 

The French coin designated as an *écu* dates from a gold piece of that name that was issued by Saint Louis in 1266. The coins that Rabelais had in mind when he mentioned the *écu*, however, were those modeled on the Italian *scudo*. Originally, it was a piece minted from the finest gold, but a silver *écu* appeared later on. Under Charles VII, a gold version of the coin known as the *écu à la couronne*, bearing a crowned shield, was issued in 1436; and in 1483, the *écu au soleil*, which had a sun impressed above the crowned shield, was manufactured. Both Louis XII and François I continued to mint this second type—indeed, it was the only gold currency authorized by the second of the two monarchs. 

In all likelihood, it was this type of coin that Rabelais had in mind when, for example, he enumerated the generous gifts bestowed by Grandgousier on his prisoner Toucquedillon. On another occasion, he mentions a specific issue of this coin, that produced in the Bordeaux mint, the *escuz bourdeloyes*, when he gives details on the price of an experiment conducted on roasted eggs. 

The *mouton* or *mouton à la laine*, a larger version of the coin known as the *agnel*, was issued by Philip IV in 1311. It was struck in France until the time of Charles VII, but was, no doubt, nonexistent by Rabelais’ day. One occasion when he
speaks of this coin involves the magnificent ring commissioned for the middle finger of Gargantua’s right hand. This ornament is said to have the value of “soixante-neuf millions huyt cens nonante et quatre mille dix et huyt moutons à la laine.” 42

The royal, also a gold coin, dates from the fourteenth century. Its name was derived from the picture that it bore of the king in royal robes, ensconced under a Gothic canopy or arch—a setting that resulted in the coin’s also being called a pavillon. 43 Philip VI of Valois (1328–1350) issued a gold coin under this name, as did the Black Prince in his Anglo-Gallic series.

A coin of this name appears in Rabelais in the scene in Book II in which Panurge is given the office of “chastellenie de Salmiguondin.” Among the supposed assets of this post is an annual income of “6,789,106,789 royaulx” 44—an absurdity that was doubtless reinforced by the unavailability of such currency.

A coin that was worth very little when Rabelais’ volumes began to appear was the carolus. It was struck by the Emperor Charles V (1519–55) and was of base silver or billon. It will be remembered that Charles succeeded to Burgundy, and that there, at Dôle, he struck money of very low value under his name. 45 Rabelais exploits this cheap money and the unpopularity of the Emperor to ironic purpose when he donates to the Sybille de Panzoust what he calls “carolus nouvellement forgéz.” 46

A genuinely valuable coin was the henricus or henri d’or, a handsome gold piece issued by Henry II in 1549. It occupies a very distinct place in French numismatics for it is the first French coin to bear a date. 47 Rabelais, doubtless as a gesture of
obeissance to his monarch, has Panurge display a purseful of the freshly minted coins when he begins his bargaining for sheep with Dindenault."

The *philippus* is a coin that has caused editors and critics to go rather far afield in their attempts to identify it. Contrary to expectation, the name of the coin refers neither to money issued by Philip of Macedon, nor is it a general sixteenth-century term for money minted in gold. The *philippus* is actually the same as the ridde issued by the Duke of Burgundy in 1433, whose coinage, as we have seen, was accepted tender in France even after the monetary reforms of 1436. One example of its use in Rabelais is found in the chapter dealing with Grandgousier’s attempt to buy peace during the Picrochelian Wars. In addition to returning many cakes to replace those taken forcibly by the enemy, he orders that Marquet is to receive “sept cens mille et troys philippus pour payer les barbiers qui l’auroient pensé.”

Coins that are essentially provincial are the *pite* and the *patac*. The former is usually identified with the district of Poitiers, its designation being derived from the Latin form of that name. Ste.-Palaye describes it as “petite monnaie de la valeur de la moitié d’une maille.” As a consequence of its infinitesimal value, Rabelais’ use of it to indicate the price of experimenting with roast eggs becomes particularly absurd when he stipulates that the cost of this culinary adventure would be “la douzaine partie d’une pithe.”

The problem of identifying the *patac* has caused some disagreement among critics. Sainéan claims that it is a Gascon version of the word *pithe*, but Jacques Boulenger suggests that it is the same as *patars*, “monnaie picarde valant 5
liard.” Ste.-Palaye calls it simply “petite monnaie provençale.” It is, beyond any doubt, the *patac* of Perpignan and Marseille. (The *patard* is really a Flemish sou.) The patac is mentioned by Friar John in his conversation with Panurge after his unsatisfactory interview with Her Trippa.

As might be expected from a man who enjoyed toying exuberantly with words, Rabelais was not content with confining his numismatics to coins that actually existed. On at least three occasions he created money of his own to serve a particular literary purpose. In speaking of the funds to be utilized in the construction of the Abbaye de Thélème, for example, he mentions, in addition to such usual currency as the *escuz au soleil*, a sum composed of *escus à l’estoille poussinière*. Poussinière, in the sixteenth century, referred, of course, to the constellation of the Pléiade whose seven stars resembled in outline a chicken. The creation of this fanciful money adds a charming levity to an otherwise solemn moment.

Another type of fantastic currency is found in Book IV. After a grand banquet given by Homenaz for Pantagrueel, the latter contributes a box of *doubles escuz au sabot* for the upkeep of the church. In creating his mock currency, Rabelais observes the popular practice of characterizing coins by means of the regal or reverent symbols appearing on their surfaces—“la couronne,” “la croisette,” “la salamandre”—but chooses a particularly lowly object as the symbol borne by the coins he donates to the holy building. A similar ironic creation is found in the scene in which Pantagrueel sends Gymnaste to the island of dogs with alms consisting of “dix-huict mille beaulx petiz demys escuz à la lanterne” for distribution among its hypocritical inhabitants. The coin is aptly named: the *lanterne*,
the sign of the spurious money, is, in its pretense of emulating the light the soleil, which is the sign of the genuine écu, as hypocritical as the citizens who receive it.

These, then, are the coins mentioned in Rabelais, and they are taken from ancient, medieval, and contemporary currencies; from royal tender and those of lowlier princes and the provinces; from among pieces that were décriés; and from among those that existed only in the imagination of the author. In their variety and the richness of their associations, they reflect the interests, and indicate the creative abilities, of Rabelais himself.

1. L. Sainéan, in his La Langue de Rabelais (Paris, 1922), I, 190, deals briefly with the coins. He did not have, however, the advantage of the considerable work which has been done in numismatics since his volumes appeared.


8. The editor of the Pléiade edition does not include the portion of the prologue which contains the mention of the sicle, contending that it is not the work of Rabelais and is to be found only in the edition of 1564. Sainéan places the citation, incorrectly, in Chapter XLII of Book V.


10. See the author's article, "François Villon and His Monetary Bequest," Speculum, XXXIII (1958), 345.


18. Rabelais, p. 171.
25. Frey, op. cit., p. 216. Frey also records the following citation from Tavernier’s Grand Seignior’s Seraglio: “The scherif otherwise called sequin or sultanin.”
31. Rabelais, p. 373.
32. Sainéan, op. cit., I, 194.
33. La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, Dictionnaire historique de l’ancien langage François (Paris, 1875), VIII, 310.
35. Rabelais, p. 323.
36. Frey, op. cit., p. 26; Lafaurie, op. cit., No. 373. The later name was guénar.
38. Frey, op. cit., p. 75; Lafaurie, op. cit., Nos. 524, 554.
40. Rabelais, p. 533; Lafaurie, op. cit., No. 592. The escu bordelais had a poorer alloy.
42. Rabelais, p. 52.

44. Rabelais, p. 356.

45. Frey contends, *op. cit.*, p. 40, that the coin was first struck by Charles VIII, but Jean Chartier in his *Chronique de Charles VII* (p. 219) mentions it as one of the coins whose value was adjusted “a six deniers, lesquils estoient a huit.” It was more likely the *carolus* of the Emperor Charles V, which circulated in France as very base money. See Dieudonné, *op. cit.*, pp. 50, 211–13, 268, 297.

46. Rabelais, p. 410.


50. Rabelais, p. 117, n. 3.


52. Rabelais, p. 533.


54. Rabelais, p. 447, n. 5.


56. Rabelais, p. 171.

57. Rabelais, p. 711.

58. Rabelais, p. 737.