The saluto d’oro (Figure 1) and the saluto d’argento (Figure 2) of Charles I, king of Naples and Sicily (1266 – 1285 AD) are considered to be among the most beautiful coins from the Middle Ages. On the reverse of these coins there is a wonderful Annunciation scene: the angel Gabriel stands with his wings spread out while he announces (annunciates) to the Virgin Mary that she has been blessed by God.

‘Saluto’ in Italian means ‘greeting’, and it refers to Gabriel’s first words to Mary, “AVE GRACIA PLENA DOMINUS TECUM”, which is the Latin legend on the reverse of the coin. The legend means, “Hail, (you who are) full of grace. The Lord (is) with you.” This is verse 28 in the first chapter in Luke’s Gospel. The types continued unchanged into the reign of Charles’ son, Charles II (1285 – 1309). His coins differ from those of his father by having SCD (secundus) in his title on the obverse, and on the reverse Gabriel seems to be hovering in the air and his clenched left hand, which holds a fleur-de-lis (lily flower), is not visible. Only the fleur-de-lis is shown (Figures 3, 4 and 5).

Charles I had previously issued a gold coin called a reale d’oro (Figure 6). On the obverse there was a crowned bust of Charles with a fleur-de-lis in the left field, and on the reverse his heraldic shield covered with fleurs-de-lis. Charles was the brother of Louis IX, king of France, and the fleur-de-lis was the emblem of the French royal family. It was believed that Clovis, the founder of the Frankish kingdom, took the lily as the symbol of his baptism in c. 493. Being a white flower it represented purity.

In 1277 Charles acquired the title of king of Jerusalem. He bought his claim to the kingdom from Maria, princess of Antioch. She was the daughter of the half-sister of Maria, the wife of John of Brienne, who had been king of Jerusalem. Although the claim was tenuous and doubtful, Charles took full advantage of it. New coinage was required to proclaim his new title and to display the coat of arms of Jerusalem. The reverse should be a new type indicating his Christian piety and his link, through two women called Mary, to the Holy Land. Also it needed to be something that
would please the pope, who was a major power in Italian politics. His choice of an Annunciation scene could not have been more appropriate for his purposes.

Who designed the new reverse? Concerning the saluto d’oro, G.W. de Wit, a specialist in medieval coinage, wrote in a catalogue of his coins (‘The De Wit Collection of Medieval Coins’, Fritz Rudolf Künker GmbH & Co. KG, 11th March 2008), "This is one of the most beautiful of all 13th century coins and its design was carried out under the personal supervision of Charles I himself. He established a new mint in the Castel dell’ovo in 1278, using craftsmen from the old mints of Brindisi and Messina, under the direction of a Florentine moneyer, Francesco Formica. The die engraver was Giovanni Fortino.” All the accounts mention Giovanni Fortino. None mentions Nicola Pisano who was the leading sculptor in Italy at the time. Nicola originally came from a region that was later part of Charles’ kingdom because in two documents of 1266 he is called ‘Master Nicola from Apulia’. He must have left the region before 1260 because his masterpiece, the pulpit in the Pisa Baptistry, is signed by him and dated 1260. Charles had allied himself with the papacy to conquer southern Italy and Sicily, defeating Manfred and Conradin, the last of the Hohenstaufen dynasty, at Benevento in 1266 and Tagliacozzo in 1268. It is therefore possible that Nicola had worked in southern Italy for the Hohenstaufen family, and Charles may not have wanted him involved in his new artistic venture. Nicola’s pulpit in the Pisa Baptistry is amazing (Figure 7). It is hexagonal with five marble panels, the sixth side being the entrance. The first panel has the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Bath of Jesus and the Annunciation to the shepherds. The second panel has the Epiphany. The third has the Presentation in the Temple. The fourth has the Crucifixion, and the fifth, the Last Judgment.

Like all the art of this period Nicola’s largely derived from earlier work, especially Classical Greco-Roman sculpture, and there was considerable influence from the art of the Orthodox Christians to the east, just across the strait of Otranto. In the first panel (Figure 8) the dominant figure is a woman reclining on a couch with three people in front of her: a bearded man and two women bathing a baby in a basin. This scene was copied from a common Orthodox icon called ‘The Birth of the Virgin’ (Figure 9). In the icon the reclining woman is Anna, the mother of Mary, and the man is Joachim, her husband. The two women are nurses bathing the baby Mary. In Nicola’s panel the baby has a penis, and the scene must therefore be re-interpreted as the bathing of the baby Jesus. In the upper left corner of the panel there is an Annunciation scene. The figures of Gabriel and Mary facing each other had previously appeared in Ortho-
The icons of the Annunciation (Figure 10). In the icon Gabriel’s right arm is stretched out, but his left hand is rather awkwardly placed in front of his abdomen. Even the pediment between the heads of Gabriel and Mary had previously appeared in Orthodox icons (Figure 11). It indicated that Mary was on the porch of a building when Gabriel flew down from heaven. On the panel the upper part of Gabriel’s left wing looks like a cabbage obscuring the left corner of the pediment. The Annunciation had previously appeared in Italian art: a mosaic in Sta

Figure 6 – Reale d’oro of Charles I of Anjou, king of Naples and Sicily. The obverse legend is + KAROL DEI GRA. The reverse legend is + REX SICILIE. (CNG Auction 85, Lot 1400)

Figure 7 – The Pulpit in the Pisa Baptistery. It was made by Nicola Pisano. (Wikimedia Commons)
Maria Maggiore in Rome shows Mary seated and spinning thread while Gabriel stands on her left. It dates from the 5th century.

When Nicola’s Annunciation is inspected more closely (Figure 12) it is obvious that the Annunciation on Charles’ coin has been derived from it. Firstly, Gabriel’s angular left wing fits the shape of the pediment nicely. Looking up at the pediment it is easy to imagine Gabriel’s outstretched wing in its place. His unusual hairstyle, with an upper level shaped like a dome, is exactly the same on Charles’ coin. It can be seen in a frontal view (Figure 13). In the two icons of the Annunciation (Figures 10 and 11) Gabriel’s hairstyle is different. Although Gabriel’s right hand has broken off in the panel it would have been similar to that on the coin. In the panel the fingers on Gabriel’s left hand suggest the shape of a fleur-de-lis, and the rest of the hand becomes the clenched hand that holds the fleur-de-lis on the coin. As previously mentioned, the clenched hand is not shown on the coins of Charles II, only the fleur-de-lis. On both the panel and the coin Mary’s head is tilted to her right; and on the panel, below her right wrist an almond-shaped object can be seen. This is a tool for spinning thread (There was a legend that Mary was one of the virgins weaving a veil for the Temple), but on the coin it becomes Mary’s raised left hand. In the panel the space between...
Gabriel and Mary is partly filled by one of the nurses, but on the coin there is a bunch of lilies. On the coin at the bottom of the composition there is a vase holding the lilies, and in the panel there is a vase-shaped bowl for washing Jesus. On the salut d’argento the vase has handles.

The lily had long been recognized as representing purity and as a symbol of the Virgin Mary. In fact it had been painted on the tombs of virgins in the catacombs in Rome. Also, a vase made of glass, being translucent, represented purity. On Charles’ coin the fleur-de-lis is next to the highest lily in the vase. This indicated Charles’ closeness to the Virgin Mary in his devotion and to the Holy Land in his sovereignty of Jerusalem.

The similarities between Nicola’s Annunciation and the Annunciation on Charles’ coin are striking. Someone involved in the design of the coin, probably Giovanni Fortino, must have gone to Pisa.
to see Nicola's famous pulpit. Using his imagination and aware of Charles' needs, he conceived the outline of the coin's Annunciation scene when he looked up at Nicola's panel.

Nicola died in 1284, but he had a son, Giovanni, who was also a sculptor. He was commissioned to make the pulpit in the Sant' Andrea Church in Pistoia near Florence (Figure 14). He worked on it from about 1293 to 1301. Although the Annunciation scene is like his father's, there are features which make it very different from that on Charles' coin. Gabriel's left wing clashes with the irregular architecture behind it. His arms are folded tightly across his chest. The space between him and Mary is partly filled by his knees, indicating that he is about to kneel before the Virgin who is already looking down. The nurse is bending forward putting her fingers in the bathwater making sure it is not too hot. The basin has been moved to the right and is quite separate from the Annunciation scene. It is not possible to see Charles' coin in Giovanni's sculpture.

Weighing up all the evidence it seems very likely that the Annunciations of Nicola and Charles are connected. Fortino must have been aware of Nicola's pulpit. The idea of changing the bathing basin into a vase of flowers might have come from the Roman coins of Hadrian that show a vase between a kneeling and a standing figure (Figure 15). Notice the wing (actually part of a cloak) and the outstretched right arm of the kneeling figure. A pious Italian of the 13th century would have interpreted this image as an Annunciation scene. In Giovanni Pisano's panel Gabriel is about to kneel and in later Italian paintings he is kneeling before the Virgin with a vase between them (Figure 16). The vase on Charles' coin could well have been derived from Hadrian's coin, but the design on Charles' coin fills the circular space and a kneeling figure would not have been suitable.

The mint for the coins of Charles I and his son was in the Castel dell'Ovo (Figure 17), which stood on a small island in the Bay of Naples. It was called Castel dell'Ovo (Castle of the Egg) because according to legend the Roman poet Virgil put a magic egg in its foundations. The egg certainly worked its magic in the castle in the 13th century because the beautiful coin that was made there has cast a spell on numismatists ever since.

Dr de Wit, previously mentioned for his large collection of medieval coins and his expertise in the subject, knew nothing of numismatics until he visited Italy, became fascinated with medieval art and bought a saluto d'oro. That coin was the beginning of his collection. Charles' Annunciation still touches us today, and it is good that Nicola's part in the design has been recognized.

Figure 15 – Sestertius of Hadrian showing Achaia kneeling before him. Sear 3627 (c. 136 AD). There is also an aureus and an as in the series. (Stack's Bowers and Ponterio Sale 173, 11th January 2013, lot 5277)

Figure 16 – 'The Annunciation' by Fra Carnevale (1425 – 1484). (Wikimedia Commons)