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FORTHCOMING EVENT

THE TONY ABRAMSON CABINET OF 'DARK AGE' COINS: PART IV, CONTINENTAL FINDS IN ENGLAND

London, 30th September 2021

(preceded by Part III on 28th September 2021 – please see issue 39 for details)

Parts I and II of Tony Abramson's ground-breaking collection were sold at Spink in March, and saw frenzied bidding with record prices achieved. We spoke to Tony about his reaction to the auctions, and what highlights we can expect in the fourth and last part of the collection following the sale of Part III two days earlier:

EH: What are your thoughts after the excitement of the marathon opening sessions?

TA: I'm reminded of the original Fry's *Five Boys* 1^d chocolate bar wrapper (though the price had increased to 3^d when I were a lad!) My emotions quickly escalated from desperation to pacification, expectation, acclamation and, ultimately, realisation.

EH: How so?

TA: Being an accountant keen on spreadsheets, I'd embedded an algorithm that computed the final outcome each time the hammer fell. The *Five Boys* slogan encapsulates the trajectory precisely. But that was only the first two dozen lots; it got even more exciting after that!

EH: What were the highlights?

TA: Apart from Greg's exuberance and endurance? There were so many highlights, especially in the English gold, but the most gratifying was to see the York shillings achieve due recognition – they had been denigrated for much of the twentieth century. Again, in the early pennies, some of the rarest Northumbrian sceats deservedly featured among the top performing silver.



Lot 336: York variety Cii, £25,000 hammer

I hope it's not too pretentious to suppose that sceats came of age and received full recognition for their rarity, historical, economic and iconographic significance.

EH: Were there any disappointments?

TA: I would rather think of the low performers as providing some astute collectors with a happy surprise. I did hope the rare and iconic 'Get thee behind me, Satan!' Series J, type 72 variant (lot 125, *Sceatta List* 19-20) would attract a lot more attention but at least I do know it found a good home.



Lot 125: Series J, type 72v, Get thee behind me, Satan! £380 hammer

EH: Tells us about the final selection in Part IV

TA: This final offering of the 'Dark Age' cabinet covers over 200 Continental coins - gold tremisses, silver deniers and sceats - found, with very few exceptions, in England. The selection includes Visigothic Spain, Merovingian Frankia, the Low Countries and Denmark. Some issues are emulated in England, such as the insular versions of Ribe's so-called 'Wodan and monster' coinage of Series X. The common factor is that all these specimens witness the extent of North Sea trade in the seventh and eighth centuries - prior to the Viking onslaught. Their enormous variations of design evince widespread confidence in the generic coinage – an economic sophistication well beyond what has been conventionally accepted as England's 'Dark Age'.

The first three lots are tremisses of exceptional quality, issued respectively by Sisebert, Elafius and Ebromarus.



Tremisses of Sisebert (Seville mint), Elafius (Bannassac, Aquitaine) and Ebromarus (Orléans)

Among the remaining gold are issues of Quentovic and the uniface 'Nietap type' usually mistaken for an early English shilling.



A fine example of the 'Nietap' tremissis

The cross-section of deniers on offer includes a number of designs familiar from English sceats of Series G and O, though the direction of borrowing is difficult to discern – the presumption is of origination in the south. Many of these deniers of the ‘National Series’ are attributable to named mints and/or moneyers – Aribaldo of Poitiers, Ermoberto of Rouen (familiar from the cover of the reprint of Prou’s catalogue), and an *Ecclesia racio* type of Theodoal of Limoges.



Deniers of Aribaldo of Poitiers, Ermoberto of Rouen, and Theodoal of Limoges

We now return to territory more familiar to collectors of sceats - the prolific issues of the Low Countries, notably Domburg, Dorestad and Ribe. For Series D, type 2c alone, Wybrand Op den Velde and Michael Metcalf projected a total of 2,670 dies. At 10,000 strikes per die this gives production approaching 27 million. Even if the dies fell short of this longevity (a fraction of that achieved in the fourteenth century), output is impressive, demonstrating the reach of the monetised economies around the North Sea.

A choice selection of widely varying radiate busts of Series D, type 2c, both right and left facing, is on offer, including fine examples of the degeneration into a geometric obverse.



Low Countries’ Series D, type 2c, busts right, left and geometric

The wholly geometric Series D, type 8 is a purely utilitarian currency of which some intriguing variations are on sale. The use of a cruciform reverse throughout Series D signifies its appeal to Christianised trading partners.



Possibly unique variety of Series D, type 8 with a reverse aesthetically appealing in its simplicity

The interlace cross type, associated with Maastricht, is represented by both disintegrated and modelled bust obverses.



Interlace cross varieties

The sceat coinage is dominated by the prolific mintage of Series E from the Rhine-mouths area. Op den Velde and Metcalf estimate an output almost twice that of Series D. They describe primary, secondary and tertiary phases, loosely related to the English chronology. Excellent specimens of the four primary types – ‘plumed bird’, *VICO*, varieties G1-5 and D - are available.



Primary Series E: ‘plumed bird’, VICO



Primary Series E, variety D, conventional and elaborate reverses

The specialist will find some rarities, for example, the G5 inscribed on both obverse and reverse.



Primary Series E, variety G4 and rare G5 variant with obverse and reverse inscriptions

The secondary phase is represented by specimens with a recognisable votive standard, before this transforms into more complex geometric designs, often with a cruciform motif, many of which are extremely rare and have great eye-appeal.



Secondary Series E, varieties A and C

There are many choice examples of the main secondary types for those wanting to build a representative collection.



Secondary Series E, varieties B and F.

In the late 'porcupines' – Metcalf's 'vast trackless wastes' – there is much variation in both the obverse quilled crescent and the reverse standard. Pseudo-runes appear, though rarely, and one sceat shows a minute female figure facing, protected by the quilled crescent of the 'porcupine'.



Late "porcupines": pseudo-runic reverse, female figure facing.

Ribe's distinctive and long-lived 'Wodan and monster' coinage is present in many of its variations. Typically, the obverse face is flanked by crosses, suggesting that it is Christ rather than Wodan that is portrayed. The ambiguity aids the type's broad currency. Below the monster's jaw, a series of privy marks constitute an attractive sequence evincing well-controlled production.



Ribe's 'Wodan and monster' Series X

The more degenerate types are attributed to England and referred to as 'insular'. Execution and alloy generally fail to match the better Ribe sceats. Nevertheless, the coins have a bold, native freshness of style.



Insular Series X

A group of related 'Wodan' types bearing a potent facing portrait on the obverse are matched with reverses displaying twin standard bearers, a monster or degenerate standard. Included here are excessively rare 'broad face' types – one plausibly showing Wodan's afflicted eye.



A selection of "Wodan" types

The sale closes with examples of the Hexagram sceat.



A choice example of the Hexagram sceat

EH: Has parting with these wonderful treasures been distressing?

TA: Given the rewarding outcome, it's been quite cathartic really and given me a sense of completion.

EH: You've had a diverse career, from designer of accounting systems to nanotechnology entrepreneur and a major force in 'Dark Age' numismatics. I can't imagine you dozing in an armchair!

TA: I have a *very* comfortable armchair, thank you! But, if it's not too outrageous (which it definitely is), let me direct you to <https://mazikspark.com/>. It's fun – and in aid of Blood Cancer UK.



