

‘Dark Age’ coinage demystified

Midway through the sale of his renowned coin collection
Tony Abramson describes the historical significance of ten pieces

If all has gone to plan with Spink’s auction of Part I ‘Connoisseurs Choice’ will now have taken place. I have selected ten early pennies, choice specimens of which were offered in Part I. More affordable, yet tempting specimens are included in Part III, ‘Collectors’ Selection’.

Part II is concerned with the coinage of the kingdom of Northumbria and Part IV, continental tremisses, deniers and sceats found in England.

I have focussed here largely on inscribed English sceats from south of the Humber. All the Northumbrian coins show a high level of literacy and controlled production. In the primary phase, southern sceats are conservative in style. In contrast to this and the northern issues, southern sceats, in the secondary phase, show a huge range of designs, alloys and execution, although the images are often highly creative, evocative and invocative befitting the Age of Conversion to Christianity.

Valdoberhtus, Fig. 1. (Part I, lot 31 and III, 22. NB: Part III lot numbers may change)

I find the imaginative designs of the later sceats, which give free reign to native motifs, more appealing than the early, conservative phase, which adheres to Roman prototypes. This unusual type is an exception because of the named moneyer. Mark Blackburn thought this type likely to be Merovingian, due to the then absence of English findspots. The sceats here are respectively from Alne, North Yorkshire and Kent. I would place them in the transitional phase between pale gold and silver.

Vernus, Fig. 2. (I, 44-6 and III, 43-9)

Vernus is taken to be a moneyer producing a bust/‘votive standard’ design. On better specimens, the name surrounding the bust is clear. There is an affinity with the ‘plumed bird’ design of the early ‘porcupine’ group, but the Vernus type regresses to a recognizable profile head.

Saraldo/FITUR, Fig 3. (I, 47-8 and III, 50)

This type, again with a bust/‘votive standard’ combination, is not rare, even specimens with legible inscriptions are available, but those bearing FIT/RV within the reverse standard are very rare. It has been suggested that this means ‘is made’, but the surrounding reverse legend is yet to be understood.

Æthiliræd, Fig. 4. (I, 64 and III, 375-8)

As the commencement of silver pennies has been pushed earlier by recent archaeological studies, it has become feasible that this is the coinage of Æthelred of Mercia (675-704), son of Penda, which better anchors the issue in historically documented events. The pairing of this runic, bidirectional inscription with a crude ‘porcupine’ design suggests a date late in Æthelred’s reign.

LEL Fig. 5. (I, 144-7 and III, 202)

Coins of Series T, inscribed LEL or similar, also pair a handsome portrait with a ‘porcupine’ reverse. Possibly the issuers thought use of the prolific ‘porcupine’ gave their emission greater currency.

SEDE, Fig. 6. (I, 65-6 and III, 379-80)

An extraordinary and very rare type has a four-letter inscription separated by crosses and usually read as SEDE, possibly implying a bishopric, but the D could be an A. The reverse has a coiled serpent protecting a central cross. In the Germanic tradition the serpent is protective, whereas in the English repertoire it represents evil.

Wigræd Fig. 7. (I, 94-5 and III, 86-8)

The East Anglian Series R, probably minted at Ipswich, is long-lived. Again, the design is a crude bust/degenerate 'votive standard' combination. Towards the end of the sequence, two moneyers are named in runic script, which adds intrigue to what is otherwise a trading currency of relatively immobilised style.

Tilberht Fig. 8. (I, 96 and III, 89-91)

This is the other late-phase moneyer of Ipswich. These coins are not especially rare and offer the opportunity to build a collection of inscribed Southumbrian sceats.

C/ARIP Fig. 9. (I, 148-54 and III, 204-7)

The reverses of this small group return us to far more appealing native reverse designs: pecking birds, coiled serpents, standard bearers sometimes in foliage and the very rare, seated figure reminiscent of classical coinage. The ARIP is taken to be the episcopal title of the figure portrayed. The initial C is behind the bust and could be associated with Canterbury or even Archbishop Cuthbert of Canterbury who presided over the Council of Clofesho in 747. The legend changes with different dies.

Willibrodr Fig. 10. (I, 327 and III, 372)

Finally, a most enigmatic variety. The famous collector of sceats Professor Wim de Wit suggested to me that this type may be associated with the Northumbrian missionary, Willibrord, first Bishop of Utrecht (695-739). His tenure parallels the coinage. He was invited to Frisia by Pepin of Herstal, fled from the pagan Radbod, but returned under the protection of Charles Martel.

The type is essentially an extension of variety G of Continental Series E, showing a 'porcupine' styled bust with an uncertain inscription and, on the reverse, a degenerate votive standard, surrounded by a tantalising legend commencing VVILL... We are yet to see a specimen with the remainder of the legend but in the meantime rely on the central motif – a cosier, Willibrord's attribute.

I have covered a very small selection of the collection being auctioned by Spink. Parts III and IV include many affordable specimens covering almost the full spectrum of this under-rated and intriguing early coinage. Such a wide variety is unlikely to be offered on the market for many years.