



Series Q1G, type 59, S363<sup>2</sup>

**The De Wit Collection of  
early Anglo-Saxon coinage  
at the Fitzwilliam Museum,  
Cambridge.**

By Tony Abramson<sup>1</sup>



Series K, type 32a, S206

In 2007 the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge acquired part of the private collection of the Dutch numismatist Professor Wim De Wit with the financial support of the Heritage Lottery Fund and Art Fund<sup>3</sup>. The De Wit sceatta collection, assembled over a forty-year period as part of a much larger assemblage of medieval European coinage, consisted of 7 gold and pale gold thrymsas, 443 silver sceattas and 31 Northumbrian base stycas. Many of the specimens are of the highest quality and rarity.

De Wit started his career as a physics lecturer at Leiden University but in 1947 joined what has become the financial colossus ING for the remainder of his working life, as a general manager specializing in non-life insurance mathematics in which he had an international reputation, publishing over 100 articles. For the last eight years of his career he also taught insurance economics at Erasmus University, Rotterdam.

It was the Frisian trading currencies that De Wit collected in the late '60s, acquiring a small number of additional specimens in the 70s as the Elmore-Jones and Mack collections were dispersed by auction, as were parts of the Aston Rowant hoard.

The majority of his sceatta collection was acquired in the 80s and 90s from Spink and Patrick Finn, but whilst his sceattas may have been his “jewel in the crown” they constituted only about a tenth in number of his entire medieval European collection, which was sold in three major auctions in 2007-8, by Fritz Rudolf Künker GmbH & Co. KG, Münzenhandler, of Osnabrück, Germany. Künker has generously produced a fourth catalogue covering that part of the collection acquired by the Fitzwilliam.

This paper diverges somewhat from the rather extempore talk given as part of the 2008 *SEMC @ IMC* Symposium. In that talk I illustrated some exceptional sceattas in this remarkable collection and then compared some of the rarest specimens with the very few similar coins known elsewhere. I now repeat that presentation, perhaps not comprehensively, in the first part of this article and then proceed to describe, in the second part, the Fitzwilliam's exhibition of the De Wit and related material and finally, in part three, the catalogue compiled by Messrs Künker.

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Michael Metcalf for his characteristically helpful observations on the interpretation of coins included in this article.

<sup>2</sup> Images are not to scale and are reproduced by kind permission of Messrs Künker of Osnabrück and the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. All De Wit sceatta reference numbers are prefaced by an S.

<sup>3</sup> With assistance from the Wolfson Foundation

## 1. The Collection

Inevitably, there are numerous different approaches to presenting a collection of this magnitude and significance. I have chosen to cut across what might be a conventional methodology to adopt a perhaps less penetrating, but hopefully more aesthetic, perspective simply by selecting what visually appeals most and what most excites my curiosity.

The rich variety of dress, style, coiffure and jewellery adorning sceats deserves the attention of Anglo-Saxon clothing and fashion aficionados. The posture, execution and appearance of this artwork is, more often than not, no accident and much interpretive work remains to be done. Two beautiful specimen, S217-18, of the well-known Series K, type 42 are selected merely to make this point. They are possibly the work of the same die-cutter - note the cross-hatching of the hair, the treatment of the 'knot', the drapery and the beast's collar.



S217 & S218: Series K, type 42

The three-quarter-length figure on Series W, type 54 makes it something of an iconic type. Even slight wear detracts from the subtle execution of the scarce variety adorned by annulet crosses on either side of the standing figure and described by Metcalf as resembling "nothing so much as a hedgehog". The exquisite De Wit specimen, S149, illustrates the intended style of this sceat drawing attention to the clothing and hairstyle/headwear.



S149: Series W, type 54

Mules and contemporary imitations are frequently denigrated and indeed many belong to a tertiary class of sceattas, lacking the originality and inspiration of secondary types. However, occasionally such coins can cast a beam of light on chronology or design and open up intriguing possibilities. S084 combines a runic bust obverse imitated from types R1-2, with a careful copy of a VICO reverse. The curved headdress is distinctive. A die-duplicate comes from Woolstone, Berkshire (Ashmolean, 213).



S084: Series D or R/E, VICO mule

Given that Series E obverses are derived from the diademed bust, S135 seems to be the hairstyle equivalent of 'big hair'. The stranglehold of Sutherland's intentionally inappropriate appellation "porcupine" is now so deeply rooted, that it is unlikely to be removed from the nomenclature. In which case, the reverse of S135 merits the description 'ziggurat - aerial view'. Similar ziggurat reverses are also illustrated below:



S135: Series E derivative    S194 (QIX) & S271 (type 70): ziggurat reverses

It is worth highlighting the very rare, ex Aston Rowant, early or experimental variety of the SAROALDO type with the central reverse legend reading FIT/RV, S151 and comparing this to the more recently found "bespectacled" specimen with the +SAROALDO legend around the bust, probably by a different die-cutter. The reverse dies vary particularly in the recumbent S above; note that both show the tufa to the left of the standard.



S151: SAROALDO type reading FIT/RV    EMC 2002.0002<sup>4</sup> found nr. Lichfield, Staffs, c.1995.

The following specimens, S409 & S196 are mentioned in *Some New Types*, SiEMC1, pages 38 & 40, and are now illustrated to give a more complete picture, especially as they display variation from the specimens then illustrated. This occurrence of significant variation within such a small corpus reminds us that it is unsafe to extrapolate from too small a body of data.

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<sup>4</sup> Abramson E930.



S409: 'Wodan'/monster variety



S196: Series N/J, 60 mule?

Various attributions of the following three illustrations, S311-13, also mentioned in *Some New Types*, SiEMC1, page36, have been put forward, but Michael Metcalf (this volume, 'Maltese' cross type) seems to be correct in regarding both of these types as Aldfrith derivatives.



S311-13: Aldfrith derivatives?

Again, we can see significant variation between two rare varieties of Northumbrian sceats of Eadberht, Booth class F. Almost certainly from the same obverse die both display a small central face with long moustaches, but the reverse attributes differ; the right hand illustrations having a cross potent under the tail. See also Beowulf 108-N03<sup>5</sup>, CNG 75/1442.



Small face varieties: S433,



Abramson Y118

A coin lacking in aesthetic appeal, but nonetheless of interest, is a Series B derived sceat, S233. This is a crude imitative effort, but worthy of recording as the issue is given credibility by the occurrence of three similar examples; the second and third seem to be from the same reverse die.

<sup>5</sup> See SiEMC1, page 151.



Another rare variety give credence by at least three specimens is the “feeding bird” type now identified by De Wit at S188. Two are identified here and De Wit mentions a third at the British museum<sup>7</sup>. The bird, to the right, appears to be perched on the monster’s rump. These two coins presumably belong, in some sense, together, and yet the treatment of the dress of the two standing figures, and of their arms, is distinctly different. On S188 they wear ‘kilts’, whilst on N270 their arms are angular.



Series N, type 41 var. with “bird feeding” reverse: S188 & Abramson N270

Whilst the selection illustrated here is subjectively based on my own preferences, and is necessarily far from comprehensive, one cannot fail to highlight the extent to which this collection expands the repertoire of recognised types and increases the pressure for an eventual expanded scheme of classification.

## 2. The Exhibition: *Art In The Round*<sup>8</sup>

At the time of writing, the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge is displaying part of its magnificent collection of early Anglo-Saxon artefacts and coinage, the latter drawn largely but not exclusively, from the De Wit acquisition. The exhibition includes a selection of some of the finest known early Anglo-Saxon art. Design features of this selection are enhanced by the inclusion of metalwork artefacts from the Fitzwilliam and other local museums as well as some exceptional coins borrowed from private collections. One objective is to expose the source of inspiration for this coin art and to trace its artistic influence on subsequent issues.

The sceattas, in particular, flaunt an explosion of artistic creativity in what was previously regarded as the Dark Age. Curiously, this early medieval renaissance has been almost entirely neglected by numismatists, art and monetary historians until the metal-detector discoveries of the last two decades.

Whilst tribal invaders to the Western Roman Empire on the Continent had sought a seamless continuation of Roman institutions and coinage, this was not the case in England. Here coinage lapsed probably within twenty years of the Roman departure, c410AD, and did not revive until the very end of the C6th or early C7th. However, on

<sup>6</sup> See SiEMC1, page 132.

<sup>7</sup> Also see DM Metcalf, *Sceattas found at the Iron-Age Hill Fort of Walbury Camp, Berkshire, BNJ* vol. XLIV, 1974, pages 1-11 and plate 1

<sup>8</sup> This part of the paper first appeared in similar form in *Stamp & Coin Mart*, September 2008.

its inception, the gold coinage of that early period was of a very high denomination and it was only with the later coinage that the silver sceat reached its widest extent – in monetary volume, geographical penetration and variety of design. This revival was a perfect platform for Christian propaganda, which, at least as Gannon interprets the iconography, constitutes a predominant theme of this highly diverse English coinage. The diversity thrived on the lack of a unified political hierarchy until the gradual unification of the English sub-kingdoms, under Offa, brought greater uniformity, and less creativity, to the coinage.

However, the continental sceattas, whose primary purpose was trade, had been found in significant numbers for many generations. What is misguidedly referred to as the “porcupine” type<sup>9</sup> was known in coastal Frisian folklore as the “moonstone” because the tide exposed these minute silver coins to sparkle in the moonlight, and superstitious locals believed that they had been brought by moonbeams!

What makes the exhibition particularly successful is the manner in which these tiny coins have been displayed. Despite their minute 10-11mm diameter, these sceattas are of such quality and depth of relief that angling them carefully in the light makes the designs shine out. Alongside each coin is a high-resolution enlargement to enhance portrayal of the often complex iconography displayed on the coinage.

The exhibition consists, in the main, of four display cases. The first describes the artistic influences on the Anglo-Saxon coinage. The clearest influence is referred to as “Romanitas” – emulating classical Roman portrayal and images to enhance the issuer’s authority and credibility. The typical style of late Roman bust is a clear prototype for this coinage in its transition from gold thrymsa to silver sceatta<sup>10</sup> (fig S 8).



S8: thrymsa of PADA

This Roman influence can be then traced through both secondary and Continental issues. Another clear icon is the “wolf and twins” type which reappears on the Series V sceatta (fig S 175), coins of Offa and Aethelberht and the Larling Plaque.



S 175: Series V, wolf and twins

<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, this incongruous and inappropriate term was coined by Sutherland in 1942: “This type would be better termed the “porcupine” type in order to avoid controversial alternatives; and such we shall henceforth call it.” CHV Sutherland, *Numismatic Chronicle* 1942.

<sup>10</sup> See Anna Gannon’s *Imitation is the Sincerest Form of Flattery*, *Coinage and History in the North Sea World c.500-1250*, *The Northern World*, vol. 19 (Brill, 2006).

During this early medieval period, the coinage of Frankia, under its Merovingian and Carolingian dynasties, was better controlled than the English equivalent. The English borrowed many designs from this source whose influence continued under Offa and his successors and contemporaries.

Germanic and insular art, whose origins remain obscure, also had a significant influence on the English designs, for example, in the use of backward looking animals (fig S 363) and protective serpents (fig S 342 below). Such motifs are often conflated with other, mainly Christian, iconography in what appears to be intentional ambiguity.



S 363: Series Q1G, backward looking beast

Case II illustrates the coming of Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons, known as the ‘conversion period’, following St Augustine’s arrival at the court of King Aethelberht of Kent in 595. The conversion process stretched through the C7th and C8th with many aristocrats, for the preservation of their souls, endowing churches and monasteries, which often were an integral part of the local economic and monetary systems.

Echoing the artistry of illuminated manuscripts, the sceatta coinage of the period is vibrant with theological and other imagery. The ‘inhabited vine’ with animals and birds being nourished by the fruits of the vine, resonates with the nourishment of the soul (fig S 167). A small number of types has literate inscriptions (fig S 338), signifying an ecclesiastical source, but most are uninscribed though clearly related to biblical themes.



S 167: Series U, bird pecking vine – or attacking serpent?

Some of the best-executed types in this coinage bear latin legends as can be seen on Series T related sceattas of the MONITASCORVM type (fig S 338). Might these have been specially engraved for an ecclesiastical purpose such as tribute money?



S 338: MONITASCORVM type, ‘money of the saints’

Specimens of the C9th and C10th English and Viking coins on display overtly proclaim the Christian allegiance of the issuer to ensure that there can be no doubt of their loyalty.

The vibrancy of Christian sceatta art is restrained compared to the uninhibited portrayal of animals and birds in case III. Here we see images drawn from both pagan Germanic sources and Christian art. Arguably, vestiges of Celtic and classical motifs are also incorporated. Whilst hens, swan and peacocks are easily recognisable (fig S 161), some birds and beasts are transformed either through lack of familiarity or in an intentional attempt to portray hybrids (fig S 292). In the absence of contemporary comparanda, perhaps lost through execution in a less resilient medium, many such renderings remain tantalisingly beyond interpretation, and all the more mystical and inspiring for that.



S 161: Series H, peacock



S 292: Series QII, quadruped and wading bird

Whilst it is difficult to ascertain whether the bird on the reverse of a coin of the London Series L is a falcon, raven or eagle (fig S 246), this coin shows an extremely rare seated figure, clearly a special rendering though the literacy of the obverse legend has lapsed.



S 246: Series L with enthroned figure on reverse

What are likely to be lions are frequently portrayed on sceattas, even though the impression may be indistinct or open to other interpretations. The lion would have represented Christ (fig S 430).



S 430: Northumbrian sceat of Eadberht, class C.



In Germanic lore the snake is protective (fig S 342), though elsewhere it is seen as evil in the battle of Good Vs Evil (fig S 359). An extremely rare variety of this type (S 361 & 362) shows the bird turning away from the serpent to look at a cross – “Get thee behind me, Satan!”



S342: SEDE type, with reverse of a snake protecting the Church



S 359: Series J, type 72 reverse: bird and serpent in conflict



S 362: Series J, type 72 reverse: bird turning its back on the serpent and looking to the cross

The final display case of this remarkable exhibition, is entitled *Designing in the Round* and explores the creative way in which engravers respond to the aesthetic challenge of conveying meaning and accuracy in the limited space available to them. For instance, looking at, say, the purely geometrical designs, these can vary from the deceptively simple double cross ancrée (fig S 264) to the deeply complex triquetra cross (fig S 265, reverse).



S 264: double croix ancrée



S 265: triquetra type

A small number of the sceatta types, most notably the highly literate Northumbrian series, are embellished with legends. Occasionally, these are in English runes, which however superstitious it may be, always add a little magic to artefacts (fig S 274). Runes appear on the contemporary Franks Casket and on some stone sculpture and other scarce personal artefacts where they imbue these items with a little mystery and character. There are many such occurrences on the coins, and I for one was first attracted to this coinage for this very reason.



S 274: Æthiliræd type

The current Art in the Round exhibition will remain at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge until 7<sup>th</sup> September. It then transfers to Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery from 20<sup>th</sup> September to 18<sup>th</sup> January 2009 and finally appears at Ipswich Town Hall Galleries from 6<sup>th</sup> March to 5<sup>th</sup> September 2009. There is a well-crafted podcast and digitised online exhibition on the Fitzwilliam website, and an accompanying programme of lunchtime lectures, handling sessions and children's workshops. This exhibition is a visual sensation - a must see event!

3. The Catalogue: 1000 Years of European Coinage: The De Wit Collection of Medieval Coins, Part IV: The Sceattas, Fritz Rudolf Künker, GmbH & Co. KG, Münzenhandler, Osnabrück, Germany 2008.

Full recognition must be given to the auction house Künker, for publishing this companion volume, as the final part of the extensive De Wit collection. Publication of De Wit's own text, translated into English, within a year of the purchase, helps fulfil the Fitzwilliam Museum's terms of acquisition. Restoring these predominantly English coins to the UK, housing them in one of our leading, most active and accessible, numismatic departments, whilst avoiding disruptive dissemination by auction, is a major success for all concerned. As already mentioned, acquisition would not have been possible without financial support from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Art Fund.

This is a collection of highly important early Anglo-Saxon sceattas of exceptional quality and pedigree. Today, it would be nigh on impossible to emulate Professor De Wit's success in gathering such an assemblage. It demonstrates great discernment and perceptiveness in the single-minded pursuit of a near comprehensive accumulation of this remarkably varied coinage.

This collection contains numerous singular specimens highlighted by both Metcalf<sup>11</sup> and Gannon<sup>12</sup>. The photography, by Lübke & Wiedemann, Stuttgart, is of the highest order enhancing, to the very best advantage, the display of early Anglo-Saxon art and technique on this miniature, yet often beautiful, coinage. For this reason alone the catalogue is well worth acquiring. De Wit's arrangement, though unconventional, has the merit of

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<sup>11</sup>DM Metcalf, *Thrymsas and Sceattas in the Ashmolean Museum Oxford*, Royal Numismatic Society, London 1994, ISBN 1 85444 067 5.

<sup>12</sup> Anna Gannon, *The Iconography Of Early Anglo-Saxon Coinage*, Oxford University Press, 2003, ISBN 0 19 925465 6.

revealing iconographic linkages that might otherwise be overlooked. But one must assess objectively whether it succeeds in this thought provoking challenge to the current orthodoxy.

De Wit has narrated the catalogue himself, and with due reciprocity, has frequently cited Gannon. Gannon's erudite work is a paradigm of diligent research, correct presentation and thoughtful construction. Regrettably, it is somewhat of a distraction that the present work fails to emulate these exacting standards. Allowing for all the difficulties of trilingual *übersetzungen*, from the misspelling of 'Sceattes' on the cover to the resurrection of "king" Houad<sup>13</sup> at the close, the absence of proof reading takes us on a journey of mistaken spelling, grammar, meaning and usage. In itself, this is a slightly embarrassing flaw but falls short of fatal, as do the misstatements of gender for both motifs (S165, Series U, and S211-4, Series S, "This is a man, to my mind...") and numismatic colleagues (p. 29). However, historical inaccuracies are of a higher order (Northumbria, p. 107: the assertion "790 to 820 formed an interval from which no coins are known" is lamentably ill-informed) especially when stated with the author's characteristic resolve. Given our paucity of knowledge of sceattas, one should err on the side of caution or speculate in an open-minded manner as is Metcalf's custom.

All the major dedicated texts in this field - from the scholastic to the populist - can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Acquaintance with these would have obviated exaggeration of the number of supposedly unique and unrecorded coins here claimed (S195, S196, S233, S234, S237, S409 and many others). S304, if rotated 90°, would be better understood - as Series M.

Whilst students of the series are at liberty, indeed encouraged, to test convention and chronology, this must be done in a structured manner, with well-organised arguments, properly researched, fully annotated with bibliographical references and subjected to a penetrating yet re-assuring peer group review. However, perhaps De Wit is not mounting a fundamental challenge. His local (English, English Ecclesiastical and Continental) and "interlocal" (English, Continental, Northern and Southern) arrangement, when viewed objectively, differs little from the conventional understanding of which types constituted trading currencies and what might have been mediums of a different nature, i.e. propaganda, during this chaotic conversion period. Within each of these, his presentation is divided iconographically and subdivided by die. This subdivision is too prescriptive, as it does not allow for the full corpus of known specimens at this tertiary level. There is a tendency to allot origin too heavily according to iconography. Sometimes eclectic types are shoehorned in incongruously: the exceedingly rare (but not "unrecorded") Hen type (S300)<sup>14</sup> is placed between an "averse unrecorded" (*sic*) Q/R mule (several known; Ashmore replicas in circulation) and a Series QIVa, when the reverse swan (?) has much in common with the only slightly less rare Archer type (S376-378). I am sceptical of the authenticity of S184, the K/N mule, being aware of several specimens all with identically offstruck reverses and flan shapes.

Moreover, the thrust of De Wit's inter/local scheme is weakened when one considers the paucity of all-important provenances, as opposed to superficially impressive pedigrees, in

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<sup>13</sup> Exposed as non-existent long ago; see D.C. Axe, *Dating the so-called King Hoaud stycas*, bar 180, 1987, even though dealers continue to sell these at vastly inflated prices.

<sup>14</sup> Recorded as no. 17 on John White's additional *Nummi Argentei* plate appended to some copies of Withy & Ryall's 1756 "Twelve Plates of English Silver Coins..."

this curiously unticketed accumulation<sup>15</sup>. Just as distribution and die studies depend on the randomness of the corpus, so arguments on economic influence are enriched by find data. I assess that De Wit has provenances for just under 11% of his coins and pedigrees for nearly 17%. Two-thirds of the coins come from just the two dealers mentioned above and vanishingly few are bought direct from the detectorist. Whilst there is nothing intrinsically wrong with market-skewed acquisition, (notwithstanding the accuracy of provenance information) absence of context inhibits historically sound interpretation.

Whether or not De Wit succeeds in challenging orthodoxy, the arrangement of the catalogue does not make for easy referencing of types sought. To overcome this deficiency, the collection has been re-arranged according to the conventional approach<sup>16</sup> and is presented in tabular form elsewhere in this volume.

Whilst the collection has the breadth of a near complete depiction of the coinage, it also has substantial and impressive depth. Each type is often represented by several specimens, nearly always, as is typical of sceattas, not die-duplicates but being capable of arrangement according to stylistic degradation. De Wit does this to good effect in many instances – for example with Series F (p. 39) – but equal weight is given to all specimens even when the coin is clearly imitative. This is the case with S228 where De Wit goes off at a doomed tangent mistaking the curved representation of a backward-looking falcon (on a mirror-image type 18 reverse) for the crescent on a mosque's minaret! Aberrant conclusions are drawn from this false premise.

Despite, or, to be contrary, because of all the foregoing, this volume should be bought as it is, and will remain, an essential work of reference. None of these complaints can overturn the intrinsic excellence of this collection. Together with Anna Gannon's forthcoming Sylloge of the BM collection, this is a significant contribution to the publication of the major sceatta accumulations.

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<sup>15</sup> The physical collection is devoid of tickets. The original catalogue was referenced by accession number.

<sup>16</sup> Based largely on Metcalf's *T&S*.