

## SHORT ARTICLES AND NOTES

### AN ENIGMATIC COIN FROM EIGHTH-CENTURY NORTHUMBRIA

GARETH WILLIAMS

AN unusual Northumbrian coin, which was a metal detector find from near Malton in North Yorkshire, was brought to the attention of numismatists in 1999. After initial fears that it might be sold abroad, it was acquired by the British Museum, where it has the registration number CM 1999, 6-2, 1 (See Fig. 1). The inscriptions on the coin provoked a constructive and interesting discussion at the time, and the present note is intended less as an exhaustive publication of the coin, than as an overview of the possible different interpretations, to which I hope that others may be tempted to respond.<sup>1</sup>

The coin itself has a high enough silver content that it is immediately apparent to the eye, suggesting that it is no later than the very early ninth century, and more probably the eighth century. It was not tested for its precise metal content, since the decline in the silver content of the Northumbrian coinage did not occur so smoothly that a test would be likely to help resolve the dating issues very precisely.<sup>2</sup> The style of both the design and the lettering also agree with a late eighth-century date. However, the interpretation of the coin is problematic for two reasons: both inscriptions appear to be slightly blundered, and both can most easily be interpreted as obverse inscriptions.

One side, which has a circle of pellets around a large pellet in the centre, reads +EΓAΥTDϷEAD. The other side, which has a circle of pellets around a central cross, reads +ϷAEDILRED. Allowing for inverted and reversed letters, these inscriptions read +ELVALDREVD or +ELVALDREAD and +RAEDIURED respectively.

The side reading +RAEDIURED is comparatively unproblematic to interpret. The spelling AEDILRED for Æthelred is common on the coins of Æthelred I of Northumbria (774-9 and 790-6), and James Booth has noted that the moneyer Cuthheard has a standardised form +AEDILREDR. Misplaced letters are not unknown in the Northumbrian coinage, and Booth has also noted the existence of misplaced initial crosses on coins of Æthelred I issued by the moneyer Cuthgils.<sup>3</sup> It only requires misplacing the initial cross by one letter to turn +AEDILREDR into +RAEDIURED, and the design and appearance of the coin are also compatible with the coinage of Æthelred I, so the obvious interpretation is that this represents a very slightly blundered obverse of Æthelred I.

The other side of the coin is more problematic, with a much greater number of inverted and retrograde letters. If one accepts the order +ELVALDREVD, this would suggest a name ELVALD, followed by a secondary name or nickname, REVD or READ. ELVALD is perhaps reasonably acceptable for Ælfwald, but neither REVD nor READ suggests a plausible secondary name, nor are such secondary names a feature of the Northumbrian coinage, although they are not uncommon on later Anglo-Saxon coins. No moneyer Ælfwald is recorded for Æthelred I, but there were two rulers of Northumbria with that name; Ælfwald I (779-88) and Ælfwald II (808-10). The physical appearance of the coin suggests an eighth-century date, and the gap between the reigns of Æthelred I and Ælfwald II makes muling between the two unlikely. A mule between dies of Ælfwald I and Æthelred I is more plausible, given that Ælfwald reigned during a period

<sup>1</sup> The coin was published on the *EMC* website by Sean Miller, with the number *EMC* 1999.0021. However, this presents only brief comments, and discusses only one possible interpretation of the coin. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to discuss the coin with Marion Archibald, Elizabeth Pirie and Lord Stewartby, and in the course of those discussions James Booth's comments on the coin were also passed on to me. I am grateful to all of them for sharing their thoughts with me, and while this paper will make clear what I personally believe to be the most convincing interpretation of the coin, I still regard the attribution of the coin as open to debate.

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to my colleague Michael Cowell for a useful discussion of this. See also M.M. Archibald, 'The Coinage of Beonna in the Light of the Middle Harling Hoard', *BNJ* 55 (1985), 10-54.

<sup>3</sup> J. Booth, 'Coinage and Northumbrian history: c. 790-c. 810', in *Coinage in Ninth-Century Northumbria. The Tenth Oxford Symposium on Coinage and Monetary History*, edited by D.M. Metcalf, BAR British Series 180 (1987), 57-90, at p. 67.



Fig. 1. Northumbrian coin (actual size and  $\times 2$ ).

in which Æthelred was exiled, between his first and second reign. This dating is also more consistent with the appearance of the coin.

Given that the initial cross on the other side is misplaced, however, and also that the legend on this side is so jumbled, there is also a distinct possibility that the legend does not begin with the initial cross, and this has given rise to an alternative interpretation of the legend. Taking the V of the EVD part of the legend to be an inverted A without a crossbar, rather than a V, one can also read the legend either as AD+ELVALDRE or EAD+ELVALDR. Either version would suggest not the name Ælfwald, but rather Æthelwald, with R or RE as a contraction of REX. This immediately suggests the Northumbrian king Æthelwald Moll (758–65). Only two coins of Æthelwald Moll are so far recorded, both quite different from the coin under discussion.<sup>4</sup>

This interpretation is problematic, however. Firstly, this would indicate a coin struck using obverse dies in the names of two different kings, with a gap between their two reigns. Æthelwald Moll was the father of Æthelred I, but the intervening reign of Alchred (765–74) makes muling less likely. Another possibility would be that Æthelwald associated his son with his kingship, and that the coin reflects their joint kingship. There is no evidence otherwise to suggest that this was the case, but Northumbrian history of the eighth century is poorly documented after Bede, and the lack of supporting evidence need not be conclusive. There are certainly parallels for such a joint issue in Byzantine coinage and, although such an issue would appear unprecedented in western Europe in this period, the fact that the kings of Northumbria adopted regal coinage some years before their Southumbrian counterparts provides a parallel for the innovative use of coinage as a reflection of royal power in eighth-century Northumbria. Such an explanation would account for the apparent use of a double obverse, but it is not clear that one needs to look for elaborate explanations for this. Within the reign of Æthelred I, Booth notes the existence of a double obverse, one side of which has the inscription +AEDILRED round a plain cross. The other side is definitely an obverse of the moneyer Ceolbald, and this one probably is also.<sup>5</sup> This suggests a certain lack of care in the striking of coins in the reign of Æthelred I, which would fit with the fact that both legends on the coin now under discussion appear to be blundered.

Another argument against the attribution of the coin to the reign of Æthelwald Moll is stylistic. The Northumbrian regal coinage up to the 880s characteristically shows an animal design on the reverse. It is not certain whether a shift to a design with inscriptions on both obverse and reverse took place late in the reign of Ælfwald I, or in the second reign of Æthelred I, since this depends on whether a double-inscription type in the name of Ælfwald should be attributed to Ælfwald I or Ælfwald II.<sup>6</sup> In either case, it seems less likely that there would be a shift away from the use of animal designs under Æthelwald Moll and a return to them under Alchred, followed by another shift under Ælfwald I or Æthelred I, than that a single change took place, whether under Ælfwald I or Æthelred I.

Northumbrian coins with double inscriptions are known earlier, of course, including the two examples already attributed to Æthelwald Moll, but these are all joint issues with the archbishops of York. Given the blundering of the inscriptions, it is just conceivable that +RAEDILRED could represent +EDILRED AR, but this would require both special pleading and the invention of an otherwise unrecorded archbishop. By contrast, the style of the coin is quite consistent with the double inscription coins of the second reign of Æthelred I.

<sup>4</sup> Booth, 'Coinage and Northumbrian history', as in n. 3, p. 73.

<sup>5</sup> Booth, 'Coinage and Northumbrian history', as in n. 3, p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> Booth, 'Coinage and Northumbrian history', as in n. 3, pp. 58–9, 65–6; E.J.E. Pirie, *Coins of the Kingdom of Northumbria, c. 700–867 in the Yorkshire Collections* (Llanfyllin, 1996), pp. 26–7.

To conclude, the blundered inscriptions on both sides of the coin make a definitive interpretation problematic. Both the appearance of a comparatively high silver content and the style of the designs suggest a late eighth-century date. While an attribution to Æthelwald Moll is conceivable, based on one reading of the inscription, a more likely explanation is that the coin should be attributed to the second reign of Æthelred I (790–6), muling a slightly blundered obverse of Æthelred I with a considerably more blundered contemporary reverse derived from an obverse inscription of Ælfwald I

## A NORTHUMBRIAN 'STYCA' FROM WILTSHIRE: THE PROBLEM WITH SOUTHERN PROVENANCES OF 'STYCAS'

PAUL ROBINSON

IN 1914 the Revd A.T. Richardson, vicar of Keevil in Wiltshire, compiled a typewritten quarto volume, 294 pages in length, entitled *Annals of Keevil and Bulkington*.

One copy was deposited in the library of the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society at Devizes and was reviewed in the *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine*.<sup>1</sup> On pages 8 and 9 some sixty coins are listed which had been 'found by Mr W. Ghey, mostly in 'Henleys.' (William Ghey farmed at Wick Leaze in Keevil, which included a field know as 'Henleys'.) The coins, which had been identified and listed by G.F. Hill from the British Museum, comprise: one Ancient British silver coin of the Dobunni (type C in Allen's classification of Dobunnic coins and incorrectly described as having been found at the nearby town of Trowbridge);<sup>2</sup> fifty-two Roman coins; one Saxon coin which is the subject of this note; and six Nuremberg jetons. The Saxon coin is particularly unusual as a find from South-West England. It is a Northumbrian 'styca' of Wigmund, Archbishop of York from 837 to 854, by the moneyer Hunlaf. The legends are transcribed without precision in the list as 'Obv. VIGMUND. Rev. HUNLAF'. Both the Dobunnic silver coin and the 'styca' were donated by Mr Ghey to the British Museum: the latter has the accession number 1914.7.11.2, but cannot now be identified in the collection. The Museum's accession register records the find spot as 'near Trowbridge', which is the nearest town, and transcribes the legends as +VIGMVND and +HVILAF.

Even though the coins listed were said to have been found 'mostly in Henleys', inferring that one or some had not been found in that field, there is every reason to accept the 'styca' as a genuine local find, whether made at that precise findspot or not. The coin is thus important as an extremely uncommon provenanced Northumbrian coin from Southern Britain, not previously noticed in numismatic literature.

There are a number of records of finds of Northumbrian 'stycas' from Southern England. Two small hoards of 'stycas' are said to have been found respectively at Bath (*Inventory* – ) and London (*Inventory* 243),<sup>3</sup> but both have been argued to be spurious by Michael Dolley.<sup>4</sup> Blackburn and Pagan, it may be noted, retain the latter find in their listing of coin hoards from the British Isles.<sup>5</sup> These purported hoards, together with individual finds made at Trewiddle and Brighton in Southern England, have been dismissed by Elizabeth Pirie.<sup>6</sup> However, the recent discovery of a hoard of 'stycas' in London,<sup>7</sup> of a 'styca' of Redwulf on the Thames foreshore at Lambeth,<sup>8</sup> and, perhaps of lesser relevance, of a Viking weight, embellished with a 'styca' probably of Eanred which was found at Faversham in Kent<sup>9</sup> show, together with the evidence of the find from Keevil, that recorded finds from the extreme south of England should not lightly be dismissed.

<sup>1</sup> *Wilt. Arch. and Nat. Hist. Magazine* 39 (1915–17), 100–2.

<sup>2</sup> D.F. Allen, 'The Origins of Coinage in Britain: a Re-appraisal', in *Problems of the Iron Age in Southern Britain*, edited by S.S. Frere (= University of London Occasional Paper 11) (London, 1960), 97–308, at p. 249.

<sup>3</sup> J.D.A. Thompson, *Inventory of British Coin Hoards A.D. 600–1500*, (Royal Numismatic Society, London, 1956).

<sup>4</sup> R.H.M. Dolley, 'A Spurious Hoard of Northumbrian Copper Coins from Bath', *NC* 7th. series, vol. 5 (1965), 197–200; R.H.M. Dolley, 'Coin Hoards from the London Area as Evidence for the Pre-eminence of London in the Later Saxon Period', *Trans. London and Middlesex Arch. Soc.* 20 (1960), 37–50, at p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> M.A.S. Blackburn and H.E. Pagan, 'A Revised Check-List of Coin Hoards from the British Isles, c. 500–1100', in *Anglo-Saxon Monetary History: Essays in Memory of Michael Dolley*, edited by M.A.S. Blackburn (Leicester, 1986), 291–313, at p. 293, no. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth J.E. Pirie, 'Finds of "sceattas" and "stycas" of Northumbria', in M.A.S. Blackburn (editor), as in n. 5, 69–90, at p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> Gareth Williams, *pers. comm.*

<sup>8</sup> *BNJ* 65 (1995), 239, no. 115.

<sup>9</sup> G. Williams, 'Anglo-Saxon and Viking Coin Weights', *BNJ* 69 (1999), 19–36.