

A NEW TYPE FOR ÆTHELBERHT II OF EAST ANGLIA

RORY NAISMITH

THE ‘wolf and twins’ pennies of Æthelberht II, king of the East Angles (executed by order of Offa, king of the Mercians (757–96), in 794),¹ are among the classic rarities of Anglo-Saxon coinage. Only three specimens survive, two of which (now in the British Museum and the Hunterian Museum) have been known since the eighteenth century, while the last (now in the National Museum of Wales) was found at Tivoli near Rome early in the twentieth century (Fig. 1a).² These have often been called on by historians as one of the few contemporary sources for Æthelberht’s reign, and for his relations with Offa.³



Fig. 1. ‘Wolf and twins’ pennies of Æthelberht and Offa. (a. British Museum: Chick 186c; b. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, Chick 171a.)

A fourth coin of Æthelberht has now been brought to light by a metal-detector user in East Sussex, in the Pevensey area (Fig. 2). This new specimen presents a completely new non-portrait design. In several respects, however, it is closely related to the three ‘wolf and twins’ pennies. All cite the same moneyer: Lul.⁴ The king’s name and the moneyer’s name are spelt in exactly the same way on the new coin as on the ‘wolf and twins’ specimens. An identical form of δ is found in Æthelberht’s name on both types, as is the same HT ligature (otherwise only seen in the time of Offa on episcopal coinages).⁵ A minor difference which sets the inscription on the new coin apart from most others of the same period is its use of curved L, once in the king’s name and twice in the moneyer’s name. This contrasts with the runic or angular letters on Lul’s other pennies for Æthelberht and Offa, and the similarly angular form normally used under later rulers.⁶ However, a curved form of L can be found in non-numismatic sources of similar date, such as in the display script on the famous incipit page of Matthew in the Lindisfarne Gospels.⁷



Fig. 2. Penny of Æthelberht II of East Anglia. (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.)

Obv. EÖILBERHT RE† around a pelleted inner circle containing a cross of four petals with pellet at centre and trefoils of small pellets in each angle.

Rev. † / L / Ū / L in angles of a cross fourchée superimposed on a lozenge containing an inner circle and a saltire of petals, with a pellet in the centre, and numerous trefoils of small pellets interspersed in angles.

Dix, Noonan and Webb auction 11 June 2014, lot 309, and at the time of publication on loan to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. 1.31 g, 280°. Found in the Pevensey area, East Sussex, March 2014 (EMC 2014.0071).

¹ What little is known of him is effectively summarised in Todd 2004.

² Chick 186a–c. One of the two eighteenth-century finds probably relates to a note in the minutes of the Society of Antiquaries of London for 31 March 1748, which records that a ‘wolf and twins’ penny of Æthelberht II was exhibited by Cotton Symonds (c. 1704–61), a landowner from Ormesby St Margaret, Norfolk. He is not otherwise known for having an interest in Anglo-Saxon coins, for which reason the coin may have been a local find.

³ Naismith 2012, 118–20; Keynes 2005, 10; Kirby 2000, 147–8; Yorke 1990, 64; Stenton 1971, 210, 236.

⁴ His long and eventful career is summarized in Naismith 2012b, 151–2.

⁵ For example, Chick 78–9 (Eadberht, bishop of London) and 150–1 (Iænberht, archbishop of Canterbury).

⁶ Chick 171–3 and 186; Naismith 2011, E3 and E10.1–2.

⁷ London, British Library, Cotton Nero D.IV, f. 27r (s. viii^{im}); the page has been illustrated many times, for instance in Brown 2003, pl. 11, and is also readily accessible on the internet.

The design of the new coin has general affinities with other early broad pennies of the late eighth century, but is not exactly matched by any of them. In particular, the simple yet elegant obverse finds no precise parallel which places the king's name around an inner circle containing a small cross.⁸ This design is reminiscent of the early Kentish issues which arrange the king's name around an inner circle containing **R** (for *rex*),⁹ but non-portrait designs placing the king's name in circumscription around a more elaborate cross are commonplace in the coinage of Offa. The elaborate cruciform motif on the reverse is broadly comparable to numerous coin-types of Offa from both East Anglia and the south-eastern mints;¹⁰ again, however, no exact match can be found.

This important new discovery significantly modifies interpretation of Æthelberht's coinage. It shows that multiple designs were used, with the corollary that Æthelberht's output was not necessarily quite as small or homogeneous as was previously believed. Neither was all of his coinage as symbolically charged in its design as the 'wolf and twins' pennies. Æthelberht's coins could have been issued over a number of years, either during a spell when some or all of East Anglia asserted independence from Offa, or by some sort of arrangement to share minting rights with the Mercian ruler – assuming that the conflict with Offa only arose shortly before Æthelberht's death.¹¹ The coins leave both possibilities open. All of Æthelberht's pennies were the work of a single moneyer named Lul. He may either have been based in a separate mint, or delegated to Æthelberht among a larger complement of moneyers at a centre under Offa's control (just as one or two moneyers in contemporary Canterbury were assigned to the archbishop).¹² The new coin, with its unusual forms of lettering (which could be the result of the work of a distinct die-cutter), perhaps suggests the former is more probable, though Lul later became more closely tied stylistically to the moneyers of Offa, Eadwald and Coenwulf.¹³

In terms of chronology, there is no single feature of the non-portrait Æthelberht penny which definitively shows whether it precedes or post-dates the 'wolf and twins' pennies. Both types are generally associated with the Light coinage of Offa (issued down to 792/3, at least in Canterbury) by their weight and typology. Portrait and non-portrait designs (sometimes sharing the same reverse types or dies) were regularly produced side by side at this time. However, one detail suggests that Æthelberht's non-portrait penny may belong slightly later than the 'wolf and twins' type. The latter is unusual in that the moneyer's name is placed on the obverse, as a prefix to the king's name, which has the effect of forcing the word **REX** onto the reverse, where one would normally expect the moneyer's name – and where indeed the moneyer's name is found on a penny of Offa by Lul utilising the same 'wolf and twins' reverse design (Figure 1b).¹⁴ This faux pas breaks with the pattern seen on virtually every other coin of the late eighth century: hence it is most likely to have occurred at a point when the individual(s) charged with laying out coin-types were still finding their feet. Even if placement of **REX** on the reverse was a conscious decision taken to lay greater emphasis on the royal title, the practice may have been inspired by the rare pennies of Offa which place the moneyer's name alongside the portrait, and which also belong very early in the course of the Light coinage.¹⁵

For these reasons, it can be proposed that the structure of Lul's coinage in the Light phase of Offa began with the 'wolf and twins' pennies of Æthelberht II. Next probably came his non-portrait coin for the same ruler, followed by the 'wolf and twins' pennies of Offa and then by other types for the Mercian king. This progression took place during a period of uncertain length. The substantive Light coinage in East Anglia probably began at approximately the same time as at Offa's other major mint-places in the southeast, or perhaps slightly later, as

⁸ The closest is Chick 242, though this was probably minted after Æthelberht's death.

⁹ Chick 84–8.

¹⁰ The closest is Chick 174 (an East Anglian issue); see also Chick 117, 122–3, 126–34 and 167.

¹¹ Early issues from Kent (in the name of Heaberht and Egbert II as well as Offa) present similar uncertainties, involving either a complex sharing agreement, or a quick succession of kings: Naismith 2012a, 326–8.

¹² Naismith 2010, 79.

¹³ Naismith 2011, I, 35.

¹⁴ Chick 171. Cf. Naismith 2012b, 119–20.

¹⁵ Naismith 2010, 92.

some East Anglian types were modelled on south-eastern issues, and there were no East Anglian specimens in the Aiskew hoard.¹⁶ Sometime in the mid- to late 780s is most likely. The cessation of Æthelberht's coinage presumably coincided at the latest with his execution in 794. If his coins were still being struck so late, the Light coinage in East Anglia may have continued slightly longer than at Canterbury and London. Room must still be made for Heavy pennies of Offa which were issued by East Anglian moneyers, but they are rare, and could again have appeared later than at the south-eastern mint-places (i.e. after 792/3). The chronology becomes less tight if Æthelberht's coinage, and the assertion of independence that it implies, had come somewhat before his execution, or if the possibility of Lul working for both kings simultaneously is entertained.¹⁷ Much still remains to be determined about the earliest decades of the broad silver penny, and when even one new find can prompt such reappraisal of an obscure king's reign and coinage, it is fully to be expected that further discoveries might change our perspective in new and unexpected ways.

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A NEW ROUND HALFPENNY OF ÆTHELSTAN (924–939)

HUGH PAGAN AND STEWART LYON

ENTRY 92 in *BNJ* Coin Register 2013 records a metal detector find made at Thornborough, Buckinghamshire, in May 2012 (EMC 2012.0167), described as follows :

Æthelstan II/Guthrum (880–90), Two-Line type, North –
Obv. †EDLǼ[N?][A][R?][E]†, pincer cross with lozenge centre containing four small wedges.
Rev. []EEE[*C*, *G* or *L*?] / RI MO
 Weight: 0.45 g. Die axis 270°.

An accompanying note records that this is a 'new type for the coinage of Æthelstan II/Guthrum'. Dr Peter Northover undertook a metallurgical (EPMA) analysis of the coin for the finder which is understood to have been consistent with this attribution, but no results of this analysis are available at present.¹

¹⁶ Chick 2010, 8–9; *Checklist* no. 46a.

¹⁷ For further discussion of East Anglian chronology at this time see Chick 2010, 94–5.

¹ Dr Peter Northover, *pers. comm.*