AN IRISH ELEVENTH-CENTURY COIN OF THE SOUTHERN O'NEIL.

BY H. ALEXANDER PARSONS.

SINCE the foundation of the British Numismatic Society much has been done towards a more complete elucidation of the coinages of these islands, and amongst the notable achievements of the past was the discovery, by Major P. Carlyon-Britton, of a native issue of Wales.¹ I have now to place on record a further coinage of the Celtic peoples of these islands, this time of that branch of them which has its home in Ireland.

It must have seemed a remarkable fact to numismatists that the Celtic peoples of Ireland who, in the early mediæval period, had so advanced a civilization that they may be said to have taken the lead in much of the learning of Europe, did not institute a metallic monetary system of their own at the time of the inscribed issues of their Anglo-Saxon contemporaries. Indeed, our early schools of Irish numismatists, commencing with Simon, and ending with Lindsay, boldly but not very discriminatingly, appropriated an issue of money² to a Donald, King of Monaghan, figure 1, of which the following coin is an example:—

![Coin Image]

FIG. 1.—HIBERNO-DANISH PENNY OF DUBLIN FORMERLY ATTRIBUTED TO DONALD, KING OF MONAGHAN. H. A. PARSONS.

Obverse.— + DYMN Roe + MNEMI
Reverse.— + FAEMIEN M NO DYEL

¹ The Saxon, Norman and Plantagenet Coinage of Wales, British Numismatic Journal, ii.
² See British Numismatic Journal, vi, p. 76.
Modern research, however, clearly shows that the coins so attributed are the product of the Hiberno-Danish, or perhaps more correctly speaking, the Hiberno-Norse, mint of Dublin at the time of Sihtric Silkbeard, A.D. 989 to 1029 or 1035, who died in 1042.

In my enquiries into the coinages of the peoples of Northern Europe in the tenth and eleventh centuries, which have a common origin in the coins of Saxon Britain, I have come across an issue of money, so far as I know represented only by the coin now exhibited, about which there can be no question of the country of origin, and it opens an entirely new line of numismatic enquiry. That it is not one of the numerous blundered or designedly indecipherable coins of the period, is evident on comparison of it with specimens of that class of money which, in fact, was the rule in the Hiberno-Norse currency of its time; although well struck intelligible pennies had been issued just before. Beyond a certain crudeness of execution, and a pardonable lapse on the part of the die-sinker in so punching the reverse die as to cause the legend to be retrograde, the coin reads quite clearly as follows (see figure 2):

**FIG. 2.—Penny of the Southern O'Néil. H. A. Parsons.**

Obverse.—NOIL + REX M, the E retrograde and the left lower limb of the X incomplete. Mantled bust to left, helmed and coroneted; surrounded by the inscription broken by the bust and points of the crown. All within an outer dotted circle.

Reverse.—+ BLANPISE ON LI, retrograde; the L of LI inverted. Quatrefoil with three pellets on each of the cusps, superimposed on a voided cross; around, is the legend between an inner and outer circle.
The R of the period on Anglo-Saxon coins is generally formed with an exaggerated loop and a tiny tail. Figure 4 shows a specimen with the R formed on this coin, but owing to the brooch of the mantle being out of place and in the way, the tail of the R on the Irish specimen has almost disappeared in the circle representing the brooch. The downward folds of the mantle, one to the right and the other to the left of the shoulders, were punched into the die in the wrong way so that, instead of flowing outwards, they trend towards each other. It is an error pardonable to a tiro in the art of die making.

If we transpose the E, complete the X of REX, and place the + before instead of, as on the coin, after the king’s name, the obverse inscription reads +NOIL REX M, and having regard to the reverse reading, the words REX M can mean only King of Munster.

The retrograding of the reverse inscription is not uncommon in the initial efforts of countries newly adopting a metallic medium of exchange. The die makers, of course, failed to cut the dies so as to secure forward impressions off it.

The third letter of the moneyer’s name is the unbarred A of the period, and the fifth is, of course, the Saxon form of W, which was almost universal on the Anglo-Saxon prototype coinages of the period, and was continued on English money for a century after the approximate date of our coin.

We therefore have disclosed to us a moneyer called Blanwise. This is a northern dithematic name made up of the protothème Bland and deuterothème-wise. Both these elements are well known of the period,¹ although, until the discovery of this coin, they have not hitherto been found in association. It therefore adds another name to Searle’s list, and in this connection it might be mentioned that the coinage forms our only record of many names in use in the Saxon period.

I have reason to think that in those countries where there was no necessity for an elaborate organization for the mint, the die-sinker

¹ See Onomasticon Anglo-Saxonicum. W. G. Searle, M.A.
was also the moneyer.\(^1\) The matrices of this coin would therefore have been cut by an Hiberno-Norse craftsman residing in the town represented by the letters L I. Having regard to the obverse inscription, which ends in REX M, these letters unmistakably point to Limerick, the capital of Munster, and, as now, the most considerable town of the West of Ireland at the period of our coin. Limerick, in Old Norse, was equated Hlimrek, but the initial aspirate if occurring on mint names was rarely placed on the coins. To take a well known case lying nearer to us, the form Hrofceaster almost invariably appears on our money without the aspirate, as Rofceaster or some abbreviation of that spelling.

Limerick was one of the coast towns colonized by the Norse vikings at the time of the second period of invasion of Ireland, which commenced about A.D. 845. The Norsemen do not appear, however, to have conquered Munster, or to have been present there in very large numbers. Limerick therefore was probably never much more than a trading station to the Northmen.

However that may be, Munster failed to maintain its ground as an independent Norse kingdom after the defeat, at Sulchoit in A.D. 968, of Magnus its Norse king, by the great Irish leader Brian Boru and his brother Mahon. The Norse eclipse in the West of Ireland did not, however, involve total expulsion. A colony was left there to maintain, according to the Irish records, the trade and handicrafts of the town; for there is no doubt that in commerce and in some constructive arts the Norse settlers of Ireland were in advance of the native peoples. At least they attained by practice to a higher standard in some of these arts than did the Celts, for instance, in ship and fort building, and the making of arms.

The reverse inscription proves that, although inspired by the Celtic masters of the town the coin was the work of a Norse craftsman,

\(^1\) For example, on the Coins of Eric, jarl or earl of Norway, A.D. 1000 to 1015, the only legend on the reverse is \textit{HROSA ME FEC = Hrosa made me}. I think it is reasonable to conclude that Hrosa was the die-sinker as well as the craftsman who struck off the coins.
and it thus affords striking corroboration of the Irish records above referred to. With the statement of fact that the coin was the work of a Norseman, we can usefully return to a consideration of the obverse legend which must be considered to have been cut, in respect of the form of the king’s name, in Old Norse. It is true that the title is in Latin, but that would be due to the copying of the similar word on the prototype, in just the same way as the letters ON between the moneyer’s and mint names is an exact copy of that universal word on the Anglo-Saxon money of the time. Where they were appropriate, the die-sinker imitated exactly the designs, and the titles of king and moneyer; but the name of the prince to be placed on this coin was one for which there was no copy, any more than there was a guide to the form of the name of the moneyer. In both instances they were therefore by a Norseman cut in Old Norse. Now in the same way as the Old Norse name Gudrød is now equated Godred, so the modern Neil would in Old Norse be given as Nöil, alternative Noil, the modified o, which equals oe, having the pronunciation of the French eu, and the i being pronounced like long e. A collateral example occurs in the name of Ramsey in the Isle of Man which in the Chronicle of Man appears as Romšö.

We therefore arrive at obverse and reverse readings which mean that the coin was struck by a Norse moneyer named Blanwise, for use in the town of Limerick, in the kingdom of Munster, at a time when that town and kingdom were under the dominion or, at least, the influence of an Irish king of the family of the O’Neils. Alternatively a Norse craftsman of Limerick, being called upon to strike money for the use of the merchants, was inspired to place on the coinage the greatest Irish name known at a time when warring factions, and rapid political changes, made it uncertain who was the over-king.

The question now arises “to which member of the historic family of the O’Neil the coin is to be ascribed, or in whose time and name it was struck?” Initial help in this direction will be obtained by consideration of the period of issue of the Anglo-Saxon prototypes, for
it must have been struck after the date of the second of these prototypes.

To those who are acquainted with late Saxon coins it will be seen that the prototypes are to be found in the money of Edward the Confessor, A.D. 1042 to 1065. The obverse is a copy of the second type of the coinages of that king, figure 3; and the reverse is an imitation of his third type, figure 4.¹ Both of these issues, in the form imitated on our coin, are peculiar to Edward the Confessor. The type of the bust on this Irish coin shows that it was probably copied from a penny struck at a mint in the North of England at this time, for the method of showing the points of the coronet above, instead of on, the helmet, is a peculiarity frequently to be seen on the coins of this type of the northern mints of England—see figure 3 for a Derby example.

![Figs. 3 and 4.—Showing the types of Edward the Confessor from which the coin of the O'Neill was imitated. H. A. Parsons.](image)

It will be seen that the obverse of the Irish coin closely follows figure 3, and, indeed, it is more than probable that it was actually copied from a similar Derby example, because the defective X of REX, noticeable in figure 3, also appears in the imitation, figure 2. In other ways, for instance in the bust, the two coins closely approximate each other in their treatment. Commerce between Ireland and the North of England through Chester and Man was extensive at this time, and the coins of the Northern mints of England would therefore be more largely represented in the sister kingdom than those of the southern mints. That the money of the Confessor was, in fact, well known in Ireland is established by the great hoard of such

¹ The arrangement of the types followed is that of Major Carlyon-Britton in "Edward the Confessor and his Coins," Numismatic Chronicle, 1905.
coins, amounting to over 1000 examples, with more than 200 contemporary Hiberno-Norse coins, found at Dunbrody Abbey, County Wexford, in 1837. From the meagre record of this hoard, given by Lindsay,¹ we learn that coins of the two types from which the subject of our paper was imitated were present in considerable numbers; and if the hoard bears any analogy to similar finds in Scandinavia, as is probable, it would be chiefly composed of these two types.

Edward the Confessor ascended the throne of England in A.D. 1042. He issued 10 to 11 types of coins from that year to A.D. 1065 and, according to Major P. Carlyon-Britton, the last of the two types represented on our coin was continuously issued between the years 1045 and 1048.² I hardly think that the Irish penny under notice would come so early as this, for it must have taken some time for supplies of the prototype to have become known in the West of Ireland. In broad terms, the period of issue of this Irish coin would, on the evidence of the prototype, be probably after the middle of the eleventh century.

Which O’Neill then claimed dominion over Munster, or was acknowledged there, at this period? Although the O’Neils had been titular over-kings of Ireland for centuries, their main country was in the middle and north of Ireland, that inhabited by the Southern and Northern O’Neils respectively. In Munster, however, the powerful family of the O’Briens more often than not reigned supreme. A consideration of the history of Ireland at the time will, however, throw light on the question at issue.

Eliminating exaggeration and myth, the period before the suggested time of issue of the coin was marked by the rise of the greatest of the representatives of both the Southern O’Neils and of the O’Briens. The former, in the person of Malachy II³ had, by his defeat of the Norse vikings and the Southern native chiefs in the late tenth century, attained an eminence which went far towards

¹ A view of the Coinage of Ireland, p. 134.
² "Edward the Confessor and his Coins," Numismatic Chronicle, 1905.
³ It should be noted that modern spellings of Irish names have been adopted throughout the paper.
An Irish Eleventh-Century Coin of the Southern O’Neill.

converting the somewhat shadowy title of over-king of his predecessors into a real overlordship of Ireland. On the other hand, his preeminence was soon after eclipsed by the most notable of the O’Briens, in the person of the chief of the Dalcassian branch, named Brian Boru. This prince seems to have flashed across Irish history like a meteor. Coming up from the fastnesses of his own native Clare, he first helped his brother Mahan to expel the Norsemen from Limerick. After the assassination of Mahan, and at the conclusion of a severe struggle with the local chiefs, Brian became, in A.D. 978, King of Munster. He then turned his attention to Malachy O’Neill who, as before stated, had gone far towards converting a loose confederacy of septs into a strong central power. He did so through necessity of self preservation, for Brian’s was a nature which would not be content with his being a tributary king. Although at first checked, he by judicious if unscrupulous diplomacy arrayed the Norsemen of Dublin on his side, and so isolated Malachy that that chief of the Southern O’Neils was forced to relinquish his title of over-king and retire to Meath, where he was allowed to reign as an independent sovereign.

But Brian was not satisfied with even this measure of success, and it was not long before he broke the truce and marched to the attack of Tara, in Meath, the old Irish capital. Malachy in vain appealed for assistance from the northern branch of his family, and, in default of it, considering resistance hopeless, became, in A.D. 1001-2, a dependent king. Brian then turned his attention to the Northern O’Neils, but although by A.D. 1011 he had met with a large measure of success he never wholly subjugated the North. By this time the men of Leinster and the Norsemen of Dublin rose against the O’Brien and this resulted in the famous battle of Clontarf near Dublin, in A.D. 1014. In this battle Malachy O’Neil appeared on the side of Brian who, with the men of Clare, Munster, South Connaught and Meath, fought the rebel confederacy. The battle, although it went in favour of Brian, was disastrous for Ireland. One of Brian’s sons and one of his grandsons were slain, and Brian himself succumbed to an attack by a retreating viking. With the
death of Brian, and the confusion which arose after the battle, Malachy O'Neil again became over-king with Donchad O'Brian as under-king of Munster. But there followed continuous struggles for the supremacy and, after A.D. 1022, when Malachy II died, several of the provincial kings were claimed as over-kings by their partisans. They were known as "high kings with opposition," that is, under protest of the other kings. In the period of these "high kings with opposition," the issue of the coin under notice must have occurred. The first of these high kings was Donchad O'Brian. He was deposed and exiled in A.D. 1064, when his nephew Turlough was made king of Munster. But it is evident that this was not effected without a struggle, for Turlough's elevation was only secured with the powerful aid of Diarmod MacNambo, the king of Leinster, who had risen to considerable power. Diarmod was, however, defeated and slain at Odba by Conchobar O'Neil, son of Malachy, in A.D. 1072.

This short summary of Irish history is sufficient to show that the utmost political confusion reigned in Ireland after the death of Malachy O'Neil, from which emerges the probability that the O'Neil of the South in the person of Conchobar, had all the time been making a continuous struggle to maintain in his own person his hereditary family position of over-king of Ireland. That he succeeded to a large extent is evident from the deposition and exile of Donchad O'Brian and the defeat of the Diarmod of Leinster which followed, as the latter event probably was similarly followed by the eclipse of Turlough O'Brian of Munster. For a time, therefore, between A.D. 1064 and 1072, the presumption is strong that Conchobar O'Neil was overlord of Munster, although possibly with but slender authority. The extent to which the authority of an over-king was manifested largely depended upon the conditions of the time. The under-king generally paid a tribute, not necessarily of any great value in the case of a weak claim, and the over-king reciprocated by giving a present. In cases of weak claims to the overlordship—as in the present instance—nothing much beyond this would be necessary. The coinage was, however, a prerogative always jealously guarded in the early history of nations, and no die-sinker would
willingly infringe it. Hence the name of the supreme O’Neil on our coin.

It seems certain that it was not until the year 1072 that Turlough O’Brien secured the position of high king which his uncle Donchad had once held, before his deposition and exile in A.D. 1064. But we need not go further. It is improbable that the coin was issued after A.D. 1072 and it was more likely to have been struck before. The weight of the piece is 15 grains and, as there was certainly constant connection between Limerick and Dublin, this weight would probably conform to the standard of the coins of the latter town. On this test the date of the Limerick penny would fall between A.D. 1065 and 1095.

The earlier years of this period were those of Conchobhar, the last of the direct line of the Southern O’Neils, which for centuries had been the elect of Ireland. Conchobhar, or his partisans in Limerick, may well have thought that to initiate a coinage, and to place upon it this famous patronymic would strengthen his claim to the overlordship of his forefathers. Coins were needed only in the towns where the Northmen carried on a foreign trade, for at the inland fairs a metallic medium of exchange was not used. Limerick was probably the principal port solely under Irish rule, hence the appearance on the coinage of the name of a city in Munster instead of, say, Tara the capital of the Southern O’Neils. Limerick still contained a considerable body of Norse settlers, amongst whom one capable of executing a coinage might be found. At this time the Irish were quite used to a native, though Norse, coinage, and only the unfortunate retardation of a real central authority, so nearly set up by both Malachy O’Neil and Brian Boru, prevented a general native Irish coinage, the convenience of which, in some circumstances, could not have escaped notice of the people.

Having regard to the peculiar constitution of the Irish kingdoms, I see nothing strange in the name of the state of Munster being placed on this coin of Limerick in Munster, although issued in the name of the O’Neil of Ireland. The die-sinker would naturally put on the coin the name of the well-established sub-kingdom in
which his town was situated. In the same era we have the similar spectacle of an English king, Cnut the Great, although mainly residing in and regarding England as the chief of his dominions, issuing coins in Denmark and Sweden with the names of those countries inserted thereon. Although sub-kings were left in charge, Cnut’s name is on the money with the designations of the local kingdoms. Like the Irish coinage under review, we get the name of the over-king linked with the designation of the sub-kingdom.

A still closer example of the association on the coinage of the name of a local province with that of the overlord, and belonging to the time just prior to our coin, is an issue of money by Olaf the Saint, King of Norway A.D. 1015 to 1028, for, on a coin of this prince appears the name of a district of Norway, viz., Drontheim. The coin reads OLAFEX DRONTI although it is well known that Olaf was king of the whole of Norway.

Failing the direct issue of the coin by the O’Neil of the time, in the person of Conchobar, there is the alternative explanation that a Norse craftsman in Limerick, at a period when no one was certain who was the over-king, struck money for the use of the merchants with the name of the greatest Irish family of that age, and of centuries before. The O’Neils had been the principal royal family of Ireland for, from the beginning of the sixth century to A.D. 1022, when Malachy O’Neil died, there had been forty high-kings, and all of them, except Brian Boru, were of the sept of the O’Neils, known before the tenth century as the Hy-Nial. Although the high-kingship was not hereditary, selection was made from the royal stock, called rig-domna, or royal material, and in view of the political confusion of the period of the coin it is not an unreasonable alternative to consider that this money should bear the name of the hereditary family of over-kings, even although they had not, at the time, very direct authority over the particular part of the country in which it was struck.

In either of the alternatives suggested for the authorship of this currency it must, notwithstanding its Norse characteristics, be regarded as a native Irish coinage, for Limerick had, at a time long
previous to the issue of the coin, reverted to Celtic rule. On my attribution of the coin this currency must rank, not only as an important addition to our numismatic and Irish historical knowledge, but also as further evidence that the Celtic race was not so supine in the matter of issue of an independent currency as is generally supposed. In addition it shows that the Irish conception of a suitable coinage was in advance of the contemporary Norse ideas on the same subject, since the currency of Dublin of probably the same period, which was not merely struck but also inspired by Norsemen, consists of money of extremely crude designs, and with frankly unintelligible legends. Indeed, the presence of the names of the king and the moneyer, as well as of the kingdom and town of issue, throws it into marked contrast with the contemporary Hiberno-Norse coins of the east side of the island, which are without even a semblance of these details.

Had Conchobar O'Neil been strong enough to maintain a real and lasting overlordship, Ireland might have continued an independent coinage of which evidence exists in this penny of Limerick. In this respect Ireland does not stand alone, for a similar instance occurred in Sweden at much the same era. There also a currency, modelled on Anglo-Saxon types, was initiated by Olaf Stötkonung, A.D. 995 to 1022, to be continued by his son and successor, Amund Jacob A.D. 1022 to 1050, and then suddenly to cease for a long period, during which no native coins were, so far as is known, struck. Hans Hildebrand, writing on the period,¹ states

“that the absence of coins in Sweden then finds its best explanation in the general state of the land. The period in question, full of troubles and bloody conflicts, is rich in the names of Kings, but of those Kings nothing more is known than the names, neither their deeds, their ages, or their exact position.”

Eliminating the uncertain in Irish annals, the same could almost be said of the Ireland of our coin. But here the analogy ceases,

¹ The Industrial Arts in Scandinavia in the Pagan Times, p. 104.
for when Sweden awoke from numismatic darkness, it did so to issue a coinage under its own kings. When Celtic Ireland similarly awoke from metallic currency quiescence, the English conquest had become a fact, and it was under John of England that the future Irish native coinage was re-instituted. In the money of John, Limerick was represented, and it thus sustained the honour which is its due in being the first of the Irish towns to issue a native coinage.