A REMARKABLE CELTIC COIN FROM CANTERBURY  
By DEREK F. ALLEN

A gold coin has recently been found at Canterbury and acquired by the Canterbury Museum, which illustrates exceptionally well the perverse processes of early Celtic art. My thanks are due to Mr. F. Higenbotham, B.A., F.L.A., the City Librarian and Curator, for permission to publish it here.

There is a large and fairly common group of gold, and later silver, quarter-staters found in this country, which, for want of a better jargon, I generally call "geometric". The designs on them are meaningless to a degree, and yet are repeated again and again with only minor modifications over a long period and in more than one part of the country. The incomprehensibility of the patterns has discouraged close study, and at present we know all too little about a group which is emerging as one of the key components in our early coinage.

The best-known coins of the group, which were amongst the Selsey finds, are the types illustrated by Mack as nos. 38 and 41, to which should be added Evans E 11, which Mack does not include. Mack no. 38 has a plain obverse with two parallel indentations on it and the

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obverse of Evans E 11 is also plain. Mack no. 41 has a jagged pattern on the obverse, Fig. 3, which has been interpreted as a boar or a wolf-and-twins or, seen the other way up, a boat with sails. The reverse in all three cases might be said to consist of an assemblage of indeterminate marks around an amorphous object; the latter sometimes looks as if it had been the embryo of the badge on a Grenadier guardsman’s cap. The reverse of Mack no. 38, Fig. 5, is a spring-cleaned version of the mad-house on Mack no. 41, Fig. 4.

These appearances are, of course, deceptive. As one would expect, these coins have a derivation from Gaul and, as things are, it is not possible to draw with certainty the dividing line between those struck there and here. Some quarter-staters of the group have come from approximately the same area of Belgic Gaul as that in which the gold staters traditionally attributed to the Bellovaci and Atrebates are also found. It is a fair start, therefore, to look for the origin of these patterns amongst the features of the traditional types of Gaulish staters, the Celticized head of Apollo on the obverse and the horse and chariot with charioteer on the reverse, as they were employed in Belgic Gaul.

To take the obverse first, Fig. 3, it was a long while before I could see any trace of derivation at all, but the suggestion I now make will not, I think, seem far-fetched to those who have followed the course of other patterns through their Celtic variations. The body of the “wolf”, or hull of the “boat”, is an enlarged version of one of the conical locks of hair, usually arranged in sets of three or four above and below the main elongated central lock. Even the three prongs at the end of the lock survive, sometimes in exaggerated form, where they constitute the “face” of the “wolf”. All that is new is the two oblong holes to break the monotony of the triangular body of the lock. The “twins” or “sails” are two pairs of leaves from the wreath across Apollo’s head, joined at the corners by little cracks or flaws in the striking, a very common characteristic of the wreaths in this position on Belgic staters. In fact, the obverse of these coins, with very little rearrangement, is an enlargement of something like a tenth of the surface of an ordinary Belgic stater (of which I show the relevant part in Fig. 3A), a process which not unnaturally renders the design completely unintelligible. It is an astonishing fact that the dominance of tradition and the passion for continuity in Celtic art enabled the essential elements of an ugly pattern, inherently devoid of meaning, to survive through a century or so of copying.

The origin of the reverse, Fig. 4, is harder to pin down, but the clue is there. With the exception of Mack no. 38, Fig. 5, and similar coins, where symmetry has been consciously imposed, it is one of the most consistent features of what I will refer to as the Grenadier’s badge, that the “smoke” to the left has larger branches than that to the right. There are always three prongs to the left, but sometimes two only to the right. This is even more marked on Evans E 11. Trace this back to the versions which seem typologically the earliest (fortunately...
Mack gives one as no. 39, my Figs. 1–2, obverse and reverse, and another as no. 42), and it needs little imagination to see in the left-hand projection the wing of a winged victory driving the chariot, or perhaps more truly floating on air over the horse’s back. A similar winged figure sometimes occurs under the horse (e.g. on the staters attributed to the Aulerci Cenomani). The minor projection to the right is the remains of arm and whip. A kind of meander below the charioteer is, I have little doubt though I cannot prove it, the tail of the horse. It is in just about the right relative position, but, of course, completely incomprehensible without the horse to which it belongs. (In Fig. 2A I have reconstructed from the winged figure on staters attributed to the Bellovaci the kind of stage which I imagine preceded it.) I do not think one need read more into the remaining marks than the usual ornamentation which fills in the blanks on most Celtic coins.

I suspect these quarter-staters began when for some reason the moneyers in the north-west corner of Belgic Gaul began to strike quarter-staters with dies meant for staters proper. Gaulish, like British, coins are scarcely ever as wide as the dies which struck them and it would not be very surprising if, to save trouble, someone had tried to use the same dies for two sizes of coin, the larger and the smaller. The next step was when special quarter-stater dies were cut, but they then were made to resemble the fractional designs on the quarter-staters struck with full-size dies, instead of reproducing on a smaller scale the whole design of these dies.

We do not know enough about this group to arrange the coins in a neat family tree. The coins which seem to be the earliest, and are definitely Gaulish, are those which have on the obverse, in place of the lock of hair pattern, one, two, or four lozenges. This pattern does not seem to be derived from any part of the head of Apollo. These are the ones Mack has illustrated as nos. 39 and 42, which we have already noted give the clue to the charioteer origin of the reverse. Mack no. 41, with the lock of hair obverse, but what seems to be a typologically later reverse, may well first have been struck in Gaul, but it is a relatively common coin in Britain, and I should be surprised if some specimens were not struck here. The typological successors to Mack no. 41 are certainly British and go through a long and as yet unrecorded history of change while being struck in silver in south-west Britain.

Obviously out of the same stable, but with a slightly different ancestry, is Mack no. 38. It is clearly connected with Evans E 11, which I assume to be continental. Mack no. 38 is not, so far as I can tell, found on the Continent, but the varieties of geometric types are not always clearly distinguished in the sources. In any case the double indentation on the obverse occurs on quite a number of British coins, mostly from Kent.1 My present inclination is to regard Mack no. 38 as a British, and probably Kentish, coin.

On the reverse Mack no. 38 has a neat and symmetrical version of 1 e.g. Mack nos. 282, 284, 294, 297, 298.
the charioteer pattern. Without attempting to improve the sense, someone has at least set about making order out of chaos. The central device is now evenly arranged on the two sides, and has been linked, so as to form a triangle, with the straightened horse’s tail. To mark the angles of the base of the triangle a star, taken from the field, has been superimposed on each. Subsidiary meander bands on the earlier version have been developed into large squares, cross-hatched, and the whole is surmounted by three circles, the outer pair similarly cross-hatched. The resulting pattern would not be out of place on a contemporary wallpaper.

It is here that the new Canterbury gold quarter-stater (weight 20.5 gr.) comes in, Figs. 7 and 8. Mack no. 38 is not an exceptionally rare coin, and the details vary, but only to a minor degree. On the reverse of the new coin (the obverse with its parallel indentations is identical) the engraver has sought, without departing from the spirit
of his model, to make sense of it. He has accordingly brought the charioteer to life again in another form, but upside down. The engraver can have had no idea that the patterns with which he was playing had once before represented a human form. As now engraved, what had started as the wings have now become a corselet, belt, and kilt; the sides of the triangle seem to be upraised arms holding a pair of suns in splendour, linked together by what was the horse's tail. What on Mack no. 38 was no more than a minor ring ornament has become a human head wearing a crested helmet. The cross-hatched squares and circles above remain unchanged. The stages of the transformation are shown in Figs. 5, 6, and 7. Fig. 5 is Mack no. 38 the right way up; Fig. 6 the same the wrong way up, and Fig. 7 the Canterbury coin.

The interpretation of this remarkable device is not straightforward. Obviously, it is connected with the pursuit of arms, but it is arguable whether what is shown could ever have been intended to represent a warrior. Instead of legs, we have a single post, fixed in an orb. This suggests a trophy, on the lines of those shown on so many Roman coins, but Roman trophies, even when composed of Gallic arms, have no head, whereas on our coin the features of the face beneath the helmet are clearly visible. If this is a trophy, then it includes a severed human head,¹ and what I have taken for arms are probably crossed spears. A third, and perhaps more defensible, speculation is that we have here the legless effigy of an unidentified war-god, somewhat in the manner of a herm,² but carrying, for confusion's sake, emblems of the sun. In a coin which in many respects is still traditional, it may be best not to look for too much logic; we may have no more than a pattern composed of elements suggested by the glorification of war.

The crested helmet is of a more conical shape than usual on British coins, where a bowl-shaped helmet is almost universal. Sharply conical helmets are, however, a well-known part of the equipment of Gaulish warriors, and several examples have survived. The conical form of helmet on this coin may be a mark either of early date or of contact with Gaul. The crest, growing out of the peak of the helmet, may be compared with that on Mack no. 130.

The cuirass, with belt and kilt or skirt, is also common in the trophies of Gallic weapons on Roman coins, and a similar costume is worn by the foot-soldiers on several Gaulish coins.³ On our only coin showing a comparable foot-soldier, Mack no. 244 of Cunobelinus, although he is encumbered with a superfluity of gear, this would-be Roman legionary wears what is basically the same costume.

It will, I think, be agreed that this unique new coin from Canterbury combines in a remarkable degree the old and the new traditions

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¹ For the use of severed human heads in Gaulish monuments, see P. Lambrechts, "L'Exaltation de la tete dans la pensee et dans l'art des Celtes", Dissertationes Archaeologicae Gandenses, 1954, pp. 30–50.
² For a Gaulish herm, see Lambrechts, op. cit., p. 74.
³ e.g. De la Tour, Atlas de monnaies gauloises. 3900 (Epad), 4484 (Vepotal), 5072–6 (Litavicos), 5026 (Dubnocov/Dubnorex).
in late Celtic coinage. One cannot aim to place such a piece too precisely in the chequered story of Kentish coinage. Many waves of invasion met in Kent. For the time being it will be best to regard the coin as about the first attempt on the part of one of the many groups which settled in, or passed through, Kent, to modernize a traditional coinage of north-west Belgic stock at a date which cannot be far removed from the invasions of Julius Caesar.

The figures in the text are reconstructions of the complete type, or as much of it as possible, from a number of specimens. They do not represent any single coin, except in the case of the new coin, Fig. 7. Figs. 1-2 are obverse and reverse respectively of Mack no. 39; Figs. 3-4 are obverse and reverse respectively of Mack no. 41; Figs. 5 and 6 are the reverse, right and wrong way up, of Mack no. 38. Figs. 2A and 3A are not taken directly from any coin types. Fig. 2A, based on the general pattern of the winged figure above the horse on gold coins attributed to the Bellovaci, Mack nos. 1-4, represents the kind of charioteer from which I imagine Mack no. 39, Fig. 2, to have been taken. Fig. 3A is a diagram of a portion of a typical obverse die of many Belgic coin types, showing three locks of hair and four pairs of leaves from the wreath; one lock and two pairs of leaves provide the basis of Fig. 3.