FORGERY IN THE ANGLO-SAXON SERIES

By C. E. BLUNT and J. D. A. THOMPSON

With the increasing interest of the historian in Anglo-Saxon coins, a number of numismatists have been re-examining their material to test its validity. The results have been disconcerting. It had been generally assumed that forgery, of a kind likely to prove deceptive today, was not rife in the Anglo-Saxon series and that the greater part of the dangerous forgeries had been identified and condemned in Mr. Lawrence’s papers in the British Numismatic Journal.¹ This is proving not to be the case. The evidence all points to the existence of an active and well-equipped forger who operated during the nineteenth century and whose products have been only partially recognized. The earliest sale record of his coins that we have found was in the middle of the nineteenth century, but most make their first appearance later. A number of them have since passed successfully through various important collections and acquired distinguished pedigrees. Quite lately it has proved possible to have two condemned and it is hoped that in due course all will find their way into the forgery trays of the British Museum, where alone they can be not only entirely harmless, but readily available for comparison in future cases.

In dealing with the question of forgeries great care has always to be taken to avoid condemning a coin without very good grounds for doing so. There will consequently always remain a more or less suspect class of border-line cases where there may be a conviction that a coin is a forgery but insufficient evidence to prove it. This class of coin is not dealt with in the present paper.

Another problem in writing about forgeries is to give the evidence of detection without at the same time telling a future forger how to avoid similar pitfalls. In this paper certain evidence is deliberately withheld with this end in view, but it is hoped that sufficient will be given to prove the case it is sought to make.

Before turning to the individual who is the primary subject of this paper, it would be profitable to say a word on John White, an earlier forger in the English series. The name of White crops up often enough in early numismatic literature in England. Haigh refers to him as “the notorious forger”;² Sainthill as “the person who imposed spurious coins of Richard I on the unsuspecting honesty of Snelling”;³ Nichols as “the celebrated Collector (and supposed Fabricator) of Ancient Coins”;⁴ and Hawkins, when impugning the plates prepared by Withy and Ryall, says, “they are supposed to have been engraved under the inspection of Mr. John White and coins represented which either never existed, or were altered by his ingenuity to suit his fancy and impose upon collectors”⁵

² Numismatic History of East Anglia, p. 4.
³ Olla Podrida, i, p. 207.
⁴ Literary Illustrations, v, p. 187.
Several unfavourable references to White occur in the Gentleman’s Magazine. Referring to an unusual coin, a writer says, “but this is engraved from the highly suspicious cabinet of Mr. White” (1796, p. 639). In the following year (p. 120) occurs: “Any collector of coins will give Mr. Laskey such an account of Mr. White’s fabrications, as will convince him that it was not one false step that entirely ruined his fame.” Again in the same year (p. 394): “If I do not mistake, the two pennies of Richard I fabricated by Mr. White, were not discovered to be forgeries till long after the plates were engraved and published by the Antiquarian Society. I beg to ask R. for information, what other frauds Mr. White practised in this way.”

White was a tradesman in Newgate Street in the City of London and is described in a contemporary manuscript note in a copy of the catalogue of his collection, dispersed in 1788 after his death, as “Chip, etc. Hat Dealer”. Dealing in coins appears to have been a side-line and he seems to have exercised as much ingenuity in providing provenances for some of his coins (quite possibly genuine pieces) as he did in creating coins to fill gaps in collectors’ cabinets. Among his more daring efforts was a coin which, he claimed, was “actually found on the coffin of Hardicanute in Denmark”.

Among the few customers of John White who can be identified today was William Hunter whose accounts show that from 1776 onwards he made a number of purchases from White. But Hunter seems to have been shrewd enough to avoid having direct dealings with him: the receipts are always made out to Taylor Combe who rightly enjoyed the reputation of being a good judge of a coin. One of White’s forgeries did, however, deceive Taylor Combe’s father, Dr. Charles Combe. Ruding records that a coin of Æthelbald, engraved by Hall in a set of plates of Anglo-Saxon coins prepared, “as it is believed” under the direction of Mr. John White of Newgate Street, was seen by Dr. Combe in the cabinet of a Mr. Austin and pronounced by him to be genuine. Taylor Combe, however, could not find it there. This coin would hardly deceive anyone today. It is illustrated in Hawkins’s Silver Coins as no. 168. Kenyon in Hawkins’s 3rd edition is guarded as to its authenticity. What is possibly the same coin is illustrated by Lawrence. If the alleged Richard I short-cross penny also illustrated by Lawrence is the one imposed on Snelling, the same comment would apply.

It is necessary to stress the elementary nature of White’s forgeries because his association with the first recorded specimen of Æthelberht’s celebrated “wolf and twins” penny has led to serious doubts being cast on its authenticity. This coin belonged to a Mr. Lindegreen, who

1 We are indebted to Mrs. Strudwick for these references to the Gentleman’s Magazine.
2 Nichols, Literary Anecdotes, vi, p. 179.
3 G. Macdonald, Greek Coins in the Hunterian Collection, i, p. xxiv n.
4 Animals, i, p. 124.
5 B.N.J. ii, Pl. iii, 54. A specimen was in lot 44 of White’s sale in 1788. It made with five other Saxon coins, £1. 11s. 6d. and so was presumably even then not adjudged genuine.
6 Ibid. iii, Pl. iv, 85.
was a friend of White's, and the attention of Dr. Pegge who first published it was drawn to it by White himself.\(^1\) So great was the suspicion this created that, at the sale of Barker's collection in 1803, the British Museum was able to acquire what was then believed to be a unique coin for £1. 8s. Two more specimens are now known. One is in the Hunter collection in Glasgow, the other was in the Lockett sale (lot 323). Major Carlyon-Britton, in a paper read before the British Numismatic Society,\(^2\) gave convincing reasons for regarding these coins as genuine. Even without these, it seems hardly possible that they could have been the product of an eighteenth-century forger.

Reference has been made to Mr. Lawrence's papers on forgery\(^3\) and the importance of these cannot be overestimated. In the course of these papers he produced evidence of a highly competent forger who created several series of coins from false dies which he showed considerable skill at times in altering. The groups which it is here suggested may be associated with this individual are the following:

5. Philip and Mary-Francis and Mary (Queen of Scots) group. *B.N.J.* iv, Pl. v, 67-71.

These five groups have certain features in common. The workmanship in all cases is of high quality, giving often a meretricious finish; the items in each group are (however improbably) die-linked and the dies have often been skilfully altered; in the case of the first four groups the majority of the coins are overstruck. In some cases Lawrence claimed to identify the understriking as a coin of later date than the overstrike.

In his later years Lawrence was not entirely satisfied that he had treated fairly the coins with the name of Æthelbald. In fact at his death the two specimens he had managed to acquire were found among his Anglo-Saxon coins and not in his forgery cabinet. Conclusive proof can now be brought to show that the view expressed in his paper in the *British Numismatic Journal* (and supported by Brooke)\(^5\) was the correct one. The coins which Lawrence described were:

\(^1\) Haigh, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
\(^2\) *Brit. Num. Journ.* v, pp. 73-84.
\(^3\) In addition to his papers in *Brit. Num. Journ.* see also *Num. Chron.* 1897, pp. 226-34, 1899, pp. 241-50.
\(^4\) Lawrence had earlier followed Montagu in accepting these coins as genuine. See *Num. Chron.*, 1887, pp. 132-8 and 1893, pp. 40-45.
\(^5\) *English Coins*, p. 43.
(a) A penny by the moneyer Torhtulf bearing the name of Æthelbald (Pl. I, 1).

(b) Another from the same pair of dies with the name altered to Æthelwulf (Pl. I, 2).

Since then the same obverse die (with the legend of (b)) has been found coupled with a reverse die of a type used some twenty years earlier with the legend, in five lines across the field: ++/DORO/BERN/IXCIVI/+ . (Pl. I, 3.) This coin weighs 24.7 gr. This would be evidence enough. But the same reverse die is found used on an alleged "offering penny" bearing the name of Æthered who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 870, that is twelve years after Æthelwulf's death. This curious piece, of which more than one specimen is believed to exist, reads in two lines ÆDERED/ÆRCHIEPI . The specimen illustrated (Pl. I, 4) weighs 60 gr. and is now in the British Museum.

A further group, no member of which has been published as a forgery, although specimens exist in the forgery cabinets of the British Museum and of Messrs. A. H. Baldwin & Sons Ltd., is of the first type of Egbert of Wessex. The coins can be readily identified by the unusual bust and by the curious outline of the king's head (giving the impression that he is wearing a cap back to front), and we have seen specimens by four moneyers. Those by Ænred, Biosil, and Swene (Pl. I, 5) are from the same pair of dies with the moneyer's name altered. The fourth by the moneyer Tidem(an) (Pl. I, 6) is from the same reverse die (suitably altered) and has the same bust on the obverse. But the legend in this case starts from the top of the coin, whereas on the others it starts from the bottom.

This facility to alter his dies, often in what seem quite unnecessary places, is a feature of the work of this forger and it raises interesting questions of technique on which we hope opinions may be expressed at this meeting.

The most complex group that we have found is of the first type of Alfred. Here again specimens have been placed in forgery cabinets but others continue to circulate and command high prices. The first two to be mentioned are by the moneyers Lude and Ósric (Pl. I, 7), and failure to recognize these at that time as forgeries led to their inclusion in the Whitton edition of Brooke's English Coins, an error for which Mr. Blunt must accept the blame. They are from the same pair of dies with the moneyer's name altered and certain minor changes made, e.g. the addition of a cross at the end of the obverse legend on the Lude and the addition on Lude of various pellets on the reverse—or more probably the deletion on the Lude die of the pellets appearing on the Ósric, as the original of the latter shows traces of pellets. A specimen of the Lude was in the collection of the late Dr. Arnold who readily consented to its inclusion in this paper. A specimen of the Ósric was found recently in a deceased estate and withdrawn prior to the sale. It had previously been in Lord Grantley's collection (lot 997) and before that was in Mr. Lawrence's.
The next coin in this series bears the unusual name Oeamer (Pl. I, 8). Its general similarity to the two preceding coins will be apparent, but it differs in certain important details. The obverse legend, for instance, is broken by the bust and reads +ÆELRRED;RE+. Nonetheless the position of certain letters on all these coins is so exactly similar and certain small irregularities correspond so closely that it is hard to resist the conclusion that, in some way, all come from the same basic die. Taking the Lude/Osric coins first, the two Es of Ælfred are in the same position as the E of Rex and the first E of Ælfred on the Oeamer; the R and E of Rex correspond with the R and E of Ælrred and a slight fault at the top of the latter letter occurs on both coins. The head and bust, notably the quite unusual nose, are very similar, but the dots at the end of the hair on the Lude/Osric coins are replaced by a solid line on the Oeamer. The reverse of all three coins appears to have been struck from the same die with the moneyer’s name altered.

Allied to these three coins, but with further amendments, is a coin by the moneyer Tata (Pl. I, 9). Two specimens have in recent years successfully passed through the sale-room and it was the fact that both purported to have the same pedigree that first directed our attention to them. It appears that they are different specimens and our suspicions were further aroused when it was found that yet a third existed in the Fitzwilliam Museum, also with the same alleged pedigree. As it had been in that collection prior to either of the others appearing in the sale-room, the possibility of its being the same one was entirely eliminated. We have not seen the other two specimens together, but from the photographs (and other evidence) we have little doubt that they are in fact two separate coins. The pedigree of the Fitzwilliam Museum coin as kindly supplied to us by Mr. Shrubbs, is as follows:

Shepherd collection (1885) 69. Bought by Rollin for £14. 10s.
Montagu ,, (1895) 548. ,, ,, Spink ,, £5.
Murdoch ,, (1903) 83. ,, ,, Rollin ,, £8.
Bequeathed to the Fitzwilliam Museum in 1933 by Stewart Henderson.

The Tata coins have points in common with the others we have considered but show even greater variations. The differences are perhaps more readily seen than the points of similarity. The obverse legend reads ELFERED M-XX+. The final ED of the king’s name coincides with the ED on the Lude/Osric coins and the terminal cross is not only similarly placed to the cross on the Lude coin but of the same peculiar form. The hair at the back of the head is identical but the face has been entirely remodelled. The central feature of the bust is a bent but nearly horizontal line, but the two side pieces are identical.

On the reverse the most striking difference, besides the change of the moneyer’s name, is the new form of O in Moneta. But in other respects the coins have so close a resemblance as to make it clear that
they must be associated. In particular we would point out the spacing and placing of the pellets, the sloping E in Moneta, the N in the same word with its uneven uprights and, a small feature, but one common to all this series of forgeries, the rounded corner on the left of the lower lunette.

Yet another, but smaller, group is found of the portrait type of Edwig of which the only known genuine specimen is in the Hunter cabinet. The same dies produced each of the forgeries but the moneyer’s name is different on the only two specimens we have seen.

Moneyer Athulf (Pl. I, 10). This coin, now in the British Museum forgery trays, was formerly in the Brice, Montagu (697) and Murdoch (124) collections.

Moneyer Alred (Pl. I, 11). This coin is in Mr. F. Baldwin’s cabinet of forgeries. We have found no record of its appearance in the sale-room.

The groups of coins so far discussed all have features in common which suggest that they come from the same hand.

These features are not found on the following, but they are equally dangerous forgeries. Lawrence has recorded them but they continue to crop up from time to time and are very liable to deceive. One indeed, illustrated in two of the major works of reference, is as a result particularly liable to be taken as genuine. They are therefore added here for the protection of collectors.

Archbishops of Canterbury. Iaenberht. Lawrence illustrates in Brit. Num. Journ. ii, Pl. ii. 26, a coin (Pl. I, 12) which he rightly (in our view) condemns. This specimen is in the collection of forgeries that he left to the British Museum. But another specimen from the same dies is illustrated in the British Museum Catalogue of Anglo-Saxon Coins, Pl. xii. 2, and is again reproduced in Brooke’s English Coins, Pl. iii. 15. This coin was acquired by the British Museum in 1868 from a Mr. Joseph Mayer. A third specimen was in the Montagu sale and on its reappearance in the Astronomer’s sale (lot 122) its authenticity was questioned. Several others are known to exist. This coin is clearly copied from the original in the Hunter cabinet, reproduced in Ruding, Pl. xii. From the slight differences that there are between the original and Ruding’s plate it is apparent that the forger worked from the latter.

Æthered. Lawrence illustrates (B.N.J. ii, Pl. ii. 31) a portrait-type penny of this archbishop which again he rightly condemns. A second specimen (Pl. I, 13) which had successfully passed through the Murchison, Shepherd, Montagu, and Jenks collections was condemned at the Ryan sale (lot 604). Messrs. A. H. Baldwin & Sons Ltd. have in their possession the actual dies from which this forgery was struck and also one die of a forgery of Stephen and Matilda penny, a coin illustrated by Lawrence (B.N.J. iii, Pl. iv. 78). These dies appear to have come to them together and, as the Stephen and Matilda coin is one of the die-linked series of the group 3 referred to earlier, its association with the two dies of Æthered tends to confirm
the suggestion that all are from the same hand. These dies are highly competent pieces of work and were made to be used in a professional press. The Royal Mint tells us that they might well date from the nineteenth century and it is possible that they are old dies, filed down and re-engraved that had previously been used for the issue of private tokens.

Kings of Mercia—Offa.

Bust type. Moneyer Babba. (Pl. I, 14.) Condemned by Lawrence. Several specimens are known.

Bust type. Moneyer Ciolhard (Pl. I, 15). More than one specimen known; one at least of which has acquired an alleged find-spot.

A word must be said as to the probable date of these forgeries. The earliest auction record we have traced is a single specimen of the die-linked group in the Cuff sale in 1854 (lot 688, later, Montagu 225). The greater part, however, first appear some years later and are found in such collections as Shepherd (sold 1885), York Moore (1879, 1889), Brice (sold privately to Montagu in 1887), Marsham (1888), Young (1881), Wrighton, Wilcox (1908), Murchison (1866), Shorthouse (1890), Addington (sold privately to Montagu in the 1880's), Miss Williams (1889), and Gibbs (1913). The bulk of them found their way eventually into the Montagu collection and were in his sale. It is perhaps significant in this context that Haigh, writing in 1870 on the coinage of Alfred, included none of the forgeries of this reign. This may be due to his perspicacity—and there is no doubt that he was a remarkable numismatist—or to the fact that by then they had not appeared.

It would seem in any case that the forger was working from about the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. The fact that after the appearance of the Tata coin of Alfred in the Montagu sale in 1895 two further specimens with the same alleged pedigree emerged suggests that the forger or the successor to his dies may possibly have still been active at the end of the century. But this is not conclusive as a number of instances can be quoted where a Montagu pedigree has been fabricated to lend no doubt a cachet to a coin.

Although we have our own suspicions as to the author of these forgeries we are not, in the absence of more conclusive evidence, prepared to publish them. It is a serious matter to defame the character of a dead man, though if conclusive evidence should be forthcoming it may be a duty to do so.

We should, however, clear from the charge a rather despicable character called Singleton, alias James, alias "Dr." Edwards, of whom Forrer gives us some particulars in his Biographical Dictionary of Medallists (vol. v, p. 533). His dates are there given as c. 1825–40, dates that though a little early might conceivably cover this group of forgeries. But it is doubtful if Singleton was so able a forger. Forrer says his productions were mostly casts, some from originals, some from ideal coins. Among the known forgeries of Singleton listed by Forrer are coins of Eadwald, Regnal, Wigmund, and Eanbald.
FORGERIES OF ANGLO-SAXON COINS

Plate 1
Lawrence illustrates\(^1\) coins of Eadwald, Wigmund, and Eanbald which may well be Singleton’s products and which conform in style to what Forrer’s remarks lead us to expect. If these are Singleton’s, it is hardly likely that he was competent to produce the forgeries discussed in this paper.

It is clear that the forger with whom we have to deal was a numismatist of some standing and either himself an engraver, or with access to the services of a venal engraver, of no mean technical ability. That profit was a substantial motive is clear but that it was not the only motive is suggested by the painstaking care with which he altered the dies of some groups, in particular those of Alfred, which he must have realized would not produce coins of outstanding value. This in fact looks like no more than a display of technical virtuosity the fruits of which may have given him the quiet satisfaction of having hoodwinked most of the leading authorities of the day.

Grueber, the then Keeper of the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum, was certainly among the distinguished authorities who were deceived. A large proportion of the forgeries, the subject both of this paper and of Lawrence’s, were catalogued for sale in the Montagu collection and Grueber prepared this catalogue. Lawrence was already suspicious of the group of Norman forgeries which he later published\(^2\) and it may well be thanks to a cautionary word from him that the British Museum failed to buy any of this group. More fortunate was their failure to buy any of the other forgeries recorded here, including as they did a coin of such national importance, had it been genuine, as the Edwig portrait penny. We have found no evidence that this was suspected at that time though the price realized, £14, was low even for the late nineteenth century.

What is adduced here is the result of a detailed study of no more than a few very restricted groups. This study must go farther and it is to be feared that it may disclose still more products from this fertile if misguided hand. It is hoped that any member finding further evidence on the subject will take the first opportunity to lay it before the Society.

In conclusion we should like to express our great appreciation of the assistance and co-operation that we have received from many sides. In particular we would mention the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum and individually in that Department Mr. Dolley, the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge, and individually Mr. Shrubbs, Messrs. A. H. Baldwin & Sons Ltd., and the late Dr. Arnold.