
From this paper delivered at Spoleto in 1960, we are given an idea of what to expect when Mr. Grierson's Ford Lectures are published. Its importance to the student of early medieval coinage, no less than to the audience to which it was addressed, can scarcely be exaggerated, but it is also of much wider interest for the light that it sheds on the origins of our present monetary system.

The author points out that the word "shilling" meant, originally, a 'cutting' from a ring of gold. The early seventh-century laws of Æthelberht of Kent expressed fines in terms of a shilling comprising twenty sceattas, but since there was no true native coinage in Kent at that time these units could not have been intended to denote coins: they were, the author suggests, units of weight of gold, and he cites the Widsith, a very early dated English poem, for a reference to a ring of gold marked in shillings and sceattas. The natural development, when a gold coinage was eventually introduced, would have been to relate it to the system of weights already familiar to the public, and this principle leads Mr. Grierson to the conclusion that the late seventh-century gold coins of the Crondall hoard, usually referred to by numismatists as thrýmsas, were in fact the first English shilling coins.

The basic unit of gold weight, the sceatta, is shown to have been equal to the average weight of a grain of barley—later to be known as the Troy grain—in the same way that the Greco-Roman carat represented the average weight of the seed of the carob (ceratonia siliqua), a plant unknown in the Germanic countries. (In the discussion which followed the paper, Mr. Grierson was asked whether grains weighed the same in the seventh century as they did today, and he was able to quote some nineteenth-century experiments which showed a very close correspondence between the Troy grain and the grain of barley.) A startling demonstration of the validity of the equation 'sceatta equals Troy grain' is afforded by an analysis of the weights of the 96 Frankish and Anglo-Saxon coins in the Crondall hoard, only two of which weigh less than 19 grains and only one more than 20-5 grains, the average being 19-8 grains. The weight standard must have been 20 grains, and so bears out the relationship of 20 to 1 between shilling and sceatta implicit in Æthelberht's laws. More than this, the reduction in weight of the Merovingian tremissis from 1-5 g. (23 gr.) to 1-3 g. (20 gr.) towards the end of the sixth century can be seen in this light as a change from a Roman weight standard based on the carat to a Germanic standard based on the Troy grain.

In the laws of Inc of Wessex, dating from about 690, and in late seventh-century and early eighth-century glossaries, a new monetary term appeared for the first time; the penny, otherwise pennig or pennig. Mr. Grierson contends that this name must have been given to the small, dumpy pieces of silver, improperly called sceattas by numismatists, that were taking the place of the golden shillings, and he argues, from a consideration of the weights of two sets of die-duplicates of some of the earliest of these pieces out of an unpublished German hoard from the Emden district, that the average weight of these pennies was originally intended to be 20 grains, the same as the gold shilling. It follows that the relative values of these coins must have depended solely on the relative prices of gold and silver—assuming that both gold and silver coins were of full intrinsic value, or were overvalued to the same degree, a point which the author does not discuss. It is known for the Carolingian era that these prices were in the ratio of twelve to one, which, with the reservation just made, would if applicable in Merovingian times satisfactorily explain the relationship of twelve pennies to the shilling which persists to this day. The adoption of a fourpenny shilling in Mercia and a fivepenny shilling in Wessex would then have resulted from the comparison having been made between the new silver penny and the much debased gold shilling which was in circulation at the turn of the century.

The last part of the paper is devoted to an explanation of the organization of an economy such as that of early Anglo-Saxon England which was not dependent on coined money to any appreciable extent. That this was so can largely be attributed to the size of the family group, within which goods and services are provided without recourse to
money, having been very much larger in early medieval times than it is now. In addition, the custom of exchanging gifts was an important part of social life, not merely, as now, of a symbolic nature as at Christmas and Easter. Finally, there was the indeterminate but doubtless substantial part played by barter. The author is at pains to emphasize that the absence of coined money does not imply the absence of wealth, nor does the debasement of the gold shilling at the end of the seventh century and its replacement by the silver penny indicate economic decline: the abandonment of a gold coinage was probably dictated by a decline in the supply of gold reaching western Europe from the eastern Mediterranean. Nevertheless, the adoption of a silver coinage in its place facilitated rather than impeded economic progress.

Mr. Grierson's theory of the origins of our coinage and monetary system is convincing for its very simplicity. It is clear that we should in future refer to gold shillings rather than thrynsas, and to silver pennies rather than sceattas, but the problem is to avoid confusing the early, small, but thick pennies with the later, larger thin pieces to which the name 'penny' has always been given. One would also like to know the correct name for the Northumbrian copper coins of the fourth and fifth decades of the ninth century, traditionally referred to by numismatists as styceas, which seem to owe their inspiration to the early, dumpy pennies of the eighth century. Perhaps we can look to the Ford Lectures—the publication of which will be an event of the first importance—for an answer.

One hesitates to criticize an essay of this kind on points of detail, but it is to be regretted that the author should have subscribed without qualification to the theory that the latest coins of Roman Britain were minimissim dating from the fifth century. Nor was Canterbury the only mint of Offa: there was certainly a coinage in East Anglia in Offa's time, and probably even earlier. These are, however, minor blemishes in a paper which represents a major contribution to early medieval history and numismatics.

C. S. S. L.

A Brief Numismatic History of Bristol, by L. V. Grinsell. Published by the City Museum, Bristol, 1962. 28 pp. + 4 pl. Price 2s. 6d. (or 3s. inc. postage).

The value of collecting together in one place a record of the products of a single mint, or at times a group of neighbouring smaller mints, has been increasingly recognized in recent years, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon series, though much still remains to be done. Mr. Grinsell's little handbook is an excellent example of the type of publication that provincial museums and archaeological societies could usefully sponsor. It shows how from late in the reign of Æthelred II (or possibly that of Cnut) until the end of the reign of William II the mint was almost continuously active and gives lists of the moneyers and of the forms the mint name took on the coinage at different times. Later, the Bristol mint operated only occasionally, either in connexion with, a general recoinage or, as in the reigns of Stephen and of Charles I, in an emergency. These later issues are reviewed individually and details given of the types and denominations that were struck at Bristol. In a future edition it might be worth bringing out the point that halfpennies and farthings were in fact struck at Bristol under Edward I and that it was one of the relatively few provincial mints to issue both.

In addition to the coins, Mr. Grinsell's review also deals with tokens, trade checks, and such historical medals as are connected with Bristol. Of special interest are the sixteenth-century tokens, the earliest dated 1511, which the local supply of lead from Mendip put Bristol in a specially favourable position to produce. Of the medals the most important is one struck in 1643 to commemorate the fall of the city to the Royalists. This is reproduced in colour on the outer cover.

C. E. B.


In this paper Mr. Kempson gives a brief summary of the circumstances that led to the wide-spread issue of private tokens in the seventeenth century, with particular reference to Marlborough, and provides an up-to-date list of those issued from that town and from the neighbouring villages of Aldbourne, Great Bedwyn, Ramsbury, and Shalbourne. Brief biographical notices of the issuers are added.

C. E. B.