In his recent list of medieval coin finds from Scotland and the north of England, Dr. D. M. Metcalf has queried the authenticity of a group of four early Anglo-Saxon gold coins, three of which are alleged to have been found at York—the find-spot of the fourth is unknown—and are generally supposed to have been minted in that city. One specimen, whose metal is not stated but which Dr. Metcalf assumes to have been silver, was published by C. Hall in 1774; the remainder, of somewhat base gold, were brought to the attention of scholars between 1846 and 1850, all having an alleged York provenance. These three coins, which are now distributed between the British Museum, the Ashmolean, and the Yorkshire Museum, are from the same pair of dies. Hall’s coin, the whereabouts of which is not now known, was from what was at least a very similar obverse die, but the reverse die was either a different one or Hall’s plate has freely ‘improved’ the inscription, a jumbled collection of letters being translated into +EADBALD-R-C, so that the coin was assigned by him to King Eadbald of Kent (616–40).

Dr. Metcalf raises objections to both the York group and to Hall’s coin. There are discrepancies in the accounts of the finding of the York coins. The specimen now in the Yorkshire Museum, which was formerly in the collection of a well-known local antiquary, Robert Cook, is said in one account to have been found on 20 November 1849 and in another to have been found in 1848, while that in the Ashmolean Museum, which is said to have been found with it, was known as early as March 1846, when a cast of it was exhibited at meetings of the British Archaeological Association and the Numismatic Society. Dr. Metcalf argues that if the coins are genuine they must almost certainly have been found together, and if they were found together Cook must either have been misled by the person from whom he obtained the coins as to the date of finding or have been giving a false account of the finding when he exhibited his coin in April 1850 at the Society of Antiquaries and stated that it had been found in the preceding November.

As for the coin published by Hall, Dr. Metcalf admits that if the ‘York’ coins could be shown to be genuine they would go far towards authenticating this specimen, but he points out that an inscription featuring the name of a king of Kent would render impossible the attribution to York and unlikely the discovery of the three specimens so far from their place of origin. A date as early as the reign of Eadbald would also raise difficulties regarding the Byzantine prototype, ‘since the loros had not at that time appeared on the imperial coinage in its characteristic form’. His suggestion, briefly, is that Hall’s coin may have been a forgery inspired by an interest in Eadbald and the ‘York’ coins forgeries based upon this, and no doubt under the influence of the publication of the Crondall hoard in 1844.

Most of these criticisms are based on what seems an excessive confidence in the reliability and veracity of coin owners and the accuracy of both engravings and the
THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE YORK 'THRYMSAS'

minutes of learned societies. Dr. Sutherland dismissed the reverse of Hall's illustration as 'wholly fanciful', and was surely right in so doing: the engraver simply made an intelligible inscription out of a jumble of letters which in fact were meaningless. As for the discrepancies over the date, there are two factors to be taken into account. One is that Cook, like others who have acquired coins discovered in their neighbourhood, sometimes found it convenient to practise the quality known to theologians as 'economy', and the line between vagueness as to dates and places of discovery and more positive deception is not always easy to draw.\footnote{Mr. G. F. Willmot, Keeper of the Yorkshire Museum, informs me that Cook and his brother did undoubtedly indulge in 'economy': e.g. a coin would be described as 'found in the suburbs of York' when they knew the exact find-spot, York County Hospital. Mr. Willmot has also pointed out to me that the fact of no specimens of the 'thrymsas' having been offered to wealthy local collectors like Wellbeloved, Davies, or Hargrove at York, or Haigh at Leeds argues in favour of their being authentic.} The second point is that we do not know what Mr. Cook said on 18 April 1850: we only know what is recorded in the minutes of the Society of Antiquaries,\footnote{Proc. Soc. Antiquaries, ii (1849-53), p. 68.} and this is evidence at second-hand. Secretaries are not infallible, especially where dates and names are concerned, and since Cook was exhibiting three groups of objects—the Anglo-Saxon gold coin (said to have been found in the previous November), two coins of Allectus (date of finding unspecified), and a Roman steelyard (said to have been found in April 1846)—the possibilities of confusion were considerable. The history of another of Cook's coins shows how easily mistakes can arise, and how unreliable apparently precise statements can be. One of the more interesting pieces in his collection, when it was acquired by the Yorkshire Museum in 1919, is referred to in an addition to the manuscript catalogue of his Roman coins entitled 'Note on Coin of Allectus found in Tanner Row, April 18th, 1850'.\footnote{Annual Report of the Council of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society for 1920, p. xvi.} This suggests to the reader that the coin was found on 18 April 1850, but was not so intended by its author: the date had nothing to do with the finding, but was that on which Cook exhibited the coin at the Society of Antiquaries.

Even if the minutes are correct, however, and the coins came to light separately, this would not be sufficient to condemn them as forgeries. Finding must not be confused with hiding. It would be perfectly possible for them to have made part of a single small deposit, been separated when the ground was disturbed—the construction of the railway at York was at that time bringing to light many Roman and post-Roman objects, including large numbers of coins—and found afterwards on different occasions at two or three years' interval.

Dr. Metcalf's final point about the Byzantine prototype would be valid if the design were based on a figure wearing a loros, but such a derivation, which was suggested by Dr. Kent,\footnote{J. P. C. Kent, 'From Roman Britain to Saxon England', in Anglo-Saxon coins: Studies presented to F. M. Stenton, ed. R. H. M. Dolley (London, 1961), p. 11 and pl. i. 15, 16. As he points out indeed, imitation of a solidus of Justinian II of 705/6—the coin he illustrates is actually not an imperial issue, but an Italian (probably Beneventan) imitation—would make the York coin impossibly late in date.} seems unlikely. The design of the York coins shows a rectangular grid pattern having above it an oval containing a cross on forked base—there is a vague likeness to a human face—and two crosses. This rectangular pattern has little resemblance to that of the loros, which at this period is invariably represented by a lozenge pattern\footnote{Or rather appears as such on the coins, since it is passing diagonally over the shoulders. The later type of loros hanging straight down from the shoulders, thus giving a square pattern on the coins, did not appear till the end of the ninth century.} and characterized by a pellet within each lozenge, the ultimate effect being quite different...
from that of the blank squares of the York coins. Dr. Sutherland's suggestion that the design is based on that of a bronze coin of Justinian seems to me equally unlikely; though it would account for the oval and the position of the two crosses, the rectangular grid-work bears very little resemblance to the emperor's breastplate, on which the horizontal wavy lines are sometimes accompanied below by a series of vertical lines but the two do not cut across each other. It seems more probable that the pattern was copied from that of an ordinary late Roman bronze coin with camp-gate reverse and that the oval and the crosses above were no more than fanciful variations of the central star and side turrets which occur on the prototype. Mr. Dolley has pointed out to me that the reverse type of coins of Edward the Elder (899–925) based on the camp-gate design sometimes follows the original fairly closely and at others transforms it into a very different type of building.¹

Several positive reasons can be advanced in favour of the authenticity of the coins. One is their weights, respectively 17·5 gr. (BM), 19·1 gr. (Ashmolean), and 20·0 gr. (Yorkshire Museum). These approach very closely to the theoretical weight (20 gr.) of the gold coins of this period, a weight attained with extraordinary precision by the coins of the Crondall hoard. In view of the fact that little attention was paid to metrology in the mid-nineteenth century, it is unlikely that a forger of that period would have reproduced the weights of his coins so accurately. Another reason is their inscriptions: a forger would surely have copied those of the Hall engraving, thus greatly enhancing the interest of his products. A third is the fact that Hall's engraving gives the coins a broad flat border, like that found on Lombard tremisses; once again, a forger would have been tempted to copy this feature, which is certainly fanciful, but the York coins have the normal sharply cut edges of other Anglo-Saxon gold coins. Finally, the cross inside the oval has a forked base and the space between the two boundary lines of the oval is marked by hatching; a forger, even with the illustrations of the Crondall hoard before him, would scarcely have known that hatching and crosses with forked arms are features quite peculiar to early Anglo-Saxon coinage and almost never found on that of the Franks. Despite their strange design, therefore, I believe that we are justified in accepting the 'York' coins as authentic.

Whether they were actually struck at York is a matter for conjecture. If the four recorded specimens had been found separately in the city one might have been fairly confident that they were, but the find-spot of one is unknown and the others may have formed part of a single hoard, which could have been brought there by some traveller and proves nothing. In favour of a northern origin are the two facts that the coin does not resemble those of south-eastern England and has not been found in their company; in favour of York is the fact that this city was already an ecclesiastical centre and probably one of trade. As to the date, the size of the lettering on the reverse, its neat arrangement between two circles of pellets round a cross, and the signs of declining fineness in the metal of the coins all point to their being relatively late. We can probably assign them to c. 670–80, and assume that their minting was stimulated by the creation of a gold coinage in south-eastern England and came to an end almost immediately when this was abandoned in favour of one of silver.

¹ Cf. Lockett Sale, Part I (Glendining, 6 June 1955), no. 526 (now B.M.), which is very close to the original save in the suppression of the doorway and the substitution of a rosette for the star, and nos. 527 and 528, which depart from the prototype in a number of ways. They all of course differ from the York coin in that the camp-gate has remained a building and not, as in so many other borrowings of the early Anglo-Saxon series, been transformed into something quite different.