RALPH THORESBY'S RUNIC COINS

By R. I. PAGE

Numismatists and runologists have long known that among the early coins in the collection of the Leeds antiquary, Ralph Thoresby, was one with a runic inscription. This, one of Sveinn Estridsson's Lund coins by the moneyer Thorgot (Ms. 98 in L. Jacobsen and E. Møltoke, Danmarks Runeindskrifter (København, 1941–2): type 204 in E. Møltoke, 'De danske Rune- munter og deres Prægere', Nordisk Numismatisk Årsskrift (1950), 26), was identified as runic by William Nicolson, the celebrated antiquary, historian, collector and divine, then Archdeacon of Carlisle. On 17 April 1691 Thoresby seems to have written to Nicolson, suggesting that they should correspond, and asking him specific questions on antiquarian subjects, one of which suggested that he had a runic coin in his collection.¹ Thoresby's letter does not survive, but Nicolson's acknowledgment, dated 27 April, is among the Thoresby correspondence in the library of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society.² Nicolson writes:

'I never saw any coin with a Runic Inscription. Mr Walker (in his preface to K. Alfred's life) has given us the draught of three, which he once took to be of y' nature: but he doubts they may be eastern coins; and he had good reason to do so. I have seen (in some Muses in Germany) several pieces of Persian & other East-Countrey coins mistaken for Runic ones: and possibly some of yours may be of the like stamp'.

Thoresby sent the Lund coin together with others to Nicolson in August 1691. They were returned the following month, as Nicolson reveals in a letter to Thoresby dated 9 September. He adds 'I have given you my thoughts of your Coins; which (especially on that with the Runic Characters) I hope will be grateful.' Nicolson's report on the coin does not accompany this letter, which is also in the keeping of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society,³ but a holograph copy of it, made for a third person, perhaps George Hickes, is now MS Eng. Hist. b.2, fos. 266-7 in the Bodleian Library. Nicolson's report is headed 'Notes on a Runic coin in y' possession of Mr Thoresby of Leeds, & communicated to W. N. Aug. 1691.' In it he comments:

'I much doubted whether the Inscription on this coin were truely Runic till I saw it. The Reason of my doubt was, because the best of the Danish Antiquaries are of opinion that no currant coin was ever minted in the Northern Kingdomes till the use of the Runic Character was laid aside.'

Nicolson identifies the coin as an amulet, and the obverse figure as that of the 'antient God Thor . . . Caput flammat circumdatum . . .' He gives a drawing of both sides of the coin, with the runic inscription accurately reproduced save that in place of the Roman letter s added after the place-name form lunti he draws the runic 's', and transliterates the runes: Thur gut luetis. i.e. Thoronis Dei faecies seu effigies, with the comment, 'I never yet saw any

¹ In his review of his life (J. Hunter, The Diary of Ralph Thoresby, F.R.S. . . . (London, 1830), I, p. 196) Thoresby states that this correspondence began in 1690, a date which would include the first three months of 1691. Thoresby is probably in error here: his statement was made, or at least edited, after 1702 when Nicolson became Bishop of Carlisle.
² No. 154 n in H. W. Jones's unpublished handlist to the Thoresby correspondence in the library of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society.

Runic Inscription so plain and Intelligible.’ This note of Nicolson’s is the basis of the first detailed published account of the coin, that in cols. 814–15 of Gibson’s revision of Camden’s Britannia, which came out in 1695. Thoresby accepted Nicolson’s reading. Among his manuscripts kept in a leather-bound volume in the library of Leeds Grammar School is ‘A Catalogue of the Saxon Coines in my Collection.’ The runic coin is no. 29, described as having ‘a rude figure of the Idol Thor caput flamma circumdatum’, the last five words added over an obliterated original. Thoresby originally continued, ‘but y Letters are absolutely Rulinick (sic) as I conjecture’, to which he later added with acknowledgment Nicolson’s interpretation of the runes.

In 1693 Thoresby sent this coin and a number of others to Obadiah Walker (the Mr Walker of Nicolson’s letter of April 1691), the ejected Master of University College, Oxford, who was then preparing his description of early British and English coinage for Gibson’s Britannia. Thoresby sent part of 15 August ‘taking account of the ancient coins and medals (above one hundred British, Roman, Runic, Saxon, &c.) sent to the editors of Camden’, and two days later wrote to Walker about them. Receipt of the coins was acknowledged later that month, and they were kept, apparently very carelessly, by Walker until May 1694, when those that remained were returned to their owner. On this examination depend the reproduction of the Lund coin as no. 34 of Tabula II (Nummi Britannici) of Gibson’s Britannia and Walker’s brief reference to it in col. xcvii of that work.

The coin legend was further studied by Hickes early in the following century. Two letters, dated 14 August and 10 October 1701, from Hickes to Thoresby confirm Nicolson’s transliteration but give an alternative explanation. Hickes comments (adding a mass of philological explication):

‘I told you, y Letters pur gut Luetis written in Runic characters upon your Cimbric, or old Danish coin signifieth Thor deus popidi, or Thor nationis deus, and not Thori dei fades, as the worthy, and learned Archdeacon explained the words.’

In November 1703 Thoresby sent this coin to Hickes for examination. The Leeds Grammar School volume contains ‘A list of my Saxon Coyns sent up to Sr Andrew Fountain & Dr Hickes to be inserted in his work’: item 80 is ‘the Amulet of y God Thor Tab. II. 34 & p. 814 of y new Brit’. Sir Andrew Fountain’s illustration of the coin and interpretation of its legend in Numismata Anglo-Saxonica & Anglo-Danica breviter illustrata (Oxford, 1705), p. 165, one of the parts of book I of Hickes’s Thesaurus, derives from this examination. The study of this and related coins in the eighteenth century can be followed further in G. Galster, ‘Rune-mentforskning i det 18. Aarhundrede’, Nordisk Numismatisk Årsskrift (1941), 121–34.

In Thoresby’s Musæum Thoresbyanum, a catalogue of his collection printed in 1713 and appended to Ducatus Leodiensis (London, 1715), the Lund runic coin appears as no. 18 of the ‘British, Runic, Saxon and Danish Medals’, with the following comment on Walker’s identification of the runes, ‘Mr. O.W. indeed miscalls all the unintelligible and Exotic Characters...’

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2 Letters addressed to Ralph Thoresby, pp. 31–2.

3 Jones 684, 701, the first printed in Letters addressed to Ralph Thoresby, pp. 103–4. A further letter, Jones 697, dated 28 September, also mentions the runic coin without giving details.

4 In a letter to Lhuyd dated 25 November 1703 (Bodleian MS Ashmole 1817b, fo. 150) Thoresby refers to his dispatch of these coins ‘a few days ago’. See also Diary, I, p. 447.

5 Reprinted as ‘Research into runic coins in the 18th century’, Coins and History (Copenhagen, 1959), pp. 53–64.
Runic. But this single Medal is the only one known to be in any Museum in Europe, with the true Runic Letters upon it.' As Galster has shown, there were by 1713 Danish runic coins in other European collections, but the surprising thing about Thoresby’s pronouncement is that it shows his ignorance of the fact that two more runic coins rested in his own cabinet. It is true that Walker’s identification of runes was sometimes erratic, as when he found them on three probably Gaulish staters (nos. 27, 28 and 29 of Gibson’s Tabula II, presumably the same coins as Walker had chosen for Tabula VII of Spelman’s Alfredi Magni Anglorum Regis . . . Vita . . . (Oxford, 1678), to which Nicolson drew Thoresby’s attention). These Walker had whimsically attributed to ‘some of the kings of Cumberland, in which County are still extant some Runic Monuments’. But he was correct in identifying as runic the legends of two other coins in Thoresby’s collection, nos. 35 and 36 of Gibson’s Tabula II, while being wrong in his belief that these runes were ‘the writing of the Visi, or Western Goths’, who ‘acquired the Northern Parts of Britain, keeping (as it seemeth) their ancient Runic characters.’ In fact the coins are Anglo-Saxon sceattas. No. 35 is one of the common Epa coins. No. 36 is a rare type, one of the sceattas with the reverse legend Ebpiliræd, cut in two lines (divided at the end of the first element), boustrophedon, the second line inverted. I have records of nine of these coins. Seven have the reading ‘æþili | ræd’. Two of these are in the Ashmolean Museum, one unprovenanced, the other, with a retrograde legend, from Canterbury (Evans Bequest 1941). A third example, found at Domburg on the island of Walcheren, Netherlands, was formerly in the de Man collection but its present whereabouts are unknown.1 Two more were in the Grantley collection: sale catalogue no. 749 ex Montagu 174 and Shepherd 10, and no. 750, said to be ex Montagu ex Brice, now in the possession of Commander R. P. Mack. A sixth, of unknown provenance, is H. 31 in the Hunterian Collection, University of Glasgow, no. 49 in the Hunterian Sylloge volume. The British Museum has three specimens. One of them, B.M.C. I, p. 24, 4 which reads ‘æþili | ræd’, is almost certainly that found with other Anglo-Saxon coins at Reculver, Kent, in the first half of the eighteenth century.2 This in turn may have been one of the five early Anglo-Saxon coins from Reculver listed as lot 17 in the William Gostling sale catalogue (1777) and bought by Young for 17s. 0d. The coin was in the Tyssen collection, and reached the British Museum in 1802. The second British Museum specimen (B.M.C. I, p. 24, 5) reads ‘æþil. | ræd’, the third (B.M.C. I, p. 24, 6) ‘æþili | ræd’ retrograde. Thoresby’s sceat resembles the last of these in all respects—only these two have a cross or runes ‘n’ in place of the correct ‘j’—and it is presumably the same coin.

In Museum Thoresbyanum the antiquary listed his Ebpiliræd coin as no. 13 of the British, Runic, Saxon and Danish medals, while his description of no. 12 shows it to be almost certainly the Epa example. To these must be added Gibson’s Tabula II no. 14 (= Thoresby no. 11). This is a sceat of the runic type, and, although no runes can be identified on Gibson’s reproduction, Thoresby describes its obverse as ‘a crowned Head with unknown Characters’. Gibson’s Tabula II no. 38 was also an Anglo-Saxon sceat, with the suggestion of a legend, but without identifiable characters. In 1764 Thoresby’s collections were sold by auction


2 There are pen drawings of these coins in British Museum MS. Stowe 1049, fo.26. The Ebpiliræd coin is no. 4. The runes of the first element are badly reproduced, but ‘ræd’ is identifiable. Its forms of ‘r’ and ‘d’, which are irregular, correspond with those of B.M.C. I, p. 24, 4. I owe this reference to Mrs. J. S. Martin.
in London. The sale catalogue, also headed Museum Thoresbyanum, lists the Lund coin, 'supposed to be the Figure of the God Thor', as part of lot 132, while the runic sceattas and Thoresby's no. 11, still regarded as British coins, form part of lot 130. The annotated copy of the Thoresby sale catalogue in the Department of Coins and Medals, British Museum, records that lot 130 was bought by Snelling for 15s. 6d. and lot 132 by Snelling for the Duke of Devonshire for £5 2 6d. Neither the Snelling (1774) nor the Devonshire (1844) sale catalogue lists these items as such. According to Galster the Lund coin was in the possession of John White of Newgate Street, London, in 1778, but he gives no evidence for the statement, and the coin is not mentioned in the sale catalogue of White's collection (1788). Its present whereabouts are unknown, nor can the further history of Thoresby's Epa sceat, a common type, be traced. As has been seen Thoresby's Epltiræd coin is now in the British Museum, but the date and circumstances of its acquisition are not recorded. This suggests that it reached the national collection no later than 1838, for after that date acquisitions were commonly registered. However, in 1841 Hawkins, describing this coin type, remarked that 'the British and Hunterian Museums have each a specimen', clearly referring to B.M.C. I p. 24, 4 as the illustration (plate IV, 50) shows. Thus Thoresby's coin reached the British Museum after 1840 unless Hawkins compiled this chapter some years earlier and failed to bring it up to date when he completed his work. In 1868 Head recorded the sceat in the national collection. Thus there is a gap of seventy-five to a hundred years in the coin's recorded history.

Thoresby's manuscript and printed catalogues are unfortunately silent as to the ultimate provenances of his runic coins. The core of his collection was obtained by his father from the executors of the Lord General Fairfax. However, both Ralph Thoresby and his father made extensive additions, and it is unlikely that we shall now discover more about the early history of these coins.

1 'Runemøntforskning i det 18. Aarhundrede', 125.
2 A correction is necessary to R. H. M. Dolley and J. S. Strudwick, 'The provenances of the Anglo-Saxon coins recorded in the two volumes of the British Museum Catalogue', BNJ XXVIII (1956), 37 where Epltiræd sceattas nos. 5 and 6 have been interchanged. The accessions register makes it clear that it is no. 5 which was presented by R. Hinde in 1867.
4 The second edition (1870) states (p.v) that Hawkins wrote his book in 1840.
5 B. V. Head, 'Anglo-Saxon coins with runic legends', NC N.S. VIII (1868), 84–5.
6 A number of scholars have helped me to compile this note. In particular I wish to thank Mrs. J. S. Martin, Mr. S. E. Rigold, Mr. C. E. Blunt, Commander R. P. Mack, Mr. P. Grierson, the Librarian of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society, the Headmaster of Leeds Grammar School, and members of the staffs of the Department of Coins and Medals, British Museum, the Heberden Coin Room, Ashmolean Museum, and the Fitzwilliam Museum.