AN UNPUBLISHED LINK BETWEEN THE FIRST AND SECOND HAND TYPES OF ÆTHELRAED II

By R. H. M. DOLLEY

On p. 182 of the Numismatic Circular for 1965, Mr. J. D. Brand has drawn attention to a case where the addition of a sceptre to a First Hand obverse die of the moneyer Sidewine at Rochester has enabled it to be used with a Second Hand reverse in order to strike normal coins of the later issue. Very properly Mr. Brand has urged students to be on the lookout for other instances, but the present writer is convinced that they will be found to be very few and far between. In particular he would observe that it is only with the ‘Southern’ First Hand bust that the addition to the obverse type of a sceptre would not cry out for detection—it is too easy to forget that it is one of the features of the Second Hand issue that virtually all the dies appear to have been cut by one hand, whereas in First Hand regional schools of engraving are clearly to be distinguished. Moreover there is some evidence that it was the reverse type which was critical for issue in both Anglo-Saxon and Norman times, and the normal First Hand reverse die leaves little room for the addition of the extra strokes of the cuff which are for the modern student just as essential a ‘difference’ as the pellets added beneath the a and ω. What it is planned to publish in this note is a unique coin in the British Museum where alteration of a reverse die has been attempted.

The coin in question was purchased in 1894 at the Chapman sale at Sotheby’s. It formed part of lot 22, the other coins, all acquired by the Museum, being two First Hand pennies of Chester with left-facing bust, and a normal but battered and mis-described First Hand penny of the London moneyer Godwine, a die-duplicate of Hild. 2612. Elsewhere in this Journal it is argued that the ultimate provenance of all four coins is the 1841 hoard from near Mullingar in Co. Westmeath (supra, pp. 12–21). In other words the possibility of Scandinavian imitation can be dismissed, and it is also clear that the tampering with the reverse die must have occurred something like five years before the striking of coin in Ireland can possibly have begun. As will be seen clearly from the accompanying illustration (infra, p. 23, Fig. 1), the penny in the British Museum is from an obverse die of anomalous work, and the obverse legend may be transcribed +ÆDELÆþDæNEO. The reverse die, on the other hand, is a perfectly normal First Hand reverse to which has been added two pellets in the field, one beneath the a and the other beneath the ω, apparently to secure that the coin would pass as a penny of the Second Hand issue. The legend is normal and may be transcribed +LÆOFRÆþMÆGæNTHA. The weight is 1·20 grammes or 18·5 grains, a figure which leaves no room for doubt that the coin in fact belongs to the Second Hand issue which was fairly strongly represented in the Mullingar find.

Neither the obverse nor the reverse die of the penny in question is represented in the Systematic Collection in the Royal Coin Cabinet at Stockholm, but this is no more than a timely reminder of the fact that our knowledge of the First and Second Hand issues of Æthelræd II is still far more fragmentary than some students would appear to appreciate. That the obverse die of the British Museum coin is of anomalous work need not occasion concern—in Southern England there exist from several mints such pieces of First but not
of Second Hand type, for example at Canterbury Hild. 131 and 215—and there is not the least reason to suspect irregularity of a criminal order. On the other hand, what is clear is that the sceptre is an addition barely squeezed into a quite inadequate space so that the third of the pellets of the head is superimposed upon the king's lips. In other words, an attempt has been made to convert both the obverse and reverse dies into those of the Second Hand issue.

The attempt was a clumsy one, but that the alteration should have been essayed has implications which the numismatist cannot ignore. For some years, now, there would seem to have been an undercurrent of mistrust concerning the clear distinction now drawn between the First and Second Hand types which seem to the present writer indisputably to constitute two emissions of equal status running each for six years. This mistrust seems to ignore the fact that the two issues were struck on completely different weight-standards, while rejection of the sexennial type-cycle raises a number of questions that seem not to have been posed, let alone answered. For example, if there had not been demonetisation of First Hand, it is curious that only the far less common Second Hand coins appear to have been present in the Isleworth find of 1886. If, too, we attempt to calculate a septennial cycle from 1003 onwards one finds the Oxford mint surviving the sack of 1009 only to cease production without apparent reason at the end of the following year, while a backwards calculation necessitates a parallel rejection of the observed coincidence between the sack of Wirral in 979/980 and a complete disruption of striking at Chester. Nor does this exhaust the objections that can be brought forward to various alternatives to the sexennial cycle calculated from 973, but it is hoped that they are sufficient to show that a septennial cycle was not lightly dismissed as a hypothesis nor a sexennial one proposed without very careful thought.

What is highly significant is that an engraver should have troubled to alter dies. Had the Second Hand type not been substantive, the labour would have been superfluous, and it is
interesting to note in particular that the obverse die also was altered. The natural interpretation is that Second Hand coins were to be identified principally by the pellets added to the reverse type, but that in cases of doubt reference was made to the sceptre on the obverse. The two designs probably were too close for convenience, but we must not forget that in c. 985 the English sexennial cycle was still to some extent experimental. It is suggested, though, that the absence of muling between the two issues may possess unlooked for significance. When two classes had very different reverses, mules 'the-right-way-round', i.e. bringing back into use discarded obverse dies, could very well be tolerated, as the possibility of abuse was negligible. Indeed, a 'follow-up' of the careers of moneyers known to have struck such mules soon establishes that any offence was far from being heinous, unless one supposes that the authorities virtually never caught up with the offenders. When, however, two reverses were as alike as First and Second Hand, and when the second issue was struck on a very different weight-standard, muling could be thought objectionable, and especially in the first few weeks of the new emission when recourse to it was most likely to be had, since the authorities would need to be on their guard against any attempt to pay in as 'heavy' some of the new 'light' pieces. Indeed, one may wonder whether some such sharp practice does not lie behind that most curious mule 'the-wrong-way-round' of the Lewes moneyer Theodgar in Mr. H. H. King's cabinet (BNJ XXVIII, iii (1957), p. 519, no. 20—ominously perhaps Theodgar's latest recorded coin).

However this may be, the Canterbury penny in lot 22 of the Chapman sale of 1894 does represent an important and unpublished variant of the Second Hand type, and throws considerable light on the transition from the preceding issue. That it was picked out and placed in a lot with other rarities reflects the greatest credit upon the cataloguer, and it is no less significant that the lot was bought by the English National Collection. Unfortunately the purchase was too late for the coin to be included in the British Museum Catalogue, but it may serve as a reminder of how urgent it has become that the Anglo-Saxon coins in the British Museum be included in the Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles. As the coverage of that series becomes progressively more complete, so the absence from it of major cabinets becomes at once more serious and more pronounced.