THE ANGLO-SAXON PENNIES FROM THE 'UPPER SOUTERRAIN' AT KNOWTH

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SINCE 1962 Dr. George Eogan, M.R.I.A., Lecturer in Archaeology at University College, Dublin, has been conducting a series of excavations at Knowth, one of three great prehistoric burial mounds that remain to this day one of the outstanding archaeological features of the Boyne Valley. Already these investigations have revealed a site of unexpected richness, and it may be said that each year has produced its own surprises.\(^1\) In 1969 considerable attention was given to the top of the mound, where along the eastern edge there have emerged considerable traces of a secondary settlement extending over an area at least 20 miles in length and 8 miles in width. Both on the inside and on the outside, this settlement was bounded by stone walls, but, despite the occurrence of a number of post-holes, no house or house plan has as yet been recorded. The assemblage of finds from the occupation debris, however, is one that can be paralleled at a number of ring-forts and crannogs that have been securely if rather vaguely dated to the Early Christian period. Associated with the secondary settlement was a whole complex of souterrains, four at least in number. It was in one of the passages connected with what is currently termed the 'upper souterrain' that on 31 July 1969 the archaeologists had the good fortune to come across dating-evidence which can fairly be described as sensational.\(^2\) In a structurally intact portion of the souterrain, and imbedded in a sticky silt-like material covering the floor and in turn sealed by a subsequent 'fill' of rubble and loose clay dating from the period of the souterrain's going into disuse, there came to light a small lump of metallic oxides. Closer examination revealed two coins corroded together, with one overlapping the other for approximately two-thirds of its circumference. Still on the site the two coins were carefully separated, and preliminary inspection suggested that they were Anglo-Saxon. A few days later the present writer was able to visit the excavation, and provisionally identified the coins as a silver penny of Æthelstan (924–39) and a silver penny of (?) Eadred (946–55). Very tentatively at this stage there were proposed the attributions that constitute the substance of this note, but it should be stressed that the coins, one of them broken into two pieces, were in so corroded a condition that for the moment any identifications amounted to little more than suggestions.

In October 1969 the coins were brought to the Conservation Laboratory of the Department of Archaeology at the Queen's University of Belfast, and their cleaning entrusted to the Keeper, Mr. Stephen Rees-Jones, and to his assistant, Mr. Colin Slack. The results of the cleaning will be self-evident from the accompanying enlarged photographs, and are a tribute at once to the skill, resources, and above all patience of the staff of the laboratory. In both cases the legends can now be read in their entirety with complete confidence, and it can also be said with reasonable certainty that neither coin evidences

\(^1\) PRIA 66 C (1968), pp. 299–400.\(^\text{a}\)

\(^2\) Information kindly supplied by Dr. Eogan.
any significant degree of wear. A detailed description and a discussion of the coins follow:

**COIN A**

*Obv.* $+\text{ÆDELSTAN RE}X$ T$\cdot O$-BRIT within two circles: small cross in centre: small wedge-shaped stop before BRIT. Die-axis 270°. Weight 1.48 g. (22.9 grains). The coin has been broken into two pieces, but any loss seems minimal.

*Rev.* $+\text{ÆDELM MVV}N$-CIVI-T within two circles: small cross in centre: four small pellets disposed at regular intervals in the field just inside the inner circle: a pellet stop before CIVI-T.

![Image of Coin A](image)

This *circumscriptipn small cross* coin (North 672 = Brooke 5 = BMC v, etc.) is exceptionally important. It is of the Winchester mint, and by the known Winchester moneyer Æthelm (? = Æthelhelm with haplographic reduction, cf. O. von Feilitzen, *The Pre-Conquest Personal Names of Domesday Book* (Uppsala, 1937), p. 79). The type itself is a common one where Æthelstan's coinage is concerned, but, though known of four Winchester moneyers, has not been recorded hitherto of Æthelm. This moneyer did, however, strike coins of the *portrait* type with the crowned bust breaking the legend (North 673 = Brooke 4 = BMC viii, etc.), a type which probably followed that under discussion. Of this *portrait* type by the moneyer Æthelm at least four specimens are recorded, one in the British Museum (BMAcq 535), two in the Museo Nazionale at Rome (ex 1883 Forum hoard, cf. NC 1884, p. 247, no. 269), and one which went through the second Drabble sale (Glendining, 13 and 14: xii: 1943, lot 851 but not illustrated). On three of these coins the mint name reads VVINCI or VVINEL, normal forms of the Winchester mint-signature in this type, but on the fourth (one of those in Rome from the Forum hoard) the reading is identical with that which appears on the *circumscriptiopn* coin from the excavation at Knowth.

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1 I am indebted to Mr. Blunt for giving the information on the Æthelstan coin.
The reverses of *BMC* types v and viii are very similar, and this makes it unusually difficult for the student to identify mules between the two. Where the London mint is concerned, a few mules had already been established with fair confidence, the criterion being the form of the mint-signature which differs significantly between the two issues. At Winchester, on the other hand, the material is much less extensive, but in the *portrait* type there had already been noted the *CIVI-T* form as anomalous, and the suggestion had been hazarded that the coin was a mule, although with the essential reservation that a ‘true’ coin of the *circumscription* type had still to be found.¹

A comparison of the Knowth and Forum coins on the basis of photographs establishes with complete certainty that both pieces were struck from the same reverse die. Dr. Eogan’s discovery thus provides the missing evidence, and for the first time we are enabled to identify with confidence the coin from the Forum hoard as a mule between the *portrait* and *circumscription* issues. The dating of the Knowth coin, however, is something best deferred until later in this note.

**Coin B**

*Obv.* +EADREDRE within two circles: small cross in centre; second ‘r’ of legend of distorted form: heavy rusting of die between 4 and 5 o’clock. Die-axis 90°. Weight 1.465 g. (22.6 grains).

*Rev.* rosette/ DVRA/O+O/NMO- rosette, in five lines across field: inner plain and beaded outer circle.

![Fig. 2 (c. 2½ X).](image)

This *two-line* coin (North 708 = Brooke 1 = *BMC* i, etc.) is from the same pair of dies as two coins in the Royal Coin Cabinet at Copenhagen (*SCBI* Copenhagen I, 737 and 737a—both nineteenth-century purchases) and a coin in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (*SCBI* Edinburgh 289—from the Iona hoard). It is likely, too, that the Knowth coin is not the first, from the reverse die at least, to have been found in

¹ In a study of the coinage of this reign by Mr. Blunt, a summary of which was read before this society but which is as yet unpublished.
Ireland; a comparable piece was in the cabinet of the Dublin numismatist James Simon at least as early as 1754 (cf. National Library of Ireland MS. 301, p. 6, no. 28). The inclusion of the two rosettes in the reverse type suggests that it was struck in north-western England, and a mint in or near the Welsh march might have seemed further indicated by the name of the moneyer appearing to have a seemingly Celtic suffix—an were it not for the fact that beside the consistent spelling DVRAN on rosette coins with the Chester mint-signature of the three-line type of Eadgar (North 757 = Brooke 1 var. = BMC ii)—we may instance SCBI Chester 82 and Edinburgh 627—there exists BMC 49 of Eadmund where north-western rosettes are accompanied by the inflected form DVRAND(ES) which itself is suggestive at this date of striking somewhere in the general area of Chester. There can be little doubt, then, that DVRAN is a variant of Durand, a well-attested OG personal name, even though the individual responsible for the rosette coins cannot well be the same as the moneyer signing himself consistently DVRAND who was prolific in the north-east of England under Eadgar. The products of this second (? York) moneyer include BMC 84, 168, 169; SCBI Edinburgh 388–90; SCBI Glasgow 682; SCBI Oxford 388, etc., not to go beyond the more obvious works of reference, while a measure of the scale of his activity is the fact that there were 15 of his two-line (North 741 = Brooke 1 = BMC i) pence in the 1945 Tetney hoard from Lincolnshire, and 3 at least of the small cross circumscription (North 748 = Brooke 4 = BMC iii) coins in the 1894 hoard from near Douglas on the Isle of Man. It is possible, too, that the Chester Duran(d) struck this type also at Tamworth (cf. Wheeler, 12–14: iii: 1930, lot 35), but more work will have to be done on the apparent overlap of this type with a small cross and its much scarcer rosette analogue (North 758 and 759 = Brooke 4 (var. not distinguished) = BMC iv) and also on the forms of the Tamworth mint-signature before there can be anything like certainty on this point.

DATE OF LOSS

The two coins were found corroded together, and were the only coins to be discovered in the gallery in question. The most natural inference is that they were lost on the same occasion, and this near-certainty is only heightened by the circumstance that the second coin was struck well within the normal life-cycle of the first. Even in England itself, though the evidence is scanty, there does not seem to have been any formal demonetization of the coins of Æthelstan until very late in the reign of Eadgar, while from the Irish Sea area there are hoards in plenty concealed as late as the 970s in which are present one or more of his coins.

It is perfectly acceptable, then, that coins of Æthelstan and Eadred should have been in the possession of one and the same individual in the Boyne Valley about the middle of the tenth century, and the absence of coins of Eadwig (955–9) and of Eadgar (959–75) may seem an argument that loss did not occur all that much later. Even Eadwig coins are not all that uncommon in Irish finds, while in Ireland pennies of Eadgar are easily the most frequently met with among English coins from the whole of the Viking period. If, therefore, two English silver pennies had been lost at Knowth at a date much subsequent to the 950s it may be thought very unlikely that neither would have been a coin of these two reigns. In this connection there cannot be ignored the circumstance that neither of the Knowth coins appears to evidence any significant degree of wear, and it
is clearly desirable to postulate loss at a date not too far removed from that of the striking of the older. The fact that the Æthelstan coin is of circumscription type with the Rex totius britannie formula appearing in the legend must suggest that it was not struck before 927, while the fact that it is not of portrait type but of the Winchester mint could suggest a date before rather than after c. 935. Nor is this the end of the story. That no other pennies of this type are known for this moneyer may not be significant, but the fact that the reverse die survived to be used with a portrait obverse die does suggest that we are dealing with a coin struck not all that long before the introduction of the portrait type. In other words it is reasonable to suppose that the Æthelstan penny was struck c. 935 or a very little earlier. There seems, too, no reason why the Eadred penny should not have been struck in the early part of the reign, i.e. before rather than after c. 950, and so the Æthelstan coin need not have been much more than a dozen years old before the two coins came together. On this telling we are probably justified in suggesting for the date of loss of the two coins from Knowth a date c. 950 or a very little later. It is a dating which I believe is sufficiently close to be acceptable to the archaeologist who has to conclude that the primary silting of the upper souterrain at Knowth occurred about the middle of the tenth century. In other words, the remodelling of the Knowth burial complex as an artificial hill-fort seems now to ante-date the Anglo-Norman conquest of Meath by more than two centuries.

In conclusion one would stress that finds of Anglo-Saxon coins from the first half of the tenth century are not unprecedented where the area of Knowth is concerned. Perhaps the most immediately relevant is a c. 1871 discovery, at Fennor only a couple of miles to the west, of a coin of Æthelstan and of one of Eadmund (939–46). Unfortunately the coins can no longer be identified in the Academy’s cabinet now housed in the National Museum of Ireland. Mention should also be made of two pennies of Edward the Elder found in the early part of this century on the demesne lands of Castle Bellingham some fifteen miles to the north. From Drogheda, too, some five miles to the east, there is the record of a penny of Æthelstan, now in the Ulster Museum, by the London moneyer Beahred. If we extend our net to take in the three contiguous counties of Louth, Meath, and Co. Dublin, it is to find a total of no fewer than six coin hoards which we may suppose to have been concealed in the first half of the tenth century. Earliest but very shadowy is what was rumoured to be an immense hoard of Kufic dirhams with a few Anglo-Saxon pence that is supposed to have been unearthed near Drogheda in 1846 but only four coins from which seem ever to have been seen by a competent numismatist. Three years before this, however, there had been discovered a score or so of coins of Edward the Elder with the odd English Viking and Kufic coin at Lugga, near Nobber in Co. Meath. The find is now preserved in the National Museum of Ireland. In 1838 a similar but slightly later find came to light at Glasnevin in Co. Dublin. The coins have been dispersed, but most of the hoard can be reconstructed with a fair degree of confidence. In 1883 a slightly larger hoard dating from late in the reign of Æthelstan was found at an unknown place in Co. Dublin, and fortunately before its dispersal was listed by the highly competent Aquilla Smith. Finally there was a major

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1 PRIA i (1879), pp. 19 and 20.
3 Ulster Journ Arch. i (1853), p. 164.
4 JBA iii (1848), p. 334.
6 SCBI B.M. H/N (1966), p. 28 correcting Lindsay’s ‘Claremont’ on strength of MS. catalogue of the Dawson cabinet in Royal Irish Academy.
7 NC 1883, pp. 282–7.
hoard ending with coins of Eadred and perhaps concealed a year or two before that king's death which came to light in 1746 at Monasterboice only a few miles north-east of Knowth.¹ On the basis of such evidence we can be reasonably certain that a quantity of Anglo-Saxon silver coin was in the possession of the Vikings of Brega and Dublin about the middle of the tenth century, and so this little find of two Anglo-Saxon coins at Knowth occasions no surprise. It is the stratified archaeological context and not the find-spot that is sensational.

¹ NC 1957, pp. 195 and 196. Were one prepared to include finds from the three counties concealed as late as c. 980, the following additions would have to be made: Dalkey 1838 (JRSAI xci (1961), pp. 1–18), 'Co. Meath' (SCBI B.M. H/N, p. 32), Killyncoole 1859 (JRSAI viii (1864–6), pp. 373–6), Killyon Manor 1876 (BNJ xxxi (1962), pp. 23–5), Oldcastle 1900 (ibid. xxix, ii (1959), pp. 253 and 254), and Smarmore 1929 (ibid. xxvii, ii (1953), pp. 161–6).