SOME DANGERS OF DATING SCEATTAS BY TYPOLOGICAL SEQUENCES

MARY MOREHART

Dating sceattas, the earliest English silver pennies, a perennial interest of numismatists, has again recently been in vogue. The total life for this coin series is now confidently put between c. 660–70 and c. 740–50. However, type order within the series, as well as precise dating for each, has yet to be achieved or agreed upon.

Many methods are used either separately or in conjunction to date individual sceatta types, but I would like to comment on certain risks in one method only, typological sequence dating, when used unsupported by any other method. Having isolated these risks, I would like further to show how the art historian can aid the numismatist to avoid these dangers by showing that contemporary ornamental metalwork offers more likely models than do other sceattas for many sceatta designs included in such constructed sequences. I take as an example of the risks in question and their resolution, a typological sequence with a long and unresolved history even before being used by S. E. Rigold in a recent chronological arrangement of the early sceattas.¹ Rigold states that the reverse of BMC type 37 (Fig. 1a), a rose formed of four small birds whirling around a small central cross, originates from the reverse of one variety of BMC Type 27 (Rigold’s type B III b), a bird perched on top of a cross, this latter design being itself taken from a Merovingian source. D. M. Metcalf² accepts this derivation, but on other grounds argues for different dates than those assigned by Rigold.

Neither Rigold nor Metcalf gives any explanation for this imaginative change from one bird on a cross to four birds arranged around a cross, but perhaps both rely on G. Baldwin Brown, apparently the first to suggest this transformation of type 27 into type 37, in his *Arts in Early England* (1915). Baldwin Brown's suggestion differed from an earlier proposed sequence of C. F. Keary in the *Catalogue of English Coins in the British Museum* (1887) in which type 35, a bird with a cross before it, gave rise to type 36, in which one bird is duplicated, with one small bird now above a larger bird with cross, to be followed in its turn by type 37 with four birds, thus a reduplication of the two birds of type 36; in all, a logical progression from a simple one bird with cross to a complex of four birds by repeated duplication. This earlier sequence is accepted by G. C. Brooke (1932) and by Philip V. Hill (1952).

In these two sequences each ending with type 37, which are sometimes used to support dating and sometimes not, we have an example of a reaction to the absence of an agreed-upon Roman, Merovingian or Byzantine prototype for a sceatta design which would insist that the missing prototype must necessarily be another sceatta. This reaction has given rise to some rather fanciful 'sequences' in which only a stretch of the imagination can relate the type alleged to 'evolve' from one to another. Many writers from Keary onward have bridged these imaginative gaps by endowing the sceatta designer with unusual creative gifts and quickness of fancy in transforming one design into another. Hill, for example, speaks of 'the delight which the designers of the sceattas took in varying and modifying dull designs'.

In his discussion of 'The Artistic Aspects of the Early Anglo-Saxon Coinage' Baldwin Brown developed at length his explanation for creative imagination producing sudden design leaps. He describes a process of devolution, in which successive copying of a design, originally Roman or Merovingian, ultimately produces near or total unrecognizability, until, from these wrecks of older representations, the artist die-engraver imaginatively creates a new design that has very little resemblance to the original type. This combination of devolution and creation can be demonstrated in detail for a small number of sceatta types, but contrary to popular opinion, does not apply to most, and specifically not to type 37. Neither of the sequences ending in type 37 show the essential features of degeneration. There are minor changes in pellet arrangement, in the size of the one bird of the Bird on Cross, but nothing so unrecognizable as to give rise to four birds or two in place of one.

If proposed sequences, like those under discussion terminating in type 37, do not satisfy the conditions of 'degeneration'; if there are not telling stylistic connections among the types in the sequences, the relationship being merely thematic, here, for example, the sole relationship in each proposed sequence to type 37 appearing to be 'bird(s) and cross', and if the argument of 'improving a dull design' is not sufficient to warrant any chronological deductions, where are we to turn?

Philip V. Hill tried to find parallels in art history for type 37 before accepting the Keary sequence, stating, when unable to do so, that the tendency toward revolving motifs was one of the most successful characteristics of Saxon art, as was the love of

---

1 iii, pp. 91–2.
2 i, p. 18.
3 English Coins, p. 6.
5 Ibid., p. 10.
symmetry. More generally, other numismatists have suggested that the sceatta die-engraver was also a silversmith, making decorative jewellery, bowls, boxes, plate, and the like, thus being open to many contemporary influences and ideas outside the range of coin designs, whether of sceattas or others. Here we are on the right track. Though little ornamental silverware or jewellery survives from late seventh- or eighth-century England, sufficient other clues are available to prove that many designs adapted to sceatta dies were first created for larger-scale ornament.

![Gold disc-fibula from Schretzheim, Germany. First half of the seventh century. Diam. c. 4·1 mm. Heimatmuseum, Dillingen, Germany.](image1)

![Gold pendant from Faversham, Kent. Seventh century. Diam. c. 3·2 mm. B.M.](image2)

Parallels in ornament for type 37, the end point of our various sequences and explanations, are to be found in designs of three, four, five, or more small birds wheeling around a central point, cross, or circle on disc ornaments popular in Lombard Italy, the Upper Rhine area, and Kent in the late sixth and seventh centuries (Fig. 1b, Fig. 2a and b). Two such parallel ornaments, one of sumptuous gold and cloisonné from Schretzheim (Germany), the other of pierced bronze from Bülach (Switzerland), offer the designs which most closely resemble the naturalistic birds of type 37.

The Schretzheim brooch (Fig. 2a), dated in the first half of the seventh century, belongs to a group of gold or silver-gilt disc brooches decorated with filigree wire, and a characteristically complicated system of cells, often with step-patterns and curved lines, holding flat-polished stones, which has numerous close analogies both north and south of the Alps and in Kent—for example the famous Kingston brooch. This type of cloisonné art, known as ‘close cell work’, after its invention by the Lombards south of the Alps, was much used by the Germanic peoples to the north, from whom it was adopted by the English and Scandinavians.

---

2 J. Werner, 'Die byzantinische Scheibenfibel von Capua und ihre germanischen Verwandten', Acta Arch. vii (1936), p. 62, fig. 6. For a colour plate of the Kingston brooch which has similar close cell work and the same central boss as the Schretzheim fibula, see Baldwin Brown, op. cit., iii, pl. A.
3 J. Werner, op. cit., p. 60; and Münzdatierte Austrasische Grabfunde (Berlin, 1935), pp. 44, 45, 54.
The pierced bronze ornament from Bülach (Fig. 1b), used as a decoration on a leather or cloth bag hung from a woman’s belt, comes from an Alamannic cemetery which was abandoned in the first decades of the eighth century. Still others of the same type with three to six birds, all of the mid- or late-seventh century, are known from Germany and Switzerland. No ornament with the four naturalistic birds of type 37 has been found in Kent—that with three bird’s heads in cloisonné and filigree work in the characteristic whorl pattern illustrated here (Fig. 2b) is the closest parallel—but such can reasonably be supposed to have been known to the sceatta die-engraver. Accepted as the source for the type 37 sceatta design, these ornaments now reinforce sceatta distribution and other evidence for a close connection between south-eastern England and the Rhine trade route in the latter half of the seventh and the early eighth centuries.

This review of the evidence, together with the establishment of an independent source in Germanic ornamental metalwork for the motif of type 37, indicates that any part of dating systems, such as those of Rigold, Metcalf, or Hill, which are based on the two traditional typological sequences to type 37, can no longer be sustained. Since type 37 cannot be the terminal member of either sequence, none of the other elements of the sequences can now be dated relative to it, each of these types thus becoming again undated as before the sequence construction, subject to other evidence. It is less misleading to have neither order nor date for the members of the type 37 sequences, than to have a false order leading to unsupported positive dating. In the same way, we are free of any speculations about the inventiveness of the die-engraver or his creativity, since the motifs of the disc brooches would have been available to him for adaptation to sceattas without requiring these rare qualities.

Unfortunately, although all would like to see individual sceatta types dated, there are no typological sequences for English sceatta types, however common such sequences may be among Frisian types, which would achieve this end. Indeed, most sceatta motifs not clearly derived from Roman or Merovingian coins have parallels in Anglo-Saxon art, which make them independent not only of sceatta but also other coin parallels.

On grounds other than parallels in Anglo-Saxon art, numismatists have eliminated certain of the earlier accepted typological sequences for sceattas. For example, the obverse of type 37, two confronted heads separated by a cross with a three-pronged base, is neither a duplication of the type 36 obverse, a profile head with cross, nor a reduction of two figures standing in profile, but an imitation of the profile heads of both gold and silver coins in France, as well as the coins of the Visigothic kings, Egica and Wittiza (697–700). Another such sequence from a degraded profile head to ‘Porcupine’ to ‘Plumed Bird’ disappears with evidence that the ‘Porcupine’ type is Frisian, the ‘Plumed Bird’ English. Similarly, in a recent study of the ‘Wolf’ sceattas, D. M. Metcalf and D. R. Walker have found that the ‘Wolf’ types do not conform to the previous theory.

---

2. N. Åberg, *The Anglo-Saxons in England* (Uppsala, 1926), fig. 243; for other examples see fig. 265 and fig. 292, a gold pendant with four birds’ heads from the Wieuwerd hoard, Friesland.
of successive issues from a single workshop, the ‘Wolf and Twins’ being the series prototype.\(^1\) That all ‘Wolf’ types also have independent parallels in the Anglo-Saxon art of the eighth century supports this view.\(^2\)

In the light of these warnings from numismatics and art history, it would seem safest that any ordering of sceatta types which relies solely on typological sequences, or ‘degeneration’ processes without intermediates, or ‘creativity’ or ‘design improvement’ hypotheses, be avoided because of the risk of misleading consequences for dating and other purposes. It is at best a harmless play of fancy, as Baldwin Brown remarked of ‘Porcupines’, to make such derivations as the ‘Female Centaur’ from the ‘Two Emperors’, or the ‘Celtic Cross’ from the ‘Face in Shield’; but it is at worst imaginary chronology.


\(^2\) My forthcoming book will discuss the many correspondences between Anglo-Saxon art and sceatta design.