REVIEW ARTICLE

Coins of the Kingdom of Northumbria, c. 700–867 in the Yorkshire Collections (The Yorkshire Museum, York; The University of Leeds; The City Museum, Leeds) by E.J.E. Pirie, (Galata Print Ltd, Llanfyllin, Powys, 1996), 287 pages, including 58 plates. Cloth. £75.

THE Yorkshire collections of Northumbrian so-called stycas are so extensive as to contain representatives of nearly every die and combination of dies used in the concluding decades of the old Northumbrian kingdom, which perished with the defeat and death of kings Osberht and Ælla when in March 867 they vainly attacked the Danish Great Army occupying York. Elizabeth Pirie is to be congratulated on making and publishing a complete die study of the coins in those collections, with over 2200 different die combinations illustrated on plates of clearly reproduced direct photographs taken by herself; these will be an invaluable source of material for future research.

The first 135 years of the period covered by the title are represented by only 115 die combinations, and the student interested in the issues of those years will need to consult other sources such as BAR British Series 128 and 180. This is because hoards found in Yorkshire, which are the main source for the collections, have consisted predominantly of coins of the kings of Northumbria and archbishops of York from about the commencement of minting by Archbishop Wigmund until the end of the series, including a large irregular component.

Wigmund’s dates are traditionally given as 837–54 which, on the parallel royal dating, would require him to have occupied the see of York from three or four years before the death of King Eanred, throughout the seven or eight years’ reign of his son Æthelred II (including a brief usurpation of royal power after about three years by a certain Redwulf) and for the first five or six years of the reign of Osberht. As has been pointed out by previous commentators, these relativities may not be entirely correct, as is suggested inter alia by the coinage of Wigmund’s successor Wulfhere, which displays no continuity of moneyers with those of his predecessor and yet gives the appearance of having begun before that of Osberht.

To encourage historians to focus on the chronology, numismatists must try to develop robust criteria for splitting Æthelred’s coinage between his two reigns and determining which of Wigmund’s coins are likely to have been struck in each of those reigns and in Eanred’s and, if possible, Redwulf’s. In BNJ XXVIII this reviewer, in his first foray into numismatic research some forty years ago, interpreted the hoard evidence and his own die study as implying that the Hexham hoard of 1832 (represented in the Yorkshire collections by a modest parcel) was deposited at the end of Redwulf’s usurpation or soon afterwards, because it lacked coins of Osberht and Archbishop Wulfhere and most of the issues of a major moneyer of Æthelred called Eardwulf; and that since the later hoards so well represented in the Yorkshire collections contained no new varieties or moneyers of Archbishop Wigmund his coinage must have ceased by that time. However, Elizabeth Pirie argues that Hexham should be dated much later in Æthelred’s second reign. Having observed that nearly all the obverse and reverse dies used in Redwulf’s coinage display a linear cross, or else a cross of five pellets, as the central motif, and that a linear cross was the most prevalent motif on late coins of Eanred, she takes the view that dies used in Æthelred’s coinage and that of Archbishop Wigmund can be assumed to have been made in Æthelred’s first reign if they have cruciform motifs while dies with other motifs (such as a circled pellet), many of which are undoubtedly late, would have been engraved in his second reign. As a result, a substantial number of the coins previously assigned to Æthelred’s first reign are catalogued in this volume under the second reign and many more moneyers are thus attributed to it. So, too, is a significant proportion of Wigmund’s coinage.

Cataloguing such a vast quantity of material raises fundamental problems of arrangement. Unless it can be subdivided into manageable segments, students less familiar with the series will find it impossible to see the wood for the trees. In the recent past, notably in fascicules of SCBI, the custom has been to lay out the royal issues by reign, and by moneyer within each reign, with the coinage of Æthelred’s second reign assumed to be limited almost entirely to the moneyer Eardwulf as had been proposed in BNJ XXVIII. Then follow derivative and blundered coins, and finally the coins of the three archbishops (Eanbald II, Wigmund and Wulfhere). For the stycas from late in Eanred’s reign onwards Pirie has radically departed from this convention. First, she divides the regular coinage into five groups differentiated by die-cutting features and designated A, B, C, Cii and Ciii and subdivides each group by reign and then by moneyer; secondly, she allocates Æthelred’s coins within each group other than A to his first or second reign according to whether or not the motifs on both obverse and reverse are cruciform; and, thirdly, she hypothesizes Wigmund’s coins to the various groups and reigns and interpolates them chronologically within each group. Since coins of most moneyers have been allocated to more than one group the result is a frustrating degree of fragmentation; the moneyer Monne, for example, is found in all except Group B, and his regular coins for four kings (and five reigns) are to be discovered in fifteen different places.

The groups themselves are fully objective only insofar as the coins of Æthelred are concerned, for in his case they merely reflect the spelling of his name. To
be classified in Group A the letter before the L has to to be an E (Group Ai) or F (Group Ai1), not the more usual I. In Group B the name is spelt AEILRED or AEILRED and in Group C EDILRED or EDILRED. Group Cii is as Ci but with the L inverted, and in Group Ciii the I and L are interchanged. This is clear enough. but it is less easy to understand how the coins of other reigns have been allocated to these groups. It appears that inter-reign die-links, and stylistic similarities with coins involved in such links, have been the main determining factors, though some objective criteria emerge: thus the first E of Aethelred is reversed in Group Cii; Redwulf is spelt REDVULF in Group A, HEDVULF in Group Cii and REDVLF (or REDVLE) in the others. Wigmund does not feature in Groups B and Cii; his early issues with the title AREP are placed in Group Ci, but later issues with IREP and variations in its consonants can be found in Groups A and Ci; IR in Group Ci; and coins with no title in Groups Ci and Cii. Aethelred’s coinage and the parallel issues of Archbishop Wigmund are divided in all but Group A according to whether or not the obverse and reverse motifs are both cruciform; the double cruciforms are placed before Redwulf and the remainder are placed after him. It seems that because Group A includes the specially ornamented varieties of the moneyer Leofthegn, Pirie could not bring herself to follow her own logic, so in that group all coins of Aethelred precede those of Redwulf and all coins of Wigmund follow Redwulf. Those coins she thinks might belong to the second reign are asterisked, which means some of Leofthegn’s and all those of other moneys with non-cruciform motifs. Had she done the same with the other groups it would have saved a lot of aggravation.

The basis of her allocation of coins of Eanred, Redulf and Archbishop Wigmund to the various Aethelred groups and the reasons for her identification of Groups A, B and C as separate die-cutting workshops not necessarily in the same centre (York) are less clearly explained in the catalogue than in her paper ‘Phases and groups within the styca coinage of Northumbria’, in Coinage in Ninth-Century Northumbria: The Tenth Oxford Symposium on Coinage and Monetary History, edited by D.M. Metcalf (BAR British Series 180, 1987), pp. 103–145. Unfortunately she has not responded to the serious criticisms made at that symposium of her chronological division of Aethelred’s coinage according to whether or not the motifs on obverse and reverse are both cruciform.

Thus in Appendix III on the alloy composition of authentic stycas she writes:

‘The schedule of results obtained from analysis of specimens in York and Leeds is given here as a mere record of practical work done, without further comment. Projects planned – first one and then another – were never completed, so that there are insufficient data for adequate comparison of like with like within the individual groups, or for valid contrasts to be drawn between the various parts of the coinage ... By the autumn of 1982 [following analyses of Eanred’s coinage] plans were laid for the analysis of a considerable number of coins by each of the various moneys (of Aethelred II, Redwulf, Osbert and the archbishops) in each group. Unfortunately, because of departmental difficulties in Bradford, analysis there came to an end almost before this project had begun: only [58] coins of Leofthegn ... were examined [in 1983].’

and on page 46:

‘It is one of the regrets arising from this present work, that no major analysis-project for York’s later specimens, other than that published in 1987 (Gilmore and Pirie), has been completed.’

It is true that there were insufficient data from the 1982 and earlier experiments for valid contrasts to be drawn between different parts of the coinage from Aethelred onwards, but this was substantially rectified in an important contribution to the 1987 symposium by D.M. Metcalf and J.P. Northover, ‘The Northumbrian royal coinage in the time of Aethelred II and Osbert’ (ibid. pp. 187–233). They reported and commented on the results of a detailed analysis of the composition of 120 coins of Aethelred, three of Osbert and thirty-one of the prolific blundered series. Pirie completely ignores that paper, notwithstanding that it was given to a symposium which she attended, and she even omits it from her bibliography despite citing three other papers on coinage alloy presented at the same time, one of which is the Gilmore and Pirie study (of Redwulf’s coinage) and another is a shorter paper by Metcalf and Northover on the coins of a moneyer of Eanred (‘Herreth’, ibid. pp. 91–102). Given such an extraordinary omission, it is necessary to devote some space in this review to the implications of Metcalf and Northover’s analysis for the validity of her hypothesis about the chronological significance of cruciform and non-cruciform motifs. With the reservation that the recorded composition of each coin is based on EPMA readings taken at three points on a polished section of the edge, so that the precision of results published to two places of decimals is somewhat spurious, those results can be related to Pirie’s catalogue as follows:

(a) On Plates 14–19 of the symposium volume Metcalf and Northover illustrate 116 regular and near-regular coins. When these are allocated to Pirie groups, they yield 36 coins of Group A (including two of Redwulf and one of Wigmund), 8 of Group B (including one of Redwulf), 49 of Group Ci (including three of Redwulf), 20 of Group Cii, and 3 of Group Ciii (two of them of Redwulf). Of the 74 coins of Aethelred in Groups B and C, 47 would be classed by Pirie as first reign, 3 as ‘Descendants which may have been struck [from regular obverse and irregular reverse dies] during the usurpation of Redwulf’, and 24 as second reign. Of the 33 coins of Aethelred in Group A, several would be asterisked as indicative of belonging to the second reign.

(b) On Plates 20 and 21, they illustrate 31 coins which are irregular or meaningless and three in the name of Osberht. (There are also three forgeries.) None of these 34 coins was shown to contain more than 0.37% silver (the apparent exception, no. 139, shown as 2.23%, must be an error because it brings the total metallic content to 101.87%).
(c) Returning to Plates 14–19, fifteen out of twenty coins of Æthelred’s moneyer Eardwulf (Group Ci) showed 0.14% silver (Ag) or less. One of these (no. 107) is doubly cruciform, the other 14 are not. The remaining five (nos. 102, 103, 106, 112 and 120) showed between 0.73% and 2.28% silver; again, one (no. 106, 1.01%, a duplicate of 107), is doubly cruciform. The three Descendants also registered very low levels of silver, namely 0.05% (no. 36, Ci), 0.39% and 1.18% (nos. 85–86, Cii).

(d) Seven of the eight coins of Redwulf showed at least as much silver as the best of the Æthelred/Eardwulf pieces, namely 2.20% and 2.69% (Ci), 2.67% and 3.29% (A), 3.30% and 4.43% (Cii), and 4.56% (B). All these are doubly cruciform. The other (no. 98, Ci) showed only 0.09%; its reverse is not cruciform. (A doubly cruciform coin by the same moneyer, Monne, from a similar obverse die was reported by Gilmore and Pirie to show 0.10% silver.)

(e) Ten doubly cruciform coins which Pirie would date before Redwulf showed less silver than any of the Redwulfs except the last. Eight of them showed less than 2.25% but more than 1%, the lowest being 1.48% (nos. 44 and 72, Ci; 33, 34, 45, 48 and 50, Cii; and 51, Ciii; these include five of the seven specimens of the moneyer Cumemund). The others are two die-linked specimens of Æthelred’s moneyer Alghere with 0.10% and 0.59% (nos. 59 & 60, Cii); Metcalf and Northover comment (p. 204) that ‘they are obvious candidates for reattribution to Æthelred’s second reign’.

(f) Six coins of Æthelred in groups other than A and by moneyers other than Eardwulf are not doubly cruciform and Pirie would therefore date them after Redwulf. One of these showed a low silver content of 1.86% (no. 32, Cii) but the others showed between 3.64% and 9.32% (nos. 23, 24, 80–81, Ci, and 31, Cii).

(g) Thirty of the 33 coins of Æthelred in Group A showed a silver content between 3.92% (no. 30) and 11.92% (no. 6), several of them of varieties that would be asterisked by Pirie as likely to belong to the second reign. The other three registered 2.08% (no. 11), 2.47% (no. 22) and 3.24% (no. 90); none of them is doubly cruciform.

From this analysis it does not seem to have mattered much in most of Æthelred’s first reign whether the silver content was, say, 3%, 6% or 9%. G.R. Gilmore (‘Metal analysis of the Northumbrian styca: review and suggestions’, ibid. pp. 159–73) suggests that any control of silver which had existed in Eanred’s reign had been abandoned and that the coinage alloy up to and including Redwulf may have consisted of a mixture of new brass (some 25% zinc and 75% copper), recycled old coins with a substantial content of silver, and a little tin. The resulting silver proportion would depend on how much old coinage was available to be included in the melt on any given day. If that view is correct, one would expect the virtual absence of silver in the first-reign Descendants and in the second-reign coinage of the moneyer Eardwulf to signify that the supply of old coinage had become exhausted. It is true that the Hexham hoard, deposited after the silver had begun to disappear from new coins, contained a substantial proportion of coins of Eanred of better silver, but Hexham is far from York and it does not follow that the money supply in the two locations had the same composition.

So could the results of Metcalf and Northover’s analysis be reconciled with Pirie’s cruciform hypothesis on the basis that coins must have been struck occasionally with 1% of silver or less before Redwulf, and more frequently with 2% or more in the first years of Æthelred’s second reign? It does not seem probable. Gilmore (ibid. p. 171) shows that by the time of Osberht and Archbishop Wulfhere even the brass had become of poor quality. Virtual absence of silver in coins of Æthelred seems more likely, therefore, to be a defining characteristic of his second reign.

Why in this catalogue did Pirie ignore Metcalf and Northover and, in the process, allow herself to exercise no judgment on the results of various metal analyses? It must be because, although published in 1996, the catalogue is essentially a pre-1987 compilation. Metcalf and Northover’s analysis exposes potentially fatal weaknesses in the cruciform hypothesis. However, leaving aside the moneyer Eardwulf, too few coins outside Group A which are not doubly cruciform were included to enable any view to be taken on the extent to which such coins might have been minted with a negligible silver content by first-reign moneyers. Such minting would provide what is currently lacking for most of those moneyers, namely evidence that they operated again for Æthelred when he was restored and were not adversely treated if they had worked for Redwulf in the meantime. More coins of Wigmund’s moneyers need also to be analysed to determine whether there is evidence for any of them having operated after the restoration. It is regrettable that Pirie did not arrange for the necessary work to be done, if not in Bradford then perhaps in Oxford, following the 1987 symposium, though the omission would be understandable if she had feared that the outcome might have caused her to reject her own hypothesis. In that event the reworking involved would have been so extensive that the publication of the catalogue would probably have been abandoned.

We must therefore accept it as it is and learn to use it while recognising and pointing out its serious shortcomings, as this review has attempted to do, for when all is said and done the catalogue is a testimony to Elizabeth Pirie’s mastery of recording, photographing and die-analysing large volumes of unpromising material and to the many years she put into this work. It is hard to think of anyone else who would have dared to undertake it, not least to unravel the extensive derivative and imitative series which she classifies as Descendants or, in a separate Group D, as Irregulars or Reflectives (the latter comprising 356 different die-combinations linked together in a single die chain).

For the regular coinage a number of visual patterns...
of die-combinations illustrate her work. It would have been better had she denoted obverse dies by squares rather than by slightly larger circles than she uses for reverse dies. Also, at the risk of pursuing a point which may be thought to have been adequately covered in other ways, it should be mentioned that her division between the two reigns of Æthelred of the coins of moneyers who also worked for Redwulf is seen to result in rather too many reverse dies which originated in the first reign being regarded as having been reused in the second reign, but thereby improbably left unused during Redwulf’s usurpation in favour of newly engraved dies. Finally, this reviewer finds her convention for referring to rulers and moneyers idiosyncratic: Uigmund in preference to the conventional Wigmund, for example.

To sum up: Miss Pirie’s catalogue, the result of many years of diligent and painstaking recording and die-analysis, is now an indispensable work of reference for the styca series, but students wishing to use it need to be aware that key criteria for its arrangement will probably prove to be seriously flawed.

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