PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS 2011
WHAT IS THE POINT OF NUMISMATICS?
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Introduction
In my last two addresses I feasted your eyes with illustrations. Tonight, I shall engage your minds with words alone. To ease any qualms you may have, in responding to the question I have posed I offer myself as your stalwart champion, not as a feeble apologist.

Definition
Before entering the lists, we should be clear what is meant by numismatics. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as ‘The study of coins and medals, esp. from an archaeological or historical standpoint’.1 This is a pithy but uncharacteristically lazy definition. To ‘coins and medals’ we can immediately add the study of tokens, banknotes and other embodiments of money and money’s worth. Also, to the incipient queue formed by archaeology and history, we can add economics, politics, metallurgy, engineering, art and aesthetics, iconography, mythology and even anthropology. You could doubtless place others in this queue, were you so minded.

Indeed, the sheer scope of numismatics is one of its greatest attributes and sources of fascination. It also risks, ironically, being its Achilles’ heel. Touching so many other disciplines it runs the danger of being relegated as a footnote to such subjects. I shall seek to expose the absurdity of such a notion. In doing so I shall concentrate mainly on coins and on the British series, but as we are considering numismatics per se, I must be excused for straying occasionally beyond these limits. I also crave your indulgence if the necessarily selective examples I use in support of what I say are drawn mainly from my own interests and experience. Again, you could doubtless offer alternative and possibly more telling examples of your own.

Numismatics and archaeology
The OED is irreproachable in stressing the links between numismatics, archaeology and history. Numismatics and archaeology enjoy an especially intimate, two way relationship, particularly in periods for which written records are sparse or non-existent. Both disciplines then rely on what the earth yields up. For the archaeologist painstaking excavation and recording provide vital evidence of when a site was occupied, by whom, and why and how the occupiers related to the wider environment. Within this framework coins, whether in the form of hoards or stray finds, may amplify or reshape the archaeological evidence.2 This capability arises directly from numismatic knowledge of the identity, classification and dating of the coins themselves. In the Iron Age, for example, in addition to helping define tribal territories, coins are sole evidence for the existence of such rulers as Tasciovanos, father of Cunobelin, and of

Acknowledgements
The author would like to thank the following who have provided helpful comments and information towards this address: Marion Archibald, Ken Eckhart, Susan Osborne and Philip Skingley and Drs Martin Allen, Edward Besly, Barrie Cook, David Dykes, Katie Eagleton, Philip de Jersey, Stewart Lyon and Rory Naismith. They are naturally exonerated from responsibility for any inadequacies in the content.

1 OED 1989, X, 598.
2 See Reece 2012, pp. 8–28 above, for the use of coin finds to illuminate the economy of Roman Britain.

ISSN 0143–8956. © British Numismatic Society.
Addedomaros, possibly his grandfather. The foundations are thereby laid, to be tested against other evidence coming to light, of a credible chronology for these rulers. Another example is the relevance to the introduction of gold coinage in Britain of John Sill’s work in dating the uniface stater, Gallo-Belgic E. As a significant contribution to this partnership from archaeology, advances in the techniques of conservation are enlarging the capabilities of coin evidence. For instance, the British Museum now uses a solution of alkaline glycerol as a non-invasive replacement for previous cleaning agents.

**Numismatics and history**

The examples I have just given could also be used to illustrate the interdependence of numismatics, archaeology and history. The relationship of numismatics to history is, however, more broadly based. The primary sources of history consist of the physical evidence of surviving immovable and moveable objects from the past, all of which may fall within the domain of archaeology, but they also consist profusely of the written word and other graphic material from the past. Such documentary evidence may, of course, allude to or consist of specifically numismatic evidence. Coins, besides being objects of enormous historical significance in their own right, can illuminate all the primary sources I have mentioned. The importance of coins arises from their relative indestructibility and the concentration of information they are capable of conveying. The role of the numismatist is to identify, interpret and apply this information. The contribution of coins may even be heightened where they embody both primary and secondary sources. For example, a commemorative issue may be a primary source for the commemoration itself, but also a secondary source about what is being commemorated.

As I have already observed in relation to archaeology, coins provide vital, even unique, evidence where written or graphic historical sources are either scarce or altogether lacking. From Ancient Greece certain poleis are known purely from the coins they issued. Turning to Britain, early hoards have also begun to reveal the extent to which contact with the Continent outlasted the departure of the Roman legions. Later, in ninth-century England, study of its coinage has transformed our understanding of the Northumbrian kingdom, compared with the picture pieced together from incomplete and often later chronicles. Our knowledge of East Anglia at that period is even more elusive. Contrasting with the extensive hagiography surrounding the life and death of St Edmund (d. 870), five kings ruling before him are at present unknown apart from their coins.

Where specifically numismatic written evidence survives, in the form of laws, writs, proclamations and official and monastic records, experience confirms that they can usually be relied upon. (This may be because the documents tend to deal with subject matter where the motive for falsification is usually absent.) An example is the documentary record of round halfpennies being struck in the reign of Henry I, treated with scepticism until in recent years actual specimens began to emerge.

More usually, documentary evidence relating to coinage is either clarified or elaborated by the coins themselves. An example within my own experience relates to repeated references that the abbot at Bury was entitled to a sole moneyer. Exceptionally, writs of Stephen increased the complement to three. My die studies confirm that this indeed happened in Stephen’s first, Watford type. They reveal, however, that the abbot also had two and possibly three moneyers in the latter years of Henry I’s reign, although no writs survive to testify the fact.

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3 Cottam, de Jersey, Rudd and Sills 2010.
4 Sills 2005.
5 E.g. coins of Phistelia, southern Italy. See Head 1911, 41.
6 Abdy and Williams 2006; Abdy 2006.
7 Metcalf 1987; MEC, 295–303.
9 Seaby 1949–51; Grierson 1949–51; Archibald and Conte 1990.
10 Eaglen 2006, 80–1, 98–100.
From the end of the thirteenth century the government periodically introduced only partly successful measures to ban the circulation of foreign coins in England.\textsuperscript{11} Later, from the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries the challenge to the official monopoly in currency was home grown, in the form of trade tokens. The authorities doubtless had the ability at any period to enforce their policies, but perhaps at times felt that such redress would be more troublesome than tolerating the offence. The banning of tokens in 1672 had long been forgotten when in the late eighteenth century they reappeared to meet the chronic demand for small change which the government of the day was neglecting to provide. These mismatches between regulation and practice are clearly revealed by study of the coins and tokens themselves.\textsuperscript{12}

The relationship between numismatics and history is intimate and many faceted. Knowledge and understanding in both disciplines are essential if the fullest synergy is to be gleaned from that relationship.

**Numismatics as an intellectual discipline and educative force**

If someone were naïve enough to ask – say – ‘what is the value of physics?’ a physicist might be taken by surprise, but would not be nonplussed for an answer. Ask a similar question to an historian, or to a numismatist, and the reply is likely to be more diffident. This arises from differences in the extent of practical application. Physics has a clear and measurable impact on the world, but the humanities offer less obvious and easily quantifiable benefits, especially in our materialistic times. Historians are themselves somewhat at fault for any public perception that their studies are not widely relevant. Early practitioners cultivated an aura of detached superiority towards the outside world, treating history, in the memorable words of David Cannadine, as ‘an intellectual pastime for consenting adults in private’.\textsuperscript{13} However, with an increase in recent years of numbers of students taking historical and philosophical courses at university change is afoot, encouraged by such writers as John Tosh, with his combative *Why History Matters*.\textsuperscript{14} Tosh argues cogently for the value of objective historical knowledge and judgment in understanding not only the past and the present but also in facing the future. In this, I suggest that numismatics also has a role to play but, before explaining why, I would like to put the case for the educative benefits of both history and numismatics.

The case rests mainly on their role as intellectual disciplines. Both are an exercise in gathering and marshalling facts to produce convincing narrative and valid judgments from them. The process is also an exercise in identifying falsehoods, fallacies and uncertainties, avoiding preconceived and prejudiced notions and distinguishing between what is relevant and what is not. Honing these skills makes for a successful student. It also provides the intellectual apparatus to deal with a wide range of challenges encountered in work and life.

In my student days in the 1950s it was generally accepted that a good degree in the humanities from a reputable university, apart from offering the prospect of an academic career, was a suitable stepping stone into industry and commerce and such professions as accountancy and the law. Nowadays, emphasis is increasingly placed on vocational courses within a hugely expanded university network. I wonder, however, if vocationally biased education is more likely to equip the individual to cope with the work place, let alone with life.

**Heritage and citizenship**

I now revert to the practical arguments for numismatics. Especially with the increase in disparate immigrant populations in the UK, often originating from countries not forming part of the former British empire, what are seen as core British values are feared to be under threat. The dismantling of national barriers through the ugly term ‘globalization’ is another corrosive

\textsuperscript{11} Cook 1999, 233–84.
\textsuperscript{12} Brooke 1950, 219, 220.
\textsuperscript{13} Cannadine 1987, 178.
\textsuperscript{14} Tosh 2008.
influence. It is doubly so in that the perceived assault on individual identity also encourages social polarization, based on ethnic, religious, linguistic, geographic and other distinctions. The UK government, especially since 1997, has responded by promoting the concept of ‘Britishness’. Realistically, this can only be achieved by fostering knowledge and a sympathetic understanding of Britain’s past. And no clearer framework for that past is to be found than through the medium of its coinage. Closely linked is the concept of citizenship, a test applied even to those settling in the UK from Commonwealth countries. Here the objective is to instil an appreciation of the Britain of today and its aspirations. Movements in the UK towards greater devolution, and even possible independence, naturally present a threat to the very concept of Britishness.

Perhaps partly as a reaction to the feeling of identity crisis, popular interest in Britain’s past has in fact increased in recent years. The media have been an important contributor to this change, both in stimulating and responding to it. It has to be conceded that this upsurge, seen for instance in attendance levels at museums, properties of the National Trust and others, and in the vogue for tracing family history and genealogy, may have partly arisen from the pursuit of entertainment. However, it is not to be disparaged on that account and may serve as a cue for those of us keen to promote numismatics.

Very significantly, this popular movement has had, as I have already mentioned, an academic counterpart in higher enrolments on university courses for degrees in history and philosophy. It is thus a very worrying setback that, in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, the government feels the necessity to reduce funding for universities and cultural institutions such as museums. This applies added pressure upon those contemplating a career as an academic or a professional curator or numismatist to think seriously about alternatives, perhaps with better immediate job prospects. If so, it means that numismatic advances will become more dependent on those for whom numismatics is an avocation rather than a primary occupation. Fortunately, there is a distinguished tradition for non-professional contributors to coin studies, even if their work does not always win the respect it deserves.

Numismatic research

I would now like to turn specifically to numismatic research. The many links of numismatics with other disciplines have already been stressed. In recent years such links have become ever wider. For example, the work of Anna Gannon into the iconography of the early British series has created an awareness of the meaning and artistic merits of designs that many had hitherto viewed with some condescension. More recently, Katie Eagleton is thrusting out the boundaries even further with her investigation of coinage in Africa from an anthropological point of view.

Apart, however, from links with other disciplines numismatics also has its own unique skills. I shall take two examples: analysis of hoards and stray finds, and die studies. Both are vital for the numismatist’s ability to match and differentiate individual coins, leading to a meaningful classification of individual series. Die studies were pioneered by students of Greek and Roman coins early in the twentieth century and are still being progressively applied to the British series. They have, however, not been immune from ill-conceived criticism, even from within the numismatic community itself, as an excessive preoccupation with minutiae. Indeed, the

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15 Tosh 2008, 124, 129.
16 For the ‘Life in the UK test’, see http://lifeintheuktest.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/.
17 Membership of the National Trust reached 4 million in 2011 from 2 million in 1990 (information provided by National Trust).
18 In 2011, the Universities and Colleges Application Service reported 15,092 acceptances for historical and philosophical studies, including 511 acceptances for archaeology; in 2006 there were 12,985 acceptances for historical and philosophical studies, including 614 acceptances for archaeology (www.ukcas.com/about_us/stat_services/stats_online/data_tables/subject/).
20 More information on the project ‘Money in Africa: understanding the past and present of a continent’ is available on the British Museum website (www.britishmuseum.org/research/projects/money_in_africa.aspx).
results of die studies may in themselves be inconsequential, but what is done with those results may be highly significant.

This raises an important point for the well-being and recognition of numismatics. For raw data based on painstaking study to be of any value it has to be used to draw conclusions of wider relevance and interest to numismatists, other disciplines and a wider audience. Detailed studies may be essential as a reliable starting point. They can be so daunting, such as a die study of the London mint, that no one has so far risen to the challenge. Our *Journal* and the *Numismatic Chronicle* serve an essential function in publishing such detailed groundwork. Studies such as our Special Publications constitute the second phase, interpreting detailed research to a wider audience. Phase three addresses a wider audience still with such works as Lord Stewartby’s *English Coins 1180–1551*, appealing in equal measure to numismatists and historians. Phase four is represented by a work such as Brooke’s *English Coins*, where scholarly knowledge is distilled into text appealing to numismatists, collectors and the enquiring general reader. Numismatics can and should serve all these groups.

When I first began to take a serious interest in coins, I became troubled that we were running out of worthwhile challenges. This concern has happily proved unfounded. In spite of all the work in intervening years there still remain important questions. For example, we have far to go in a complete understanding of *renovatio monetae* in the eleventh century and beyond, and of the purpose and effect of weight changes in the currency. In spite also of relatively plentiful surviving coins from the reign of Edward the Confessor, our understanding of that reign is very incomplete, as is that of Henry I, where yawning gaps are only gradually being filled from hoards and stray finds.

It is also clear that each age has something new to add, either from fresh evidence or changes in emphasis or approach. For Edwardian sterlings the work of Burns in the nineteenth century remains relevant today. He was followed by the remarkable contribution of the Fox brothers early in the twentieth century and they, in turn, by Jeffrey North, especially in the late 1980s. I would be astounded if that was the end of the story.

**Coins, art and aesthetics**

Appreciation of and the collection of coins originated from recognition of their aesthetic and antiquarian qualities. Following the Renaissance, Greek coins from the so-called Classical Period established themselves as the summit of artistic achievement. Even well into the twentieth century it was still customary to distinguish such issues from the earlier Archaic and later Hellenistic Periods. The appeal of Greek coinage between the early fifth century and the accession of Alexander the Great is indeed obvious. The flans were thick, enabling high relief to be achieved without too much concern about exposing the highlights to eventual wear. The designs themselves were nevertheless susceptible to great variations in execution according to the skills of the engraver, so that the reputation of the coinage was and remains associated with the finest examples of the celator’s art. Identifying such pieces is an aesthetic challenge to students and collectors in the series and to auctioneers and dealers alike. Alongside such coins, in the course of the last century, the intrinsic artistic merits of earlier and later Greek coins have been increasingly recognized. The pejoratively labelled Archaic Period is now appreciated for issues of extraordinary vigour whereas the Hellenistic Period spawned a remarkable portrait gallery of Alexander’s successors. Conceptually, this replaced the impassive beauty captured in Classical images of the mythical gods with uninhibited realism, later emulated with mixed success by ancient Rome.

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22 Stewartby 2009.
23 Brooke 1934.
24 Burns 1887, 186–220 and pl. A.
25 Fox and Fox 1909–1913.
26 See especially *SCBi* 39.
27 Jenkins 1972, 5.
In the time available to me it is not practicable to attempt an analysis of how coin design evolved through the Anglo-Saxon period to the immobilized types of the Middle Ages, to the surge of artistic creativity, both in coins and medals, in the Renaissance, and to the introduction of milled coinage, opening up a versatile new world of precision in low relief. The main point is that coins provide an unbroken commentary and chronology for the evolution of artistic expression through the centuries from the beginning of coinage to the present day in a way that no other homogenous group of objects could possibly do. For many periods, coins are also the only affordable (and possibly attainable) examples of the artistic movements they represent – unless you happen to be a Getty or an Arab sheikh. Not everyone is thrilled by the habit of modern mints to issue an unremitting flow of new designs for currency or for collection, but there can be no doubt that they may possess great artistic interest.

Numismatic collecting

This brings me to some concluding thoughts on collectors and collecting. Coin collectors are sometimes viewed as the poor cousins in the numismatic community. Indeed, ridiculing avid and pointless forms of collecting is a sport with a long history. Both Addison and Johnson lampooned virtuosi with an interest in ‘the curious’. Addison imagined one such – Nicholas Gimcrack – who began his will by leaving to his wife a box of butterflies and to a brother, in recognition of the lands he had vested in Nicholas’ son, last year’s collection of grasshoppers. Other bequests included a rat’s testicles and a whale’s pizzle (yes, it is what you think it is).28 In the same vein Johnson imagined a virtuoso who accumulated a collection of unimaginable trivia. In so doing he became the prey of wags and sharks, who so dissipated his wealth that he was obliged to mortgage his property to acquire thirty medals in the Harleian sale.29 In recent times, amongst my former acquaintance was a surgeon with a passion for antique clocks. His wife eventually gave him an ultimatum that when the next clock entered the house she would leave. His solution was to store his many subsequent purchases at a dealer’s premises.

Although, if taken to extremes, collecting may be ridiculous and even harmful, it is normally a deeply satisfying and psychologically fulfilling pursuit. Collectors of coins, for example, determine for themselves the boundaries of their interest, according to their personal inclination and resources. Within that framework arise the thrill of the chase, the element of surprise, and the satisfaction of possession. I would also claim that no collector has ever failed to acquire some knowledge of a personal or wider value in pursuit of a chosen field. Also, of course, major collectors, such as R.J. Lockett (1873–1950), may create a precious resource for numismatic study even though they themselves have no thought of using their coins in that way.30 For others, such as Commander Mack (1901–74), collecting may become the springboard to serious study.31 My own collections in the English series have actually been prompted by the desire to amass the materials of study. Not least was my belief that in being known as a collector I would be far more likely to hear about coins relevant to my research. Collecting also gives scope for novel approaches to coin study. I referred earlier this evening to the passing of Eileen Atkinson.32 One of her interests was in coins with images of birds. Another of our members collects coins with Wagnerian associations. It struck me the other day that a collection of coins as propaganda could be fascinating. Such possibilities are almost limitless.

Postscript

Finally, I would offer a frankly unsophisticated thought: that numismatics, whether as a body of knowledge, an object of study or a form of collecting, is also a rich source of pleasure. There is about coins a magic which few other objects can match. Each coin has its own history.

28 Addison 1710a.
29 Johnson 1750.
31 Mack 1966.
32 See p. 298 below.
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which may to a varying degree be known. Addison takes us into this realm with his essay on ‘The Adventures of a Shilling’. He chronicles the fortunes of an Elizabethan shilling from the silver mines of Peru through decades of use and abuse to a furnace in the Great Recoinage of 1696–7.33

Although in any discipline rivalries and jealousies may erupt, numismatics is unusually free from such frictions. Whether working alone or together, numismatists are only too willing help and encourage each other, in the course of which friendships are often formed that last for life.

The future of numismatists is in the hands of many. It is nurtured by academia, museums, numismatic societies, authors of diverse topics, auctioneers and dealers, collectors, metal detectorists and, increasingly, the media. Their involvement and commitment combine as a resounding affirmation in reply to my question.

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SCBI 39 see North 1989.


33 Addison 1710b.