

THE A, B, C OF THE CLASSICAL SERIES OF COINS UNDER TINCOMARUS

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TINCOMARUS, who declared himself to be a COM(*mii*).F(*ilius*) ('son of Commius') upon much of his coinage, ruled a region around Chichester, Noviomagus Reginorum under the Romans, sometime probably about 25 BC–AD 10.¹ He struck coinage in gold and silver, two denominations in each, staters and quarter staters in gold, and a unit and minim in silver, to call them by their modern terms. According to the most recent catalogue, he struck 7 types of stater, 9 types of quarter stater, 12 types of silver unit, and 4 types of minim, and this coinage has been divided into four successive series on the basis of its changing style and themes – the Celtic, Proto-Classical, Classical and Crude.² It has been argued that 'striking quality, metallurgy, and distribution indicate that the Crude and Classical series were probably from the same mint', and that 'it is only in the Celtic series that other mints can be suggested'.³ Consequently, it is the working assumption here that all of the coins of the Classical series were produced at the same mint, even though no detailed die-study has yet been published to prove this beyond a doubt. Bearing this in mind, the purpose of this article is to investigate the potential significance of a number of isolated letters – A, B, or C – that occur on the obverse of three different coins in the Classical series, on a quarter stater, a silver unit, and a minim.



Fig. 1. (a) Gold quarter stater of Tincomarus (*ABC* 1076), A-Type; Spink Auction 15049, 2 Dec. 2015, lot 124 (© Spink & Son Ltd); (b) gold quarter stater of Tincomarus (*ABC* 1076), B-Type; A.H. Baldwin Auction 99, 4 May 2016, lot 793 (© A. H. Baldwin & Sons Ltd).

Note: All illustrations in this article are twice actual size.



Fig. 2. (a) Silver unit of Tincomarus (*ABC* 1106), A-Type; Spink Auction 15049, 2 Dec. 2015, lot. 134 (© Spink & Son Ltd); (b) silver unit of Tincomarus (*ABC* 1106), B-Type; Spink Auction 15049, 2 Dec. 2015, lot. 132 (© Spink & Son Ltd).

¹ For the sake of convenience, I follow the regnal dates in *ABC*, but these are approximate at best. For the geographical distribution of Tincomarus' coinage, see Bean 2000, 137–9.

² I rely on *ABC* for the number of types. For the series, see Bean 2000, 127–37, 240–3.

³ See Bean 2000, 136.



Fig. 3. (a) Silver minim of Tincomarus (*ABC* 1133), A-Type (CCI-981968); (b) silver minim of Tincomarus (*ABC* 1133), C-Type (CCI-00268) (© Celtic Coin Index).

The quarter stater depicts a winged head, normally identified as Medusa, on the reverse, and the legend *TINC* within a corded tablet on the obverse (Fig. 1).⁴ The letter *C* always occurs above the centre of the tablet, while a letter *A* or *B* always occurs below.⁵ The silver unit depicts an eagle with outspread wings confronting a snake on the reverse, and the legend *TINCOM* around a laureate head on the obverse (Fig. 2).⁶ A letter *A* or *B* always occurs behind the head away from the main legend.⁷ Finally, the minim depicts a bird picking at a group of berries at the lower part of a branch on the reverse, and a pair of interlocking squares with incuse sides on the obverse (Fig. 3).⁸ A letter *A*, *B*, or *C* always occurs at the centre of the interlocking squares.⁹ The minim bears no legend, so the attribution to Tincomarus rather than to his successor Verica cannot be certain. However, the fact both that Tincomarus struck two other minims depicting the same pair of interlocking squares, and that he is the only ruler in the region known to have included variable letters on his coins in this way, suggests that he was most likely responsible for the striking of this minim also.¹⁰

It is interesting that only one type within each of the three denominations displays the variable letters, a fact that suggests that these three types were probably all struck during the same approximate period, but there does not seem to have been any attempt to enforce greater consistency in appearance otherwise. Indeed, the most noteworthy feature of these coins is that, apart from the variable letter on the obverse and their general classical style, they seem to have nothing in common. They bear three very different obverse designs, three very different reverse designs, and display different legends or no legend at all. If one can sometimes detect a theme or motif apparently common to two of these coins, then the third coin will prove the exception. For example, the reverse of the minim depicts a bird, perhaps a raven, the reverse of the silver unit depicts another bird, an eagle, but the reverse of the quarter stater depicts the head of mythical creature, a gorgon.¹¹ Similarly, the obverses of the minim and the quarter stater depict plainer geometric designs, while the obverse of the silver unit depicts a detailed figurative type, a human head. This lack of consistency in the obverse design is important because it proves the detachment of these letters from the accompanying design, that is, that they do not necessarily serve to describe or number any aspect of this design. For example, it is highly unlikely that the letters *A* or *B* serve to identify the human head on the obverse of the silver unit, or any attribute of the person so depicted, whether Tincomarus himself or not, because the same letters occur within the interlocking squares on the minim with no apparent reference to any being, and one would hardly expect the same terms to be used both of a person as depicted on the silver unit and a geometric design as used on the minim.¹²

⁴ VA 378 = *BMC* 811–26 = *ABC* 1076.

⁵ Bean 2000, 242 distinguishes between the A-type, his TIN3-3, and the B-type, his TIN3-4. Neither VA nor *ABC* so distinguish. *BMC* 811–24 are A-type and *BMC* 825–26 are B-type.

⁶ VA 397 = *BMC* 880–905 = *ABC* 1106.

⁷ Bean 2000, 242 distinguishes between the A-type, his TIN3-5, and the B-type, his TIN3-6. Neither VA nor *ABC* so distinguish. *BMC* 880–905 are all A-type.

⁸ VA 561 (A-type) and 562 (B-type) = *BMC* 1569–71 = *ABC* 1133.

⁹ Bean 2000, 242 distinguishes between the A-type, his TIN3-8, and the B-type, his TIN3-9, and the C-type, his TIN3-10. *BMC* 1569–71 are all A-type.

¹⁰ For the other minims with interlocking squares, see VA 383-1 = *BMC* 981–82 = *ABC* 1136 and VA 383-5 = *ABC* 1139.

¹¹ One could argue that all three reverses depict a winged creature, although this verges on the trivial (all have eyes also, and so on). For a broader discussion of the occurrence of birds on the coinage of the Commian dynasty, see Woods 2014.

¹² The letter *A* sometimes occurs behind a bearded head on one of the silver units issued by Andoco (VA 1868 = *BMC* 2018 = *ABC* 2721), much like on the silver unit here, but the fact that no other letter ever replaces it, and that this is indeed the first

One should start any analysis of these coins by investigating whether the use of these variable letters upon the obverse owes anything to any of their potential classical models. The key point here is that some issues of Roman *denarii* during the late Republic did include variable symbols used as control-marks, but this was not a standard feature of Roman coinage, and did not continue into the Imperial period.¹³ Unfortunately, it is difficult to detect a direct classical model for any of the three types under discussion. In the case of the quarter stater, the tablet on the obverse represents a more elegant version of the incuse tablet on the obverse of several other quarter staters or staters of Tincomarus, where the incuse nature of this design suggests that it imitated a manufacturer's stamp of the type often found on bricks or pottery.¹⁴ Yet it is noteworthy that the incuse tablet on these other coins never includes items above or below the tablet, and it is clear that the addition of a letter C above and variable letter below the tablet represents an innovation by the authority responsible for this coin. As for the reverse of the quarter stater, the facing head of the gorgon may have been inspired by the obverse of a denarius issued by L. Lentulus and C. Marcellus in 49 BC depicting a *triskeles* with a winged head of Medusa at its centre, but this coin reveals nothing that could have inspired the use of the letter C with variable A or B on the obverse of the quarter stater.¹⁵ Turning to the silver unit, the head on its obverse has been variously compared to a portrait of Augustus or Apollo, to the head of Apollo as depicted on the obverse of the *denarii* of C. Vibius Pansa about 90 BC in particular.¹⁶ It is of interest here that the *denarii* issued by Pansa do depict a variety of control marks. However, these are always small figures, such as an ant, an owl, or a star, rather than letters. More importantly, these control-marks always appear just below the chin of the portrait. It is difficult, therefore, to believe that Pansa's coins could have inspired the use of the variable letter A or B behind the neck in the case of the silver unit. The eagle confronting a snake on the reverse of the silver unit has no precise parallel within Roman coinage, but does resemble a reverse type featured on several different bronze issues by the Carnutes in Gaul c. 50–30 BC.¹⁷ Gallic influence seems probable, but these coins do not explain the variable letters A or B either. Indeed, most do not bear any legend at all. Finally, in the case of the interlocking squares on the obverse of the minim, there is no obvious classical model, certainly no Roman coin. The bird on the reverse has been compared to the raven depicted on the obverse of some coins issued by Mark Antony in Gaul c. 43–42 BC, but the overall composition is very different in each case.¹⁸ Again, there is nothing about this coin that could have inspired the depiction of variable letters A, B, or C within a pair of interlocking squares or any other object.

No survey of the probable classical models for the coins under discussion, and their potential contribution to the explanation of the variable letters A, B, and C upon these, would be complete without mentioning the model for the staters within the same Classical series, and its potential contribution to this topic. The reverses of the staters of the Classical series, and of the Crude series also, depict a rider thrusting downwards with a spear from a horse rearing back upon its hind legs. In this case, it



Fig. 4. Denarius of P. Crepusius (*RRC* 361,1); Roma Numismatics, E-Sale 26, 30 Apr. 2016, lot 545 (© Roma Numismatics Ltd).

letter of the name of the ruler in whose name this coin was struck, renders it likely that the A does serve to identify the head as that of the ruler in this case.

¹³ On control-marks on Roman republican coinage, see Crawford 1974, 584–9.

¹⁴ On pottery stamps as the potential model for this incuse tablet, see Williams 2002. The incuse tablet is a feature of the obverse design of all of the staters after the initial Celtic series (5 types). It is also a feature of the obverse design of all of the quarter staters within the Proto-Classical and Crude series (6 types).

¹⁵ *RRC* 445, 1a–b. Bean 2000, 151 prefers to identify the reverse of a denarius issued by Clodius Rufus in 46 BC (*RRC* 463, 2) depicting an *aegis* decorated with the head of Medusa as the model for the quarter stater instead.

¹⁶ Bean 2000, 151–2. See *RRC* 342, 3–5.

¹⁷ See DT 2576, 2582–84.

¹⁸ Bean 2000, 152. See *RRC* 489, 1–4

has long been recognised that this type is directly modelled upon the horse and rider depicted upon the reverse of the *denarii* issued by P. Crepusius in 82 BC (Fig. 4).¹⁹ These *denarii* include control marks on both obverse and the reverse. The obverse depicts a laureate head, probably Apollo, and, usually, both a control-letter and a control-symbol, one at the back of the neck, the other beneath the chin. Such is the resemblance between the obverse of the silver unit with its variable letter A or B behind the neck of a laureate head and the *denarii* of Crepusius with the control-letter at the back of the neck, that one can hardly escape the conclusion that the designer of the silver unit imitated the latter when he decided to place his variable letter at the back of the neck also. However, the fact that he imitated the arrangement on his Roman model does not necessarily require that he understood the purpose of the control-letter on his Roman model, or that he was using his letters to perform the same function.

The quarter stater presents a special problem because it remains unclear what, if any, is the relationship between the letter C above the tablet and the variable letter beneath it. If it were not for the existence of the B-type, one would be tempted to read the C above the tablet with the A of the A-type below in abbreviation of the name Calleva (Silchester) as found in fuller form upon the coinage of Tincomarus' apparent brother and approximate contemporary Eppillus.²⁰ However, this is clearly impossible now that the existence of the B-type is known, so that it seems that the C must be interpreted as a single letter in abbreviation of a single word. This still leaves the possibility that the C may abbreviate the name Calleva by itself.²¹ Yet the fact that Eppillus so proudly and unmistakably proclaims Calleva upon his coinage must raise serious doubt about this interpretation unless one is prepared to assume that Tincomarus had somehow managed to take Calleva from him, at which point one wonders why he did not therefore proclaim his new possession of this town as clearly as Eppillus had once done.

Another possibility is that the C represents an abbreviation of the name of Tincomarus' apparent father, Commius, to be understood in the genitive case in association with Tincomarus' own name within the tablet, making it clear that he was the '(son) of Commius'.²² In support of this interpretation, one notes that one of the staters struck by Tincomarus depicts a single large C on the reverse, directly beneath the chest of the horse, where comparison with other types of stater depicting the letters C.F. in the same position, reveals that this must refer to Commius in the genitive case.²³ Against this interpretation, however, one notes that the stater depicting the single large C rather than the C.F. or more common COM.F belongs to the final Crude series of coinage, where this overly severe abbreviation may be regarded as another sign of this crudity. In contrast, however, the quarter stater under discussion represents the highest state of engraving under Tincomarus, and it is difficult to believe that its careful engraver would have resorted to the same clumsy abbreviation as the engraver of the Crude series when the size of the coin afforded him sufficient opportunity to use the fuller abbreviation C.F. if he had so wished.

A third possibility is that the C abbreviates some term used to describe Tincomarus' position within the state, presumably a Latin term for a Roman office taken as the equivalent of some traditional office or position within British society. The close association between this letter and the tablet containing the abbreviation of Tincomarus' name could support such a suggestion. Here one notes that none of Tincomarus' coins describe him as *rex* 'king', even though modern commentators sometimes describe him as such. In contrast, the coins of the other two self-declared 'sons of Commius', Eppillus and Verica, do confirm that this was how they

¹⁹ Evans 1864, 162. See *RRC* 361, 1a–c.

²⁰ So Mack 1975, 50, although Evans 1890, 502 had long recognised the impossibility of this explanation. For the coins of Eppillus referring to Calleva, see VA 407 = *BMC* 986–1001 = *ABC* 1148 and VA 408 = *BMC* 1002–05 = *ABC* 1151 (quarter staters); VA 415 = *BMC* 1016–60 = *ABC* 1160 (silver unit).

²¹ Mays 1992, 81: 'Some of Tincomarus' coinage may have CALLEVA as mint-mark, abbreviated to C'.

²² Evans 1890, 502: 'the C not improbably is intended to designate Commii filius'.

²³ Compare VA 376-1 = *BMC* 767–68 = *ABC* 1061 to VA 376-3 = *BMC* 769 = *ABC* 1055 and VA 375 = *BMC* 766 = *ABC* 1058.

understood their position.²⁴ This raises the possibility that the C may have abbreviated the term *consul*. Alternatively, it may have abbreviated some honorific term such as *conservator* ‘protector’. Against such interpretations, however, one notes that the term *consul* was normally abbreviated as COS on Roman coinage, and the title *conservator*, however abbreviated, had not yet appeared on Roman coinage even, although it would prove quite common upon it by the third century AD.

One could, of course, object at this point that, since the letter C clearly abbreviates the name of Commius on the reverse of the two types of stater struck as part of the Classical series, where it occurs as part of the combination C.F., then the letter C on the quarter stater probably abbreviates the same term also. However, this objection rests on the assumption that the C of the quarter stater occurs alone, and so is much more ambiguous than it really is. If, as will be argued next, it was intended to be read as part of a combination with the variable letters A or B below the tablet, then its different context as part of the combination CA or CB rather than C.F. should have sufficed to warn that it did not necessarily abbreviate the same term as did the C in the phrase abbreviated as C.F.

The greatest weakness of the first two possibilities outlined above, the reading of C as an abbreviation of either Calleva or Commius, is that they both assume that the letter C can be treated in isolation from the variable letters A or B below the tablet. In the case of the expansion of the C as Calleva, the obvious suggestion is that the A below should be expanded to read *Atrebatum*, so preserving the full name of the city as it certainly was later under the Romans. However, if the C is expanded to read Calleva, it is not clear what the combination CB could mean. Similarly, in the case of the expansion of the C as *Commii* ‘(son) of Commius’, the obvious suggestion is that the A below should be expanded to read *Atrebatis* (or similar), so identifying Tincomarus as the son of Commius the Atrebatian. But is not clear what the combination CB would then mean. This is a problem because several factors seem to suggest that the designer intended the letter C to be read in conjunction with the letters A or B as part of some larger phrase rather than treated separately. First, it is noteworthy that the variable letters A or B are the same size as the letter C above them. This suggests that they abbreviate terms of equal importance, probably designed to be read together. Second, the variable letters A or B also display the same orientation as the letter C. Next, the variable letters occupy a position of similar importance to that of the letter C within the overall composition. They are part of the same main design rather than pushed to the side somewhere. Finally, their precise position within the main design, directly opposite the letter C below the tablet, naturally encourages one to read them together as CA and CB.

One notes that no insight can be gained into how to read the C and variable letter below the tablet by comparing this design to similar designs on the obverse of other British Celtic coins. As it happens, very few coins depict similar designs with a letter above and below an inscribed tablet. For example, Verica, another alleged ‘son of Commius’ and the probable successor of Tincomarus, depicts inscribed tablets on the obverse of several of his staters, quarter staters, silver units, and minims, but if these include anything above and below the tablet, it is only a decorative item, never a letter (Fig. 5).²⁵ In fact, the only really comparable designs occur on silver units of rulers of the Catuvellauni. In the first case, a certain Dias-, if that really is the abbreviation of a personal name, depicts his name within a tablet with the letter C above and a letter O, or perhaps just a decorative ring, below, all within a pair of interlocking squares, where it is not clear what the relationship is between the legend DIAS and the other two letters (Fig. 6).²⁶ In the second case, Cunobelinus depicts the legend CAM within a tablet, a V above, and an L below, where it is clear that this is supposed to be read CAMVL in abbreviation of

²⁴ One silver unit describes Eppillus as *rex* (VA 145 = ABC 1160 = BMC 1016–60). In the case of Verica, he is described as *rex* on a stater (VA 500-1 = ABC 1190 = BMC 1146–58), a quarter stater (VA 525 = ABC 1211 = BMC 1237–38), two silver units (VA 505 = ABC 1229 = BMC 1332–55, VA 506 = ABC 1235 = BMC 1450–84) and four minims (VA 487 = ABC 1298, VA 553 = ABC 1316 = BMC 1538–41, VA 554 = ABC 1319 = BMC 1542, VA 563 = ABC 1331 = BMC 1572–78).

²⁵ For circles with central pellets above and below the tablet, see e.g. VA 461 = BMC 1145 = ABC 184 (stater), VA 466 = BMC 1179–1206 = ABC 1199 (quarter stater), VA 384 = BMC 1506 = ABC 1271.

²⁶ VA 1877 = BMC 1683 = ABC 2739.



Fig. 5. Gold stater of Verica (ABC 1184); Chris Rudd List 145, Mar. 2016, lot 12 (© Chris Rudd).



Fig. 6. Silver unit of Dias (ABC 2739); Spink Auction 15049, 2 Dec. 2015, lot. 363 (© Spink & Son Ltd).

the name of his capital Camulodunum (Fig. 7).²⁷ However, any attempt to read the legend on the coin under discussion as TINCCA- or TINCCB- in the same manner does not seem to make sense.

The occurrence of the letter C on the minim presents another problem, since it is not at all clear that it represents a variable letter in the same manner as the letters A and B. Instead, it may simply represent a severe abbreviation of the description of the filiation of Tincomarus as in the case of the stater from the Crude series as mentioned above. In fact, there are two arguments in favour of so interpreting it.

First, it is noteworthy that the letter C does not occur among the quarter stater or the silver unit, despite the fact that these types have survived in far greater number. To be specific, the PAS presently records 35 examples of the quarter stater and 54 examples of the silver unit against 16 examples of the minim, where 2 of these 16 display a C.²⁸ By these figures, one might have expected to find twice the number of examples with the letter C among the quarter staters and three times the number with the letter C among the silver units, but to find none at all strongly suggests that such coins were not actually struck. Second, both of the other two types of minim to depict the interlocking squares upon the obverse depict letters describing the filiation of Tincomarus within these squares, CO(*mmii*) 'of Commius' in one case and C(*ommii*)F(*ilius*) 'son of Commius' in the other case. This suggests that the C of the C-variety should be interpreted similarly.²⁹ Consequently, the fact that this C could seem to continue the sequence represented by the variable letters A and B on the minim with bird reverse probably represents no more than an unfortunate coincidence.

The recognition that the variable letters upon the types under discussion consist only of A and B, and that this group does not properly include the letter C as found upon the minim, simplifies somewhat the search for an explanation of them. Next, it is important to note that the letters A and B do not occur with the same frequency upon the surviving specimens of these types, but that A occurs with much greater frequency. In the case of the quarter stater, of the 35 examples recorded by PAS, only 2 depict a B.³⁰ In the case of the silver unit, of the 54 examples recorded by PAS, only 5 certainly depict a B.³¹ Finally, in the case of the minim, of the 14 recorded by PAS (excluding the apparent C-type), only 3 depict a B. There seems to be a pattern here whereby the percentage of coins depicting a B rather than an A increases as the value of the coin decreases, from about 5% of the quarter stater population, to about 10% of the silver unit population, and about 20% of the minim population, but the significance of such a pattern remains unclear.



Fig. 7. Silver unit of Cunobelinus (ABC 2852); Spink Auction 15049, 2 Dec. 2015, lot. 388 9© Spink & Son Ltd).

²⁷ ABC 2852. Not recorded in earlier catalogues. It is also possible that the designer intended a secondary reading as CAM(*uli*) VAL(-*lum* or -*la*), 'the rampart(s) of Camulus' in play upon the literal meaning of the Celtic **Camulodūnon* as 'fortress of Camulos'. See Woods 2016.

²⁸ The two minims displaying a C are classified as examples of VA 561 within the PAS database: CCI 00268, 982096.

²⁹ Bean 2000, 135 concludes that it is likely that the C in this case is 'an abbreviated patronymic'.

³⁰ CCI 690172 = *BMC* 826; CCI 690173 = *BMC* 825.

³¹ CCI 10106, 11577, 860074, 940711, 982357. Several coins are so worn that it is impossible to tell whether they depicted A or B.

So what is the significance of the variable letters A and B? Several possibilities spring to mind.³² One is that these letters were intended to serve as mintmarks abbreviating the name of the settlements where these coins were struck. However, the main argument against this is that neither letter abbreviates the name of Noviomagus Reginorum, the largest settlement within the area apparently controlled by Tincomarus which probably ought to have served as his capital, and the location of his main mint, for that very reason. Furthermore, as indicated at the start, the evidence tends to suggest that there was only one mint operational during the Classical and Crude series under Tincomarus, although this has yet to be proven conclusively by means of a die study. A second possibility is that they may serve as the signatures of the relevant moneyers or engravers, but while this is not impossible in the case of the quarter stater or the silver unit where the name of Tincomarus enjoys a much more prominent position, so that he might not have felt threatened should another have included his initial upon the coin also, the prominence enjoyed by this letter on the minim, where no other legend occurs, surely excludes this explanation. A third possibility is that these letters may serve as some form of chronological indicator dating the coins perhaps, but since no other British rulers seem to have included any obvious system of dating on their coins, and contemporary Roman coins were also noticeably lacking in indicators of this type, this does not seem a particularly plausible explanation. Finally, they may serve as control-marks identifying workshops within the mint, wherever this mint was.³³

The identification of the variable letters A and B as control-marks identifying workshops within the mint is certainly the most plausible of the explanations offered to date. In support of this explanation, one notes that the designer responsible for the Classical series may have noticed the control-marks that sometimes appeared on Roman coins, as in the case of the *denarii* of Pansa or Crepusius as already mentioned, and have decided to initiate a similar system on his coins also. Against this, however, one may adduce three arguments. First, there are no parallels within British coinage for the use of letters to indicate the existence of different workshops. Second, and more importantly, the evidence seems to suggest, as already indicated, that the variable letters A and B on the quarter staters should be read in association with the letter C as CA and CB. Therefore, if A and B serve as marks identifying workshops, C should presumably abbreviate some term meaning workshop, so CA means 'workshop A' and CB means 'workshop B'. However, the normal terms for workshop in Latin are *officina* or *fabrica*, and there does not seem to be any suitable term beginning with C. Finally, and most importantly, the fact that neither alleged control-mark appears on either of the two types of stater issued during the Classical series of coinage must raise serious doubts as to whether these letters really are control-marks. Since the PAS database records 93 examples of one of these staters and 27 of the other, it seems clear that this denomination continued to be struck in large numbers during the production of the Classical series.³⁴ They were presumably struck in the same mint as the other denominations within this series, and in one of its alleged two workshops at least, so why were they not marked A or B accordingly? If the variable letters had some political or other significance, for example, one could, perhaps, understand the decision to include them on some denominations or types, but not on others. However, it is less easy to understand why they should have been omitted from the staters alone if they are simply control-marks reflecting the internal administration of the mint, the same mint that produced all the other denominations also.

Other options need to be explored, and there remains another interpretation of the letters A and B which does not seem to have received any consideration yet. The Commius whose son Tincomarus claimed to be struck two types of quarter stater depicting a large letter A (with a dropped rather than a horizontal bar) as the sole



Fig. 8. Gold quarter stater of Commius (*ABC* 1028); Spink Auction 15049, 2 Dec. 2015, lot 110 (© Spink & Son Ltd).

³² Evans 1890, 502: 'it may be that the A and B are significant of two distinct mints or moneyers'.

³³ Mays 1992, 81: "'C A' and 'C B' may refer to two workshops within the mint'.

³⁴ 93 examples of VA 375 = *ABC* 1058 = *BMC* 766 and 27 examples of VA 376-3 = *ABC* 1055 = *BMC* 769.

device on the obverse (Fig. 8).³⁵ Given the geographical distribution of Commius' coinage over the presumed territories of the Atrebatas and Regini, it seems not unreasonable to interpret this A in reference to the Atrebatas.³⁶ Furthermore, the Commius of the British coinage is probably identifiable either with a man whom Julius Caesar describes as Commius the Atrebatian or a son or other relative of this man, so that he was probably of Atrebatian origin himself, although of the Gallic rather than of the British Atrebatas.³⁷ It is understandable, therefore, why he should seem to have celebrated the Atrebatas on his coinage rather than the Regini, because he identified himself more closely with the former than the latter.

The probability that Commius celebrated the Atrebatas upon his coinage raises the possibility that Tincomarus may have done so too when he placed the A upon the coins under discussion. But in that case, what would the associated B stand for? The answer to this may lie in the name of the main tribe to the immediate east of the Regini and Atrebatas, the Belgae. It is generally assumed that the Belgae, whose capital was probably at Winchester, Venta Belgarum under the Romans, were gradually dominated by, and then subsumed into, the territory ruled by the various members of the Commian dynasty. If, as has been strongly argued, they, or perhaps their constituent parts, issued a large series of uninscribed coins, but had ceased to do so before inscribed coinage became the norm, then they were probably absorbed into the Atrebatian state under Commius perhaps by about 40 BC.³⁸ The result was that the state ruled by Tincomarus probably contained a large part of the former territory of the Belgae, the exact amount depending on his ability to defend himself against his neighbours, not least his brother Eppillus based at Calleva. It is possible, therefore, that he struck the coins with the letter A in celebration of his rule of the Atrebatas and Regini, the traditional heartland of the Commian dynasty, and those with the letter B in celebration of his rule of the Belgae who had not yet been subsumed into the Atrebatian identity in the way that the Regini had and still required some acknowledgement of their separate identity.

Three arguments may be adduced in support of this interpretation. The first is that it may explain the dominance of the A-type coins over the B-type coins. Tincomarus naturally preferred to celebrate his own Atrebatian identity and that of his larger state rather than that of a smaller weaker people which had probably been forced into the larger state against its wishes. The result was that he struck more coins bearing the A for Atrebatas than the B for Belgae. The second is that the explanation of the A in reference to the Atrebatas and the B in reference to the Belgae results in a plausible explanation of the C above the tablet on the obverse of the quarter stater. This C may have abbreviated the Latin term *C(ivitas)*, the term used by Julius Caesar himself in reference to the various tribes of Gaul and Britain, and have been intended to be read in conjunction with either the A or B below to mean either *C(ivitas) A(trebatum)* 'the tribe of the Atrebatas' or *C(ivitas) B(elgarum)* 'the tribe of the Belgae', although whether this term was to be understood in the nominative or some other case must remain obscure.³⁹ In other words, the more valuable and best engraved type bore a fuller, more formal description, even if still in abbreviated form, of the two peoples who were simply described as the Atrebatas and the Belgae on the lower denomination coins. Finally, the identification of the A in reference to the Atrebatas and the B in reference to the Belgae may help explain why Tincomarus never celebrated the name of some town upon his coinage in the way that Eppillus celebrated the name of Calleva or Cunobelinus did the name of Camulodunum. It has been suggested that the prominence of each name upon the coinage of its respective ruler suggests that they

³⁵ VA 353-1 = ABC 1028; VA 353-5 = ABC 1031. These coins may be attributed to Commius on the basis that the first displays the same monogram on its reverse as appears on the reverse of a stater (VA 352 = BMC 730 = ABC 1025) which includes Commius' name on its reverse also.

³⁶ For the geographical distribution of Commius' coinage, see Bean 2000, 119–20. For the A in reference to the Atrebatas, see, for example, Rudd 2006, 148, 174.

³⁷ See Creighton 2000, 59–64 in support of identifying the Commius of the coinage with Caesar's Commius the Atrebatian.

³⁸ Rudd 2006; ABC, 57.

³⁹ Of most relevance here is Caesar's use of this term when describing his expeditions to Britain in 55 and 54 BC. See for example Caesar, *De Bello Gallico* 4.38: *Eo duae omnino civitates ex Britannia obsides miserunt* 'Only two tribes in Britain sent hostages to there'; 5.20: *Trinobantes, prope firmissima earum regionum civitas* 'the Trinobantes, the strongest tribe, perhaps, in those parts'.

were intended as far more than mint-marks, but were central rather to the representation and identity of the relevant state.⁴⁰ In that case, the emphasis that Eppillus and Cunobelinus place upon Calleva and Camulodunum effectively identifies their kingdoms as city-states. However, the more important point here is that they do seem to have striven to describe their states other than by their own names. It is arguable that Tincomarus did the same, but that he preferred to describe his state by the ethnic identity of the main peoples within it, as he saw it, rather than by the name of the main city within it. In effect, he preferred to describe his state as an ethnic confederation of Atrebates and Belgae rather than as a city-state. As to the reason for this, it may be that he refused to celebrate Noviomagus Reginorum upon his coinage because his ultimate goal was to rule from Calleva instead. The fact that he dropped the references to the two tribes during his final Crude series of coinage may say less about his changing conception of his state than it does about the changed social and political circumstances that required the hurried striking of such a crude coinage in the first place.

This interpretation rests on certain assumptions, as do any potential arguments against it, and it is important to be clear about the nature of these assumptions. One major objection to this interpretation must be that it is not clear when the people inhabiting the region that later became the Roman *civitas Belgarum* were first known as Belgae. It has been argued that ‘the fact that in Gaul the name of the Belgae was applied to a collection of tribes, not an individual tribe, suggests that the British *Civitas Belgarum* was an artificial creation of the Roman government’.⁴¹ One does not doubt that, as the wide variety of early and uninscribed issues from the region prove, a number of smaller states or tribes did inhabit this region during the late first century BC and early first century AD, but it is merely an assumption that it was the Romans who first assigned them the collective title of the Belgae. It remains equally possible that Tincomarus first assigned them this title as he sought to distinguish this group of newly conquered territories and peoples by a single name, or that these peoples first took this name upon themselves as they sought to create some form of union against the threat represented by Tincomarus.

Another potential objection concerns the status of the Regini in the scenario described above. At first glance, it seems rather odd that Tincomarus should have struck coins mentioning the Atrebates and Belgae at his presumptive capital of Noviomagus Reginorum, that is, in the territory of the Regini, without striking any in the name of the Regini also. Yet this is only odd if one assumes that a ruler, or ruling elite, must share the same ethnic or cultural identity of those whom they rule, or treat the identity of the majority of those whom they rule with a respect similar to that with which they show their own identity. In reality, military elites of one identity have often ruled territories where the vast majority of the inhabitants were of another identity, an identity which they ignored in the public representations of their rule. The interpretation outlined above, that the variable letters A and B refer to the Atrebates and Belgae respectively, effectively requires that Tincomarus was a member of an Atrebatian elite which, for whatever precise reason, was prepared to ignore the separate Reginan identity of most of the inhabitants of the territory which it ruled. This cannot be proven, but it is no less valid than any assumption that he should have acknowledged the three main ethnic groups within his territory – Atrebates, Belgae, and Regini – equally.

In conclusion, there cannot, because of the very nature of the evidence, be a definitive proof of what it is that the variable letters A and B on the obverse of a small group of coins struck under Tincomarus actually mean. However, they are not random letters, or careless carry-overs from some classical model. Two main possibilities emerge. On the one hand, one could identify these as the control-marks for two different workshops within the mint. On the other hand, one could also identify them as abbreviations of the tribal names of the Atrebates and Belgae. The former interpretation is not without its problems, but has the merit of simplicity. The latter requires greater – or perhaps simply different – assumptions concerning both the existence of a group known collectively as the Belgae and the nature of Tincomarus’

⁴⁰ Williams 2007, 3.

⁴¹ Rivet and Smith 1979, 267.

rule, but remains possible. New evidence is needed to declare the debate for either interpretation, and a detailed die study either of the quarter stater or of the silver unit, preferably both, may yet contribute greatly to the discussion.

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