

A ST. PATRICK HALFPENNY OF JOHN DE COURCI

By W. A. SEABY

LISMAHON, Co. Down, also known as Ballykinlar Motte, lies $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles south-east of Clough Castle. It is a Dark Age occupation site which was heightened in the manner of a motte castle after the English conquest of Down in 1177 and continued in use until the fourteenth century. Excavation on this site was carried out by the Northern Ireland Archaeological Survey under the direction of Mr. Dudley Waterman in June 1958.

Here the excavator discovered the remains of a raised timber revetted platform which, with a refurbishing of the defences, had remained in occupation until the end of the twelfth century, when it was heightened to form a castle mound. The summit of the mound was enclosed by a palisade and contained a residential building with attached tower adjacent to the palisade and a secondary building, probably used as a workshop. The palisade was subsequently rebuilt and in the later thirteenth century the house was enlarged, part of the workshop being demolished in the process.¹



OBVERSE



REVERSE

Twice natural size.

Associated with the late twelfth-century defences was a weapon pit at the top of the mound on the north-east side, and in the excavation of this a small silver coin was discovered in a primary position on the floor of the pit. Mr. Waterman immediately informed the writer who examined the coin at the Belfast Museum on 15 June, coming to the conclusion that this piece was a type of John de Courci apparently unrecorded. Subsequent correspondence with Mr. R. H. M. Dolley at the British Museum and Dr. William O'Sullivan at the National Museum, Dublin, confirmed this supposition.

The coin is of thin brittle impure silver, having a maximum diameter of $\frac{3}{4}$ inch (19 mm.), and weighs a fraction under 8 grains. When found it had a good deal of dirt and some corrosive salts adhering to the surface. In an attempt to clean off the latter, a small fragment broke away from the edge.

¹ To be published in a forthcoming volume of *Medieval Archaeology*.

Expert attention at the British Museum Laboratory, where an electrotype of the coin was produced, has now made good the fracture and brought up most of the lettering with clarity.

The following is a description of the coin:¹

Obv. +PATRICIVS (outer and inner beaded circles). In centre, the representation of the head of a bishop's pastoral staff or crosier, probably symbolizing the Saint; to left, a cross botonée.

Rev. +IOHNS: DE CVRCI (outer and inner beaded circles). Cross annuletty, each terminal circle and the central circle enclosing a pellet; a pellet in each angle. Possibly representing the head of a monumental or processional cross. (Pl. V)

Although of a size or module only slightly less than a normal penny of the twelfth century, it weighs less than the halfpennies issued in Dublin and Waterford by Prince John, as Lord of Ireland, between c. 1185 and 1199 (11½ grains). In view of the fact that John de Courci issued three or more types of farthing, weighing from 4¾ to 6 grains, it may be best to consider the new coin as a halfpenny. Since the edge is not clipped, it can be assumed that the issuer purposely used a large module to 'offset' the lightness of the coin. Even when freshly struck it is unlikely that this piece could have weighed as much as 9 grains. The brittleness would suggest a percentage of tin in its composition but owing to its fragility no assay has been made.

The lettering is typical of the latter part of the twelfth century but shows some peculiarities. The T, while somewhat small compared with the wide dolmen-shaped A, appears to be of normal Roman form and not Celtic, such as appears on some of the de Courci farthings (e.g. *N.C.*, n.s. iii, pl. iv, nos. 14 and 15). The S on both sides has a tendency to lean forwards or overbalance, while the V's, like the A, are very wide. Most noticeable is the Lombardic or minuscule h joined by a line of contraction, or tittle, making it resemble the letter K. Henry I seems to have adopted the small H in England sometime before 1108,² but during Henry II's reign it was employed both on the Tealby and the Short Cross pennies.

The form of the name PATRICIVS in the nominative does not occur on the Down and Carrickfergus farthings, where it is always in the genitive, and Aquilla Smith took this to mean that the cross-head and shaft stood for the word CVRX.³ It is noticeable, however, that on the farthings, where John de Courci's own name appears, the obverse reading is sometimes +PATRIC+ using the Celtic T, as has been noted.

Of interest is the abbreviated form IOHS for IOHANNES in place of GOAN⁴ as appears on the farthing cited above. CVRCI also differs from the reading

¹ Obverse and reverse are difficult to determine in this instance but the writer has followed Aquilla Smith's interpretation of the de Courci farthings (*N.C.*, n.s. iii (1863), pp. 149-61).

² G. C. Brooke, *English Coins*, 1932, p. 88.

³ Aquilla Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 153-4.

⁴ The form GOAN is in itself peculiar since normally the *j*-sound was written *g* before *e* and *i*, and *i* before *a*, *o*, and *u* in Old French, but occasionally *i* was used before *e* and sometimes *g* was used before *o* and *u*. Although there are various spellings of John de Courci in the original Irish text of the *Annals of Ulster*, that most commonly met with is Eoan do Chuir, so it may be assumed that the spelling of the farthings follows an Anglo-Norman dialect and is not an Irish rendering. The writer is indebted to Mr. G. Brendan Adams for this information.

given by Aquilla Smith who assumes the initial letter to be a Q.¹ The contraction IOHS is more commonly found on continental coins,² and does not appear to have been used by the moneyers of Prince John in Ireland, either when he was Lord or after he became King. Contractions of IOHANNES were, however, used by some moneyers on the Long Cross coinage of Henry III.

The obverse design is unusual. At first glance it appears linked with the highly stylized and much debased heads found on the later Hiberno-Norse pennies and bracteates,³ but a closer inspection shows that it is not a head and there is no question of a crested hair style. On the other hand the central design can best be interpreted as a crosier, a symbol commonly found on the Irish series. It is noticeable that the shaft continues across the legend space in the same way as the cross shafts on the de Courci farthings. What, however, seems to clinch the argument in favour of a crosier is the representation of a large knob at the base of the spiral head. This form is typical of all the French and English-type pastoral staves of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries,⁴ although less characteristic of the earlier Celtic form used in Ireland.⁵ That this staff represents the saint himself is shown in the inscription PATRICIVS, whereas if CROCCIA were to be understood the reading would be PATRICII as on the farthings (see above).⁶

De Courci seems to have held the patron saint in such veneration as amounted almost to an adoration. He rededicated the cathedral at Down (formerly consecrated to the Blessed Trinity) to St. Patrick and replaced the secular canons there with Benedictine Monks. Also in association with Thomas, Archbishop of Armagh, and Malachy, Bishop of Down, he brought over the monk, Jocelyn, from Furness Abbey to write the saint's life.⁷

The reverse resembles some of the cruciform types found on coinage of Henry I's and Stephen's reigns as well as certain derivative designs on the Hiberno-Danish series. It might be argued, however, that the annuletty cross and pellets are more closely analogous to the head of a processional or monumental cross such as would be then in use in the Anglo-Irish church.⁸ It would be unwise to be dogmatic on this point, but, by analogy with the crosses on the farthings, it would certainly seem to have a purposeful meaning, rather than derive from a purely decorative pattern.

Mr. Derek Allen has discussed at some length the twelfth-century IOHANNES class of halfpenny with filleted head to right and with reverse

¹ Aquilla Smith, *op. cit.*, pl. iv, nos. 13 to 15.

² IOHS and variants are fairly common contractions in France, Germany, and the Low Countries during the late twelfth to fifteenth centuries. See W. C. Hazlitt, *Coinage of the European Continent*, 1893, pp. 257 et seq.

³ e.g. B. Roth, 'The Coins of the Danish Kings of Ireland', *B.N.J.* vi, pl. viii, nos. 172-7.

⁴ W. W. Watts, *Catalogue of Pastoral Staves* (V. and A. Museum, 1924), French and English types, frontispiece and pls. 2-6.

⁵ Margaret Stokes, *Early Christian Art in Ireland*, 1911, p. 101. Joseph Raftery, *Christian Art in Ancient Ireland*, 1941, pls. 86-96.

⁶ PATRICIVS also occurs on the obverse and reverse of the copper farthings struck by Edward IV in 1463. In this instance the type represents a bishop's mitred head. See P. Nelson, *The Coinage of Ireland in Copper, Tin and Pewter*, 1905, p. 2 and pl. i, 5.

⁷ Sir James Ware, *Commentary of the Prelates of Ireland, &c.* (folio ed. 1704), pp. 39-40.

⁸ The basic design of the Celtic processional cross is seen in the Cross of Cong (about 1123) but perhaps a form more closely analogous to that on the coin is the finely decorated cross on the back of St. Manchan's shrine which also probably dates from about 1130. See Raftery, *op. cit.*, pl. 97 and p. 152, and Kendrick in *Archaeologia*, lxxxvi 1936, pl. xxv and pp. 108-12.

bearing cross potent and fleur-de-lis in each angle.¹ After weighing the matter carefully he assigns these to John de Courci and not Prince John, as had previously been suggested by Sainthill, Aquilla Smith, and others, and tentatively places them as a counterpart of the farthing series. With the discovery of the new halfpenny of precisely the same weight, can we now equate the two series to one and the same person?

One or two things should be borne in mind. The first is that de Courci may have struck coins in Dublin as well as in the north. Secondly, that the facing head on the halfpennies of Prince John almost certainly represents St. John the Baptist and not the prince himself.² Allen has even gone so far as to suggest that there may have been deliberate ambiguity in the issue of the IOHANNES (side view) halfpennies as to which of the two earthly Johns was implied.³ Prince John in 1177, when Henry II declared him Lord of Ireland, was only about ten years old, and it is not impossible that de Courci was in fact responsible for striking his first coinage in Dublin and for summoning the three moneyers Elis, Raul, and Roger, two of whose full names have yet to be substantiated. The side-view head and reverse type, simulating the comparatively new coinage of William the Lion of Scotland, would act as an up-to-date model without 'infringing the royal English copyright', but in view of the small issue⁴ it may be implied that this coinage was unsuccessful and quickly suppressed.

There can be little doubt, however, that the coin from Lismahon was struck in Ulster. Its location in a Norman-type structure some five or six miles from Downpatrick might be sufficient evidence in itself, but the unequivocal inscription suggests that, in the north of Ireland at least, John de Courci was undisputed lord and master. But should he claim that he was his own mint-master, even Prince John could not ask, 'Whose image and superscription hath it?'

If the new coin belongs to the same series as the farthings, they were all probably struck after 1185. It is true that de Courci might have established mints at Carrick and Down as early as 1182 and given the colonists there the right to strike farthings as tokens, with the names of their townships, in order to carry on some form of local trading. It is more likely, however, that those coins bearing his full name were issued perhaps in defiance of young Prince John after he had been dismissed from his post as Chief Justice of Ireland in 1189, and when he had established a feudal court at Downpatrick and reigned as prince over part of Ulster.⁵ Be that as it may, the issue of all de Courci's coinage is likely to have ceased after John came to the throne in 1199,⁶ so that if the de Courci halfpenny was in circulation when it was dropped at Lismahon it dates the refortification of the mound closely to the latter part of the twelfth century.

¹ *N.C.* 5th ser., no. 72 (1938), pt. iv, pp. 282-92 and pl. xix.

² First suggested by D. H. Haigh in *N.C.* 1839 and later verified by Aquilla Smith in *N.C.* 1864, p. 96.

³ In a recent letter to the writer.

⁴ Fewer than a dozen specimens of the three moneyers together have come to light, most if not all from Ireland.

⁵ *D.N.B.* xii. p. 331.

⁶ Aquilla Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 160-1.