

OBITUARY

ELIZABETH J.E. PIRIE (1932–2005)

ELIZABETH Jane Elphinstone Pirie, 'Liz', as she was known to those who knew her well, was born on 14 September 1932 on Malta, the only child of Revd James E. Pirie and Ethel, née Stewart, a schoolteacher. She was born nine years after the marriage of her parents, when her father was a Royal Naval chaplain and minister of St Andrew's Scots Kirk in Malta. Trips to Britain during her early childhood were infrequent, but fortuitously she returned to Britain with her mother in 1939, just days before war broke out. Her father remained on the island during the war, but returned to the UK once hostilities were over, taking up various posts as directed by the Navy, from Portsmouth to Rosyth, moving his family with him.

Despite the rather fractured education resulting from this, spread over no fewer than eight schools, she matriculated and eventually attained an MA degree at Edinburgh University, where she studied classics before switching to archaeology after two years. An archaeology diploma at Cambridge followed and between 1952 and 1955 she took part in many archaeological excavations and expeditions.

Her professional career began at Grosvenor Museum in Chester where, in November 1955, she was appointed assistant curator. She became an Archaeological Assistant at Maidstone Museum in March 1957 and moved to Leeds City Museum as keeper of Archaeology in 1960, where she remained until retirement in 1991. Most of her books and articles were written during her time in Leeds, where her early interest in archaeology gave way to a passion for Northumbrian numismatics, and it was at Leeds that she became familiar with stycas and sceattas. In 1982 she wrote her first specifically styca-related article. From then on her knowledge grew until she was widely recognised as the expert on the subject.

She was a member of several learned, archaeological, and numismatic societies. She joined the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1957, the same year that she became a Fellow of the Royal Numismatic Society. When she moved to Maidstone, she became a member of Kent Archaeological Society and the Kent Numismatic Society. In 1960 she joined the British Numismatic Society and also, following her move to Leeds, the Yorkshire Numismatic Society, becoming its editor from 1962. From 1966–9 she served as a council member of the Yorkshire society, in 1968 she became its BANS delegate and vice president, and in 1970 she was chosen its president. In 1966 she had been awarded its silver medal for services to numismatics. In 1978 she was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London. When she retired and moved from Leeds to Edinburgh, she became a member of the Edinburgh Numismatic Society and was its Secretary from 1996 to 1999.

She was responsible for many publications, archaeological and numismatic, but will be especially remembered as the author of two *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles* volumes, in addition to several other books, particularly on the sceats and stycas of Northumbria. A third *Sylloge* volume should have followed, but conflict with the editors of the *Sylloge* committee meant that she withdrew the manuscript for the planned volume. She was not a stranger to controversy, nor shy of it, and was always prepared to voice her ideas, often against the tide of then current academic opinion. Sometimes she was right, though not always; but whether right or not, her arguments had always to be taken seriously, as they were never less than cogent and well reasoned.

In 1996 her *magnum opus*, *Coins of the Kingdom of Northumbria*, was published. This was soon followed by a shorter and more accessible publication, *Coins of Northumbria – An illustrated guide to money from the years 670 to 867*. This is a handy reference guide to thrymsas, sceattas and stycas for archaeologists, curators, collectors and detectorists. Until shortly before her death she was writing excavation reports where these involved stycas.

Her retirement was a busy period. She bought a flat in the Marchmont area of Edinburgh, overlooking The Meadows, and moved there from Leeds. She joined the Marchmont St Giles kirk and made herself a useful member and citizen. She was concerned that community events should be recorded and put her camera to good use. She campaigned for personal interests, especially against 'wheelie bins', fighting an active campaign against the city council who wanted to introduce them after minimal consultation with the public. She even appeared on television in this cause.

Her daily activity, apart from Sundays, commenced with strong coffee, crossword puzzles and word games. She bought two newspapers, not for the news, but for the crosswords and her other major hobby – spotting grammatical and spelling errors. She was proud to be a pedant, and her copy of *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* is annotated with corrections! She loved writing and her letters were never less than long, informative, interesting and amusing, and always hand-written, often in a variety of coloured inks, for added emphasis, and with frequent marginal notes.

She cared little for elegant clothes: she had a coat, fur-lined boots and woolly hat for the winter and a coat and shoes for the summer. Her only jewellery consisted of her various badges or brooches for being a blood donor, of which she was very proud.

Shortly before her life ended, she performed an exceptionally kind act, which reflected an event which had happened to her at the beginning of her life as a student. One morning she had been called to the university office where her professor asked her if she would like to own a set of the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*. The owner had no further need of them and had approached the university to see if there was a student who would make good use of them. Indeed there was, and Liz was recommended to receive them. She kept the set up to date and when, recently, she moved, and no longer had room for them in her new retirement flat, she approached the university and offered to give them to a student who would make good use of them. Her set of *SCBI* was similarly disposed of. Her negative files and her research notes are being made available for study by students of the subject.

She did not marry, but only because she never met a man of the right calibre. She is survived by an aunt and a small number of cousins, scattered to the four corners of the world, and many sorrowing friends.

PAUL WITHERS

ELIZABETH Pirie's attention to detail in preparing two fascicules of the *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles*, one devoted to coins in the Grosvenor Museum with the Chester mint-signature and the other to coins in Yorkshire collections to 1279, as well as many publications on Northumbrian coinage, was of a very high order. Who else would have had the energy and commitment to record the thousands of sceattas and stycas in the York collections, identifying with thoroughness and accuracy the multiplicity of obverse and reverse die-links, not only in the regular coinage but also in the many irregular and blundered issues? She was eventually to illustrate more than 2200 different die combinations in *Coins of the Kingdom of Northumbria*.

That work had also been intended for inclusion in the *Sylloge* and the manuscript was submitted in 1989 to the SCBI Committee of the British Academy, which felt that a number of significant editorial changes were necessary before it could be accepted for publication. Most unfortunately it proved impossible for agreement on these to be reached with the author, who decided to withdraw the manuscript the following year and publish it independently.

This is not the place to rehearse and evaluate the points of disagreement. Suffice it to say that the main problem lay in her classification of the material, based on a hypothesis that changes in the central design *motifs* on the coins were chronologically significant. Classification by *motif* was a useful device for handling such a mass of material, but Pirie also used it to divide the coinage of Æthelred II between his first and second reigns in a way that differed markedly from the principles adopted in previous *Sylloge* fascicules. The validity of the new division needed to be tested against related criteria such as changes in metallic composition, some investigations into which had already appeared in print.

However justified the Committee's concerns, if Liz Pirie had not ensured that her meticulous analysis of the material was published in her lifetime according to her own classification, it is

unlikely that anyone else would have been willing in the foreseeable future to prepare and publish a revised version. Her legacy, therefore, is a work of reference that will probably never be replaced as the essential source for identifying the dies of stycas held in other public or private collections. It is also a necessary starting point for further research into the chronology and organisation of the coinage of the kingdom of Northumbria.

It will have been of considerable satisfaction to Pirie that in the last decade of her life she was able to record and discuss in our *Journal* (vol. 65, 1995, 20–31) the first discovery of a styca of king Eardwulf, who reigned from 796 till his expulsion in 806 and is said to have been restored to his kingdom by Charlemagne in 808 (although for how long is uncertain). She called for further work on the earliest stycas, a need reinforced by the unearthing of a second and significantly different specimen of Eardwulf's coinage two years later. It is a task which, sadly, she has now passed to others to pursue.

STEWART LYON

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