

# THE ANNEXATION OF BATH BY WESSEX: THE EVIDENCE OF TWO RARE COINS OF EDWARD THE ELDER

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By the end of Anglo-Saxon England, Bath lay within the county of Somerset; a shire which had been part of Wessex since the seventh century, though first named in the late ninth century. However, for much of the Anglo-Saxon period land grants by, firstly, kings of the Hwicce (a kingdom absorbed into Mercia during the eighth century) and, later, by kings of Mercia, indicate that it was not originally a West Saxon settlement. Two coins of Edward the Elder offer crucial evidence suggesting when this annexation into Wessex probably occurred.

## The early history of Bath

The foundation charter of Bath Abbey dates to 675, or 676, and records Osric, the king of the Hwicce, granting land for the foundation of a nunnery.<sup>1</sup> This is one of the first extant charters issued by a king of the Hwicce<sup>2</sup> and appears to be of questionable authenticity but may embody features of the original grant.<sup>3</sup> This foundation charter has been much debated. It has been argued that it is based upon a genuine charter but that the location in the original has been replaced with the location of Bath. It is also possible that the charter, as it survives, was not actually the *foundation* charter for Bath, since Bath, in the mid-eighth century, was a male institution and yet the charter refers to a nunnery. It is difficult to imagine that it had been a double-monastery a century earlier.<sup>4</sup> The most recent analysis of the charter has similarly concluded that the received text is probably a later fabrication, although it does seem to have been based on a genuine seventh-century document.<sup>5</sup> It is unclear at what date the charter, as it currently survives, was fabricated or adapted, but it is likely to have been forged at a relatively early date, probably with the aim of providing an early origin for Bath.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly though, the Osric of the charter was a historical figure and it seems that Bath lay on the edge of the Hwiccian kingdom by the late seventh century.<sup>7</sup> Bede mentions Osric,<sup>8</sup> and the king also possibly attested a charter of Frithuwold, subking of Surrey, which was later confirmed by Wulfhere of Mercia (658–74), in 672–4 and seems to have been mentioned in Gloucester's foundation charter of 679, as one of a pair of *ministri* (clearly denoting demotion to sub-kingship) under King Æthelred of Mercia (675–704), as well as in the Bath charter of

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<sup>1</sup> See Kelly 2007, 3; S 51.

<sup>2</sup> Sims-Williams 1990, 31.

<sup>3</sup> Hooke 1985, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Edwards 1988, 222.

<sup>5</sup> Kelly 2007, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Kelly 2007, 62.

<sup>7</sup> Kelly 2007, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Bede (*HE* IV.23), Sherley-Price and Farmer 1990, 245.

675.<sup>9</sup> What is clear is that Bath Abbey was under the control of the see of Worcester by the middle of the eighth century, until it passed into the hands of Offa of Mercia (757–96), and it seems that the proem to the foundation charter of 675 was written in order to establish Bath as a Hwiccian establishment, closely associated with the see of Worcester from the time of its alleged foundation.<sup>10</sup>

From the late seventh century, influence in the Bath area passed to the Mercian kings who, as well as challenging the authority of the kings of the Hwicce, also later challenged the role of the bishops of Worcester in this southern region of the diocese. At the Synod of Brentford, in 781, the church of Worcester relinquished its claim to the minster at Bath and surrendered it to Offa, king of Mercia, in return for lands in the heart of the kingdom and confirmation of its possession of other minsters and lands.<sup>11</sup> This arrangement implies that the Bath estate was already part of the hereditary property of the previous Mercian king, Æthelbald, which may be consistent with land held in a sensitive border area.<sup>12</sup> After this date, Bath Abbey should probably be considered an *Eigenkloster* (a royal proprietary monastery) of the Mercian kings. According to the twelfth-century historian, William of Malmesbury, Offa is said to have been staying at Bath when in a dream he was told to found the monastery at St Albans. The sensitivity of this border settlement was revealed in Offa's actions to reduce the influence of Cynewulf of Wessex in the vicinity by reversing Cynewulf's earlier grant of land to Bath Abbey north of the river Avon.<sup>13</sup> Further underlining the frontier nature of the settlement, Offa's son Ecgrith met the West Saxon ruler, Beorhtric, there in 796. The reference, in the charter issued then, to 'the celebrated monastery' reinforces the close association between it and the Mercian royal dynasty.<sup>14</sup> The parallels between the location at Bath and the contemporary construction of Charlemagne's palace at the hot springs of Aachen may suggest that the Mercians aspired to emulate the Carolingian style of *Romanitas*.<sup>15</sup> As late as 864, King Burgred of Mercia was granting a charter at Bath.<sup>16</sup>

However, a brief entry in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* suggests that, by 906, the town had been annexed into Somerset and Wessex. The *Chronicle* notes: 'In this year Alfred, who was reeve at Bath, died.'<sup>17</sup> This Alfred was clearly of significant interest to the West Saxon compiler of the *Chronicle* and he was almost certainly the first West Saxon royal official in the newly annexed territory. Two coins offer important evidence for the probable dating of this annexation into Wessex.

### Two rare coins of Edward the Elder

Corroborative evidence for the West Saxon annexation of Bath, prior to the reeve's death, comes from the fact that Edward the Elder (ruled 899–924) was operating a mint there early in his reign. More precisely, the Bath penny of Edward the Elder, now held in the British Museum,<sup>18</sup> was minted prior to c.905, as it was at this point (or shortly afterwards) buried in the Cuerdale hoard.<sup>19</sup> This refines the 'date-window' for Bath's annexation to c.900–905, since Edward did not accede to the throne until after his father's death in October 899 and he was engaged in putting down a challenge, by his cousin Æthelwold, to his rule within Wessex that winter (899–900). Thus, 900 is the *earliest* likely date for a significant action at Bath by the new king and a date after 902 (or 903) may be even more likely as it was then that Æthelwold was

<sup>9</sup> Sims-Williams 1990, 34; charters S 1165 and S 70.

<sup>10</sup> Edwards 1988, 220–1.

<sup>11</sup> S 1257.

<sup>12</sup> Kelly 2007, 6–7.

<sup>13</sup> Williams 1999, 27; S 265.

<sup>14</sup> S 148.

<sup>15</sup> Lapidge, Blair and Keynes 1999, 54.

<sup>16</sup> Kemble 1839, no.590; S 210.

<sup>17</sup> Whitelock 1961, 60. Manuscripts C and D of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* date this event to 906, manuscript A dates it to 905.

<sup>18</sup> British Museum, *BMC* 1.

<sup>19</sup> Lyon 2001, 74; Graham-Campbell 2001, 222.

killed in battle and the threat to West Saxon security eased somewhat.<sup>20</sup> The unique character of this coin makes it so important in dating the annexation to the early years of the reign of Edward the Elder.



Fig. 1. Edward the Elder, Bath penny, mint-name BAD and title REX SAXONVM. 1.81 g. *BMC* 1, ex Cuerdale hoard. © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 2. Edward the Elder, Bath penny, mint-name BA and title REX SAXONVM, 1.61 g. Fitzwilliam Museum, CM.1.353–1990, ex C.E. Blunt collection. © The Fitzwilliam Museum.

The Bath coin is distinctive for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is the earliest definite example of any coin minted at Bath. In assessing the significance of this, it needs to be borne in mind that this does not prove that this was the first time coins were issued from Bath; especially since in the late ninth and early tenth centuries, mint-names are exceptional and we cannot assume that a complete representation of original issues survives. Canterbury and London mints, for example, are prominently named around this time but are known to have been active from the seventh century. In addition, the mint-signed issues from Bath, Exeter and Winchester are all so rare that our understanding of the operation of these mints may be far from complete. Nevertheless, Bath's mint-signed coinage appears to be part of a West Saxon group from mints which (with the possible exception of Winchester) had not been clearly active before and this may reinforce the interpretation that minting probably started at Bath with this issue of Edward the Elder.

Secondly, and even more significantly, the coin carries the mint-name (though not the moneyer) on the reverse, reading BAD (Bath). No other surviving coin of Edward the Elder bears a mint-name,<sup>21</sup> except for one made using a different reverse die and reading BA. This is now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.<sup>22</sup> The identification, from its shorter mint-name, is perhaps a little less certain. However, the current interpretation is that it too is a Bath coin.<sup>23</sup> Despite this, as it does not come from a dateable find-spot, such as Cuerdale, its significance in dating the annexation of Bath is less clear than in the case of the British Museum example. However, its style suggests that it almost certainly dates from the same period of Edward's reign.

The nature of these coins (so untypical of Edward's coinage) suggests that they represent a specific commemorative, or celebratory, issue and it seems likely that this was Bath's new status as a West Saxon town. It may also have become a fortified *burh* at about this time, although precisely dateable evidence for Late Saxon defences at Bath is difficult to identify. The Roman

<sup>20</sup> Whitelock 1961, 60.

<sup>21</sup> Grierson and Blackburn 1986, 314. See also: North 1994, 35.

<sup>22</sup> Fitzwilliam Museum, CM.1.353–1990. The exceptional nature of these two pennies is remarked on by Lyon 2001, 67, n.8. The Fitzwilliam Museum coin is first recorded in J.D. Cuff's collection, sold at auction by Sotheby, 8 June 1854 (lot 480). There is no indication in that catalogue of its provenance. It may have been from the Cuerdale hoard but this is unproven (Dr Rory Naismith, pers. comm., July 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Dr Martin Allen, pers. comm., February 2011; a point reinforced by Dr Rory Naismith, pers. comm., July 2011.

city wall, on the northern side, certainly survived into the Late Saxon period, when it seems that defensive outworks were constructed on the revetted lip of the re-cut Roman ditch.<sup>24</sup> Bath shared this characteristic relationship between its Anglo-Saxon defences and surviving Roman walls with Chichester, Exeter, Portchester and Winchester.<sup>25</sup> The re-cut Roman ditch and the outworks are thought to be contemporary (and Late Saxon) as they were not constructed in any known Roman fashion. It is noticeable that the length of Bath's defensive perimeter, as measured by the *Burghal Hidage*, is greater than the length of the Roman walls, which suggests that the Late Saxon measurement of the town's defences followed that of the outworks rather than the Roman walls themselves; this is corroborated by the evidence for defences lying outside the actual Roman wall as noted earlier.<sup>26</sup> While the *Burghal Hidage* assessment for Bath suggests that there were useable defences there by the early tenth century, at least, these defences (whether refurbished Roman ones or Anglo-Saxon constructions) were not necessarily newly built;<sup>27</sup> however, there is no evidence for the actual restoration of Roman walls, at *burhs* which utilised these, prior to the tenth century.<sup>28</sup> In the case of Bath, the street plan appears to be late ninth- or tenth-century in date.<sup>29</sup> A large east-west ditch to the south of the town wall, uncovered during major building work at the South Gate Development in 2007, may represent Roman defences which were cleared in the Late Saxon period, or they may represent a defensive feature dug as part of the Alfredian and Edwardian refortification of Bath. Exact dating though has not been established.<sup>30</sup>

However, the surviving Roman walls (in whatever state of repair) may have encouraged the use of Bath as a stronghold *prior* to this and one of the attractions of Bath to Offa, in the eighth century, may have been that it possessed functioning defences, as well as being a key frontier site on the border with Wessex.<sup>31</sup> Thus, while the completion of burghal defences may have prompted the issuing of the Bath coins of Edward the Elder, this matter cannot conclusively be established as the decisive factor, although it is still a strong possibility. Even if burghal status was a factor, it needs to be borne in mind that the motivation for creating a *burh* extended beyond military purposes, as these settlements also increased royal control over a given area.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, their role went well beyond their military characteristics, since *burhs* also had an economic and administrative function, as seen in the law of Edward the Elder that buying and selling should take place in a *port* (a recognised market centre).<sup>33</sup> This meant that the king's reeve could oversee economic transactions in these designated locations.<sup>34</sup> This is particularly significant given the prominence given to the recording of the death of 'Alfred, who was reeve at Bath'.<sup>35</sup>

There are though, of course, *other* possible motives for such an exceptional coin issue and these must also be borne in mind, alongside the matter of burghal status. These could include commemorating a royal visit; or these mint-signed coins could have been intended for the giving of alms in connection with a significant church. In this context it should be remembered that Bath, as explored earlier, had enjoyed a notable combined political and ecclesiastical role since the reign of Offa of Mercia in the eighth century. Such minster-places provided a nucleus, from which later *burhs* and urban areas could develop.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, most of the major towns that were recorded in *Domesday Book* were royal fortresses by the late ninth or tenth century and many of these locations also contained minsters. As Wessex expanded, after the 870s, its

<sup>24</sup> O'Leary 1981, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Schoenfeld 1994, 59.

<sup>26</sup> Abels and Morillo 2005, 9. For Bath in the *Burghal Hidage* see Hill 1996, 190–1.

<sup>27</sup> O'Leary 1981, 22.

<sup>28</sup> Abels and Morillo 2005, 8. See also: Hunter Blair and Keynes 2003, 293.

<sup>29</sup> Lapidge, Blair and Keynes 1999, 54.

<sup>30</sup> Bruno Barber, pers. comm., December 2011. Barber with Halsey, Lewcun and Philpotts forthcoming.

<sup>31</sup> O'Leary 1981, 27.

<sup>32</sup> Holt 2009, 59.

<sup>33</sup> I Edward c.1 (trans. Attenborough 1922, 114–17, at 114.).

<sup>34</sup> Holt 2009, 66.

<sup>35</sup> See n.17 above.

<sup>36</sup> Blair 2005, 333.

burghal policy built on the pre-existing Mercian pattern which had associated minsters with fortified sites; many of the *burhs* which were recorded in the *Burghal Hidage* were actually ecclesiastical in nature when first recorded and about two-thirds of them either contained minsters or were sited close to minsters.<sup>37</sup> In support of this interpretation of an ecclesiastical causal factor behind the exceptional Bath coin issue, is the fact that Exeter and Winchester were also important Church centres (the latter with combined ecclesiastical and dynastic importance for Wessex); this may suggest similarities with Bath and may explain the distinctive coins which were issued from these three centres under Alfred and Edward the Elder (see below for parallels with these earlier Winchester and Exeter issues under Alfred). In short, the exceptional design of the Bath coins, as with these earlier coins from Winchester and Exeter, may have denoted an unusual *purpose* as well as, or instead of, an unusual *context* of production.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that, whatever motivated the minting of the exceptional Bath coins, they still constituted an untypical form of coinage for Edward the Elder; they were minted in the early years of his reign; they were struck in a town which previously had been both a Mercian frontier settlement and one closely associated with the Mercian royal house. This is highly suggestive of a significant reason for their minting and, whilst this might have ranged from new defences to a significant church donation, this is likely to have been *combined* with celebrating the new West Saxon governmental presence in the town. Indeed, given the close relationship between the previous rulers of Mercia and the church in Bath, any major West Saxon church donation, or alms giving, in the town will have had profound political as well as religious significance.

#### Alfredian parallels to the Bath pennies of Edward the Elder

As has been briefly alluded to, the closest parallels to the British Museum Bath penny are late coins of King Alfred which also carry the mint-name as a three-letter statement, Winchester, WIN,<sup>38</sup> and Exeter, EXA.<sup>39</sup> Each of these coins (see Figs. 3–4 below) also carries the obverse legend REX SAXONVM ('king of the Saxons'). Of all Alfred's coins, this royal title in this form is found only on coins from these two mints.<sup>40</sup> These particular coins probably mark either the completion of burghal defences at these two towns or important donations associated with the Church. Some specimens of the *Cross and Lozenge* coinage (c.875–80) also give Alfred the abbreviated title of REX SAX.<sup>41</sup> These have been attributed to die cutters operating in Canterbury, London, Winchester and elsewhere.<sup>42</sup> However, these do not offer as exact a parallel with Edward's title on the Bath pennies (see below) as do the Alfredian issues from Winchester and Exeter.



Fig. 3. Alfred, Winchester penny, mint-name WIN and title REX SAXONVM. 1.56 g. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

<sup>37</sup> Blair 2005, 331.

<sup>38</sup> British Museum, 1854.0621, 28.

<sup>39</sup> British Museum, 1838.0710, 32. For a comparison of these coins with the Bath issue of Edward the Elder see North 1994, 35.

<sup>40</sup> North 1994, 125–6.

<sup>41</sup> These are nos 28, 42–51, 53–4, 56 and 58–9 in Blackburn and Keynes' list of *Cross and Lozenge* coins. The first of these is in the London style and all the Alfred coins from Winchester carry this inscription (nos 42–51). See Blackburn and Keynes 1998, 140–8.

<sup>42</sup> North 1994, 124.



Fig. 4. Alfred, Exeter penny, mint-name EXA and title REX SAXONVM. 1.58 g. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

The Bath penny of Edward the Elder also carries the obverse title of +EADVVEARD REX SAXONVM ('Edward king of the Saxons'). This particular title of Edward on a coin is very significant, as it is confined to the British Museum Bath example and to the Bath penny in the Fitzwilliam Museum collection (see Figs. 1–2 above). This further indicates the novelty and significance of these coins, since all other coins of Edward the Elder carry the royal title +EADVVEARD REX. These two pennies are therefore highly exceptional and distinctly untypical of Edward's coinage.<sup>43</sup>

### The political message of the royal title on the Bath pennies

The choice of this particular title, REX SAXONVM, for the Bath pennies of Edward the Elder is clearly significant, because it was unusual to express the ethnic/territorial component of a royal title on coins of this period; hence the large majority of Alfred's and Edward's coins simply accord them the title REX. In contrast, REX SAXONVM (when it was used) was the title traditionally used by West Saxon kings in charters and on coins to express their role as kings of Wessex. REX SAXONVM was used sporadically on issues from both Wessex and Kent during the reigns of Ecgbert and Æthelwulf earlier in the ninth century;<sup>44</sup> it was sparingly used by Alfred, as noted above; it was similarly used sparingly by Edward; and its use was revived later, in the tenth century. In the earlier examples though it had developed a particular association with the West Saxon monarchy. This was almost certainly why it was the title used on Alfred's coins minted at Exeter and Winchester<sup>45</sup> (towns firmly within the historic borders of Wessex). It can be contrasted with the title *Anglorum Saxonum rex*, or *Angulsaxonum rex* ('king of the Anglo-Saxons') which developed in charters during Alfred's reign (and continued into the reign of Edward the Elder) to convey a rule which now encompassed both Wessex and Mercia.<sup>46</sup> Alfred even experimented with a form reflecting this wider aspiration, REX ANGLOX, on the coins of his *Two Emperors* issue.<sup>47</sup> This particular coinage type – which was copied from a fourth-century Roman gold solidus – is often interpreted as showing Alfred using coin design for specific propaganda purposes. However, since the Alfredian coin was based on a Roman coin commonly found in Britain, had been copied previously in the mid-seventh century and was also issued by Alfred's contemporary, Ceolwulf II of Mercia, it may be that the propaganda significance of these coins has been overstated.<sup>48</sup> Whatever the exact reason for the selection of this Roman prototype the distinctive royal title used on Alfred's version contrasted with the more usual title of ÆLFRED REX, found on a large number of his other coin issues.

For Alfred (as later for Edward) there is good reason to suggest that all the coins of the REX SAXONVM type were intended as ceremonial or special issues of some kind and that this formula was selected in order to convey such a message. This is strikingly illustrated by the examples of the so-called 'Offering Pieces' which combined this royal title with the reverse inscription ELI MO[sina], which can be translated as 'alms'. With a weight of 10.5 g, or

<sup>43</sup> Lyon 2001, 67, 75. North 1994, 126–9.

<sup>44</sup> North 1994, 119–20, nos 589–90 and 596–8.

<sup>45</sup> Keynes 1998, 36, n.154.

<sup>46</sup> Brooks 2003, 47.

<sup>47</sup> North 1994, 124.

<sup>48</sup> Blackburn 1998, 112–113.

approximately seven regular pennies, the examples currently known were clearly intended as part of a ceremonial payment to the church in Rome, or for some other charitable payment.<sup>49</sup> Interestingly enough, given the importance of this location to one of the other Alfredian REX SAXONVM issues, the ‘Offering Pieces’ were probably struck at Winchester late in Alfred’s reign.<sup>50</sup>

Consequently, the title used on Edward the Elder’s Bath pennies resonated with both West Saxon monarchy and with acts of ceremonial celebration and seems to have communicated the new *Realpolitik* along the Avon valley: Bath was now ruled by Edward, as king of Wessex. Minted at a time when a semi-independent Mercia still existed under the joint-rule of Edward’s sister and her husband, the annexation of Bath into Wessex, as publicized by the mint-name and the royal title, seems unambiguous. Even if the motivation for the issue was connected to a Church event, its political message was *also* clear.

These two coins, therefore, are highly important, as they clearly were intended to convey a distinct political message. We may sum up their novel characteristics as follows: they are the first evidence we currently have of minting at Bath (although this is always subject to new discoveries); the presence of an Edwardian mint-name; the identification of the mint in the style of late coinage of Alfred (in the case of the British Museum penny); the royal title following another late model of Alfred’s found on (probably) celebratory coin issues. This all suggests a commemorative/celebratory function for this rare Bath issue of Edward the Elder.

This review of the numismatic evidence, therefore, corroborates the documentary evidence from the *Chronicle* entry for 906. Consequently, these two coins mean that we can suggest with some confidence that the annexation of Bath occurred *after* 900 (accession secured for Edward the Elder), or perhaps after 902 (end of the heightened threat to West Saxon security posed by Æthelwold’s revolt), and *by* 906 (prior to the death of Alfred, ‘reeve at Bath’ and by which time the Bath penny in the British Museum had almost certainly been minted).

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<sup>49</sup> Grierson and Blackburn 1986, 314.

<sup>50</sup> North 1994, 126. See also Pratt 2001, 71.

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