

A COENWULF PENNY BY WIHTRED FROM BIDFORD-ON-AVON, WARWICKSHIRE

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Discovery and Site

It is not very often that a Mercian penny, which seems to be no more than a chance loss, turns up in this country, while hoards containing coins of Coenwulf recorded during the past two or more centuries can be counted on the fingers of both hands.¹ Thus it is gratifying to report the discovery of such a piece during investigations along the route for the new inner relief road at Bidford. Excavations were just concluding in 1978 by archaeologists working for the Warwickshire Museum and the Department of the Environment under the direction of Miss Susan Hirst, when the coin was found unstratified. It lay at the top of B5 Roman quarry and at the base of the plough soil in an area between the large pagan Saxon cemetery² and the fringes of a later Saxon settlement site³ (NGR: SP09915197).

There was no indication of a deposit at the spot where the coin lay and indeed Saxon hoards from anywhere within the Middle Anglian and Hwiccan regions are at present unknown, partly due no doubt to the fact that during the ninth century Danish raids did not penetrate into the region of the western midlands.⁴ However, even single finds of coins are scarce in this general area, although discoveries of sceattas have occasionally occurred.⁵

An Offa penny by Deimund, now in the Leicester Museum, was found at Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, before 1875. This with a tribrach penny of Coenwulf by the moneyer Diola, housed in the Museum and Art Gallery at Shrewsbury, probably a Shropshire find but of unknown provenance, and a Cuthred penny of Eaba unearthed with a decorated pin of iron near Brixworth, Northamptonshire, about 1877, now in the Northampton Museum, seem to be the only examples of this denomination, predating Burgred and Alfred which are recorded as being permanently housed in local museums.⁶ To be added to these are two of Coenwulf's tribrach coins by Ibba, one discovered at Breedon-on-the-Hill, Leicestershire, the other somewhere in Shropshire⁷ as finds also from the central and western midlands. If, however, one extends the range eastwards there are coins of Offa recovered from Castor and Newton Bromswold, and a penny of Aethelheard, archbishop of Canterbury (798-805), found at Brixworth, all in Northamptonshire.⁸ Others include two of Offa, from Stilton, Huntingdonshire, and Mentmore, Buckinghamshire,⁹ and one of Ceolwulf I by Aelhun at Toddington in Bedfordshire.¹⁰ Southwards, Oxford city has produced a penny of Archbishop Jaenberht (pre-792),¹¹ a garden near Deddington Castle, Oxfordshire, one of Offa by Eadhun,¹² while at Eynsham Abbey, only a few miles north-west of Oxford, a penny of Queen Cynethryth by Eoba as well as an anonymous coin in the Kentish royal series (c.821-23) were recovered in 1834 and 1854 respectively.¹³ But the site nearest to Bidford, where a coin of Ecgbearht of Wessex by the moneyer Tidbearht was found in 1957, is Lower Slaughter, some twenty-five miles away

in Gloucestershire.¹⁴ Quite recently an Offa portrait penny by Alhmund has turned up at Trusley, Derbyshire, being, it is believed, the first recorded early Mercian piece for that county.¹⁵

It is no part of this note to discuss or indeed anticipate findings from trial excavations which have taken place at Bidford-on-Avon during four or five seasons since 1971, for archaeological investigation is still in progress. But in general terms it is perhaps pertinent to remark that a coin which in date falls mid-way between the known Anglo-Saxon community of the sixth century and the royal manor established here by the eleventh century¹⁶ must have a certain significance. Evidence from pottery and other finds of the Romano-British period¹⁷ attests the early occupation of this site which lies astride the Ricknield or Buckle Street, running south from Alcester to join the Fosse Way near Lower Slaughter, at the point where this Roman road crosses the River Avon, formerly by ford as the name implies, but in later medieval times by bridge.¹⁸

Exploitation of salt from Droitwich and elsewhere in the Salwarpe valley goes back to the later phases of the Iron Age, for the Belgic peoples needed it in their capitals; and the industry remained an important one not only during the Roman period but all through the middle ages, manufacture in fact continuing until the present century.¹⁹ So a river crossing on a well-used route for pack-horses travelling south to the Cotswolds and beyond, with trains proceeding north with wool and other commodities, may have been reason enough for the establishment here of some permanent trading post. But unlike Stratford, which was the alternative crossing of Avon, Bidford remained a village or small town without borough status, although obtaining a market grant in 1220.²⁰ Thus a penny of the early ninth century is not entirely to be unexpected where traders and travellers were continually passing through, even though this area of Mercia lies about 150 miles from the mints then striking in Kent and East Anglia.

Classification of Coin and Dating

A full description is given here since the coin appears to be a new variety by this moneyer although closely associated with four other coins mentioned below. It is illustrated at the end of this article.

Obverse. COENVVLF RE+. Bust right, diademed and robed, cutting through inner linear circle; outer beaded circle.

Reverse. +.:PIN.TR.E.:D. Small cross pattée, set saltirewise, within inner beaded circle.

Diameter 20mm, die ratio 30⁰. Decayed around almost half the edge where the flan is thin; broken across bust and recently repaired. Otherwise in very fine condition. Weight 1.22g (18.9grs).

Two things are noticeable in the inscription on the obverse: the absence of the ethnic, the initial cross being synthesised with the final letter of REX,²¹ and the retrograde N in addition to the retrograde and inverted F for L. On the reverse the moneyer's name using N for H is set out boldly using Roman capitals with slight serifs, single or groups of pellets arranged arbitrarily in the spacings of the letters. Wihtred's signature in this form is found on four other Coenwulf coins, each having a different device within the inner beaded circle: inverted A between pellets (two die duplicates); small tribrach pattée with pellets in angles; star, the six limbs pattée; saltire cross pattée with pellets in angles.²²

The number of coins recorded for this East Anglian moneyer is now twenty-three, possible twenty-four,²³ out of probably fewer than a thousand

Saxon pennies known to have survived from the period c.775 to 825,²⁴ or approximately 2.5 per cent of the total. Wihtred's coinage, assuming all of it was issued by one man, covers the later issues of Offa, the few coins put out by Eadwald of East Anglia, the whole of Coenwulf's sovereignty over Mercia and at least the first year of Ceolwulf I. This period of effective minting lasted some thirty-five years, c.787-822, and suggests the moneyer worked well into his sixties, in fact he may have been older than this when he died or retired.²⁵

As with Canterbury, Rochester and London, the East Anglian mint, whether sited at Thetford, Ipswich or elsewhere, seems unlikely to have had continuous striking during Coenwulf's reign. In fact there seems good reason to suppose that the bulk of this coinage was issued during the last ten, perhaps the last five years of his rule. For example, Wodel, another East Anglian, used the same reverse die on coins struck for Coenwulf and Ceolwulf and the obverse die of the latter is found to couple with another reverse type for Ceolwulf, so the dating of these three pieces must surely be 821-22. Since Wihtred also struck coins using similar reverse designs as seen on no fewer than five of his surviving pieces with one further closely allied reverse, we can be reasonably certain that a fair proportion of his output must be of the same date.²⁶

It seems the substantive type B, having Saxon M with contraction mark for Mercia as central device on obverse, and on reverse a large voided tri-brach moline, in issue between 798 and 805 at the Canterbury and London mints,²⁷ was not produced by any of the East Anglian moneyers; although Wihtred on one of his portrait issues did use a small single-armed tribrach as central motif.²⁸ Even though this may be a faint echo of the early group the gap between his coinage for Offa and Eadwald and that for Coenwulf would seem to be of several years duration; for to date no coins, comparable to those of his compatriot Lul, which link the non-portrait group of the late eighth century with his portrait coins for Coenwulf²⁹ have so far been recovered.

NOTES

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1. D.M.Metcalf, 'Offa's Pence Reconsidered', *Cunobelin* (1963), 42, gives 21 recorded single finds of Coenwulf's coins (and 9 of his brother Cuthred) based on lists in the possession of Mr Blunt. M.Dolley, *SCBI* 6. *The Hiberno-Norse Coins in the British Museum*, pp.48-9, hoards Nos. 1 (T125), 2 (T-), 4 (T117), 5 (T366), 7 (T328), 9 (T109), 10 (T110), 11 (T123), 50 (T362). Numbers in parenthesis are those in J.D.A.Thompson, *Inventory of British Coin Hoards A.D.600-1500* (1956).
2. J.Humphreys, 'An Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire', *Archaeologia*, 73 (1923), 89-116, and 74 (1924), 271-88; *Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society*, 49 (1923), 16-25, frontispiece and pls.II-V.
3. P.Rahtz, 'Gazeteer of Anglo-Saxon domestic settlement sites' in *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England*, (1981), p.409; W.Ford, 'Bidford-

- on-Avon', *West Midlands Archaeological News Sheet* (CBA Group 8), 14 (1971), 21; L.E.Webster and J.Cherry, 'Medieval Britain in 1971' *Medieval Archaeology*, 16 (1972), 163; T.Slayter, *A History of Warwickshire* (1981), p.28.
4. Sir Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, second edition (1950), pp.241-42. The one serious inroad recorded seems to have been in the country around the Wrekin during 855.
 5. S.E.Rigold and D.M.Metcalf 'A Check-list of English Finds of Sceattas', *BNJ* 47 (1977), 31-52, including distribution maps for eight classes. Many of these coins have been recovered in the central and south midlands but there are only six or seven specimens from the region of the western midlands including those found at Coventry, Worcester and Compton, Staffs. See also D.M.Metcalf, 'Sceattas from the territory of the Hwicce', *NC* (1976), 64-74; and 'Monetary Affairs in Mercia in the time of Aethelbald' in *Mercian Studies*, edited by A.Dornier (1977), map on p.92, covering all finds of sceattas in England.
 6. A.J.H.Gunstone, *SCBI* 17. *Ancient British, Anglo-Saxon and Norman Coins in Midlands Museums*, Nos.84, 85 and 95.
 7. C.E.Blunt, C.S.S.Lyon and B.H.I.H.Stewart, 'The Coinage of Southern England, 796-840', *BNJ* 32 (1963), 51, No.16; R.C.Lockett *Sale Cat. English* pt.3 (1958), lot 2658. See also Metcalf, *Cunobelin* (1963), 43.
 8. P.W.P.Carlyon-Britton *Sale Cat.* (1918), lot 1603; Metcalf, *Cunobelin* (1963), 51; *VCH Northamptonshire*, I (1902), p.255.
 9. Lockett, *English*, pt.1 (1955), lot 348 (= *SCBI* 1. *Fitzwilliam Museum*, No. 386); *BMC* 34.
 10. Lockett, *English*, pt.1, lot 381; *NC* new ser. 5, 168; Blunt, Lyon and Stewart, p.61, Cl.21(a).
 11. Lockett, *English*, pt.3 (1958), lot 2632 (= Blunt 132); found by 1866.
 12. *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 22 (1866), 245 (similar to Blunt 39); Metcalf (*BNJ* 40 (1971), 171-72) proves this coin is *SCBI* 1. *Fitzwilliam Museum*, No.389, ex Carlyon-Britton.
 13. R.P.Mack collection, *SCBI* 20, *Mack*, No.575; Blunt, Lyon and Stewart p.66, An.7.
 14. Blunt, *BNJ* 28 (1955-57), 467 and pl.XXVII, 1. A penny of Coenwulf by Beornfreth (Cn.23) in Stow-on-the-Wold Museum might also be mentioned as a possible local Cotswold find.
 15. Information from Miss Archibald (19 May 1982) who has kindly allowed this record to be included here.
 16. *Domesday Book: Warwickshire including Birmingham*, edited by John Morris (1976). I. Land of the King (William) 238b (3) Bidford (-on-Avon). King Edward held it.
 17. S.Hirst, 'Bidford-on-Avon, 1979', *West Midlands Archaeological News Sheet* (CBA Group 8), 22 (1979), 54-55.
 18. Originally built in the early fifteenth century, some 200 yards below the ford, but much repaired in 1449 and during succeeding centuries (see *VCH Warwickshire*, III (1965), p.50).
 19. For a brief survey of the salt industry at Droitwich, both archaeological and historical, see *West Midlands Archaeological News Sheet* (CBA Group 8), 22 (1979), 83-91. Charters mentioning salt workings go back to the

mid-seventh century. See also Metcalf, *Mercian Studies*, p.91, who, however, notes that no sceattas have so far been recorded from Droitwich itself; and 'Sceattas from the Territory of the Hwicce' *NC* (1976), 68.

20. *VCH Warwickshire*, III (1965), p.50; Slayter, map, p.54.
21. The use of + for x in the royal title occurs twelve times on a known twenty-one obverses by this moneyer but the absence of the ethnic is only found on two other pieces. This form of conflation appears to be exceptional until the time of Ceolwulf I and Beornwulf (e.g. J.J.North, *English Hammered Coinage*, 1, pl.IV, 33-Edgar).
22. Blunt, Lyon and Stewart, (note 8) p.59, Nos.103, 104, 105, 106 (= die duplicate of Lockett 2655) illustrated on pl.VI.
23. C.E.Blunt, 'The Coinage of Offa', in *Anglo-Saxon Coins*, edited by R.H.M.Dolley (1961), p.59 note 1 cites for this moneyer three coins of Offa's group II and four of Offa's group III, while Blunt, Lyon and Stewart, pp.59, 62, and 68, list eleven coins of his for Coenwulf, two for Ceolwulf I, and one for Eadwald of East Anglia. To these can now be added a further coin of Offa's group II (Glendining, 6 June 1979, lot 361) and the Coenwulf coin discussed here; also, perhaps, a further coin of Coenwulf with reverse inscription WIGHER (*SCBI* 2. *Glasgow*, 348).
24. Based on calculated figures given in various papers by Blunt, Metcalf and others, with allowance for a number more pieces recorded in recent years.
25. The possibility of, say, father and son, bearing the same name, and working consecutively at the one mint cannot be entirely ruled out. See also Metcalf's comments on duplication of moneyers' names in *Cunobelin* (1963), 40.
26. This is admirably demonstrated by Blunt, Lyon and Stewart, pl.VI, Cn. 113, Cl.31, 32 (Wodel), and Cn.109, 110, Cl.30 (Wihtred).
27. Blunt, Lyon and Stewart, pp.51-2.
28. Blunt, Lyon and Stewart, pl.VI, Cn.104.
29. Blunt, Lyon and Stewart, pl.V, Ea.2, Cn.97, Cn.98.

