

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SACK OF OXFORD IN 1009/1010 FOR THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE COINAGE OF ÆTHELRED II

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IN recent years research into the late Anglo-Saxon coinage by R. H. M. Dolley has shown that the obverse and reverse designs of the silver penny were changed at intervals, the old coins apparently being demonetised with each change, and that during the reigns of Æthelred II and Cnut the lifetime of each issue was generally of the order of six years¹. The custom undoubtedly stems from a complete recoinage which took place late in Edgar's reign and which is implied by Roger of Wendover in the course of a panegyric entered under the year 975, the year of the king's death. Mr. Dolley has always maintained that, on the evidence of the coins themselves and having regard to the fact that Edgar died in July of that year, the reform of the coinage must have taken place earlier than 975, most probably in 973. He does not believe this to be incompatible with Roger's text when the latter is analysed and compared with the surviving earlier source from which he drew much of his material—viz Florence of Worcester—but which unfortunately did not record the reference to the coinage. It would, however, be going beyond the evidence to infer that Edgar's reform actually prescribed the regular recoinages which were to become a feature of the English coinage for the next two centuries².

According to the sexennial theory, Æthelred II's last issue, now generally referred to as the 'Last Small Cross' type to distinguish it from the earlier issues of similar design, should have been introduced in 1009 as the sixth change of the series: Mr. Dolley has suggested Michaelmas as the most likely time of year for the change to have taken place.³ It had apparently been intended to replace the previous issue, known as the 'Helmet' type, by a new coinage depicting the Lamb of God on the obverse and the Dove of the Holy Spirit on the reverse, and some of these coins were in fact issued from a few peripheral mints such as Malmesbury, Derby, Leicester and Nottingham before the design was withdrawn in favour of that of Edgar's reform.⁴

The weight standard of the penny had varied considerably since the reform but the 'Agnus Dei' coins were apparently intended to be struck to a standard of 27 grains or so in contrast to the standard of about 22½ grains which was the heaviest used for the 'Helmet' coinage. The weights of 'Last Small Cross' pennies vary greatly, and research now in progress is showing that these are not in the main random variations but are in part the result of deliberate alterations in the weight standard from time to time during the issue and in part are due also to the adoption of different standards at different mints or groups of mints⁵.

¹ See for example R. H. M. Dolley, *Anglo-Saxon Pennies (ASP)*, pp. 24–25.

² P. Grierson, in *The President's Address, NC* 1962, gives a useful critical review of the evidence for the date and extent of Edgar's reform, but his interpretation of Roger of Wendover does not find general acceptance among Anglo-Saxon historians.

³ See for example *ASP* p. 29.

⁴ *ASP* p. 26.

⁵ For an introduction to this subject see Miss V. J. Butler (now Mrs. Smart), 'The Metrology of the Late Anglo-Saxon Penny: the Reigns of Æthelræd II and Cnut', in *Anglo-Saxon Coins* (ed. R. H. M. Dolley).

It is now also recognised that the coins of the 'Last Small Cross' type can be classified according to styles of die-cutting, and that the styles too have regional affinities¹. This suggests that the dies for this issue were cut at a number of regional centres, and were distributed from there to the smaller mints. However, the existence of several coins of unexpected styles from major mints such as London, Lincoln and Chester has prompted the alternative suggestion that all the dies were in fact cut at London (as Domesday indicates was the practice in the time of Edward the Confessor) and that there were several *officinae*, each with responsibility for a particular group of mints: the anomalies could then be explained on the basis that sometimes an engraver would be called upon to cut dies for another who was, for some reason, unable to fulfil his task². Current research indicates, though, that many apparent anomalies are not really such but reflect a national distribution of dies of two different styles at the start of the issue from a centre or centres in Wessex (almost certainly Winchester and perhaps also Exeter), excluding apparently the mints in the London area and in north-west Mercia. London and Mercia had a different distribution from a centre which—perhaps because of Danish attacks on London in the late autumn of 1009—seems to have been Chester, so that at many Mercian mints, including Oxford and Wallingford, there is an overlap. Subsequently dies were cut at other centres, including London, York, Lincoln and Canterbury, modelled on those of the initial distribution but differing from them in many minor details, and were distributed to mints in their own area as the dies of the initial distributions wore out³.

Coins struck from dies of the initial distributions are, with relatively few exceptions, on the heavy weight-standard of the 'Agnus Dei' type, i.e. approximately 27 grains. Subsequently the weight-standard appears to have fallen steadily, some later styles being associated with coins averaging 18 grains or even less. It is significant, therefore, that all 18 coins of the Oxford and Wallingford mints which are listed for the type in B.E. Hildebrand's 1881 catalogue of the Anglo-Saxon coins in the Royal Coin Cabinet in Stockholm are of the styles of the initial distributions of dies (8 Oxford coins and 5 Wallingford coins being of the Mercian style, 4 Oxford coins of one Wessex style and one Wallingford coin of the other) and that the lightest of these weighs nearly 25 grains and the next lightest almost 26 grains. Also significant is the rarity of coins of this type from these two mints: Stainer, for example, does not list a single coin of the Oxford mint from a collection other than Stockholm⁴.

There can be little doubt, therefore, that all the known coins of the 'Last Small Cross' type from the mints of Oxford and Wallingford were struck at the very beginning of the issue, and if there were historical reasons for supposing that these mints might have been closed for much if not all of the currency of the issue they would be supported by the numismatic evidence and would in turn provide evidence for the dating of the introduction of the

¹ R. H. M. Dolley, *Some Reflections on Hildebrand Type A of Æthelræd II* (Antikvariskt Arkiv 9, Stockholm, 1958) p. 12.

² See C. E. Blunt, *The President's Address, NC 1959*, p. vi and the reference there cited.

³ York also produced its own dies from the start of the issue.

⁴ C. L. Stainer, *Oxford Silver Pennies* (Oxford, 1904) pp. 13–14. The third coin listed, which is in the Copenhagen collection, is of the 'Intermediate Small Cross' type. There are in fact four Oxford pence of the 'Last Small Cross' type in the Ashmolean Museum (Sylloge nos. 627–630) weighing between 25.6 and 26.7 grains, and one of Oxford

and one of Wallingford in the Hunterian and Coats Collections (Sylloge nos. 882 and 886) each weighing 27.0 grains. It will be noticed from Stainer's figures that there is no clear evidence of a falling weight standard at Oxford within any of the three substantive issues preceding 'Last Small Cross' (i.e. Hildebrand Types C, D and E). In this respect Oxford follows Winchester, as also does Wallingford. However, in the 'Last Small Cross' issue although Winchester begins with an emission on the heaviest weight-standard the bulk of its output is on a much reduced standard, as at most mints other than Oxford and Wallingford.

type. Such reasons are not difficult to find. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records in 1009 the first of the final series of Danish attacks which was in seven years to bring the country under Danish rule, and states that 'after Christmas they (the host) made an incursion away through the Chilterns, and so came to Oxford, and burnt down the borough, and made their way back on both sides of the Thames towards their ships.'¹ It may thus be inferred from an authoritative documentary source that the mint of Oxford was destroyed at the beginning of 1010, and it would not be surprising if the Wallingford mint shared the same fate. The date of the sack of Oxford, taken in conjunction with the rarity of 'Last Small Cross' coins of the mint and their demonstrably early minting, strongly supports the view that the issue had begun only a few months previously—i.e. during the autumn of 1009. The absence of later coins of the issue suggests in turn that the sack was severe enough to prevent the reopening of either mint for several years.



(Enlarged)

Hild. Æ 3900 (27.8 gr.)

Hild. Æ 1730 (21.6 gr.)

By way of postscript, one of the obverse dies of Mercian style used at the Wallingford mint was later employed by the Lincoln moneyer Dreng, as the two coins from the Royal Coin Cabinet in Stockholm illustrated here demonstrate.² Dies of this style are otherwise quite foreign to the Lincoln mint. It is possible that this die was captured by the Danish raiders and was subsequently handed in or redeemed at Lincoln, where they may perhaps have had relatively free access. That it had deteriorated in transit can be seen from the signs

¹ From the translation by G. N. Garmonsway (London, 1953).

² I am grateful to the Royal Coin Cabinet for

supplying prints of direct photographs of these coins.

of rusting and of retooling of the die which appear on the Lincoln coin and which account for the minor differences between the obverses of the two coins. Die movements of this kind are being discovered on a considerable scale as the Swedish material is systematically analysed, not only explaining the occurrence at certain mints of coins of unexpected styles but also illustrating in a vivid way the sorry state of Æthelred's kingdom in the years before its final collapse¹.

POSTSCRIPT

We seem now to have a firm date for the introduction of Æthelred's last type. Mr. Dolley has plausibly dated the inception of the 'Helmet' type to 1003 on the basis of the sack of Wilton in that year and the consequent transfer of minting from Wilton to Salisbury: the former is not known for 'Helmet' nor is the latter known for 'Long Cross'. Whether the removal of the mint to Salisbury took place immediately after the sack of Wilton or after an interval the change of type must have occurred relatively soon after the sack, because the Wilton mint can be shown to have been striking as late in the 'Long Cross' issue as any other Wessex mint. The relatively coarse style of Copenhagen Sylloge no. 1317, with the ethnic abbreviated to no more than ANGL·, is found throughout the country and, except at mints in the Winchester area at which the heavy standard is maintained, tends to be associated with a weight-standard which has declined to as little as 20–21 grains.² It is therefore not unreasonable to postulate for the 'Helmet' issue a maximum duration of six years and a minimum of five. This must in my view cast serious doubt on the recent assertion by Mr. J. D. Brand that the 'Helmet' type was merely a variety of 'Long Cross' and did not represent a *renovatio*.³

Notwithstanding the support that this paper may appear to give, it is beyond its scope to examine the theory that there was in fact a rigid sexennial type-cycle in Æthelred's reign, depending as this must on the 'Second Hand' issue having constituted a *renovatio*. It may merely be fortuitous that the introduction of 'First Hand' (probably in 979), 'Helmet' and 'Last Small Cross' appears to fit the theory. It seems to me, moreover, that we handicap ourselves unnecessarily by an *a priori* assumption that there was this fixed conception, because in so doing we may obscure the economic purpose behind the series of type-changes which began with Edgar's recoinage and was to characterise the English coinage for nearly two centuries.

¹ This paper has its origins in research undertaken jointly by Mr. Dolley and myself during our visit to the Royal Coin Cabinet in Stockholm in 1962, and I gladly acknowledge my indebtedness to him for his help and encouragement.

² At London there is at this time, both in this style and in the 'Subsidiary Long Cross' style which appears to be contemporary with it, a reversion to

the full 27-grain standard. An indication of heavy weight is given by a pellet in each of two opposite angles of the long cross, though some coins without the pellets are also found to be struck to this standard.

³ J. D. Brand, 'Meretricious Metrology', *SNC* 1967, pp. 63–65, and 'The "Reform" of Eadgar in 973', *ibid* pp. 94–95.