

Editor: David Powell

A free newsletter to all who share our interest in these fascinating and often enigmatic pieces. Please send the editor at least one 300 dpi JPEG scan, or a sharply focused photo print, of any interesting leaden token or tally in your collection. Send images as email attachments to mail@leadtokens.org.uk Please note that the old david@powell8041.freeserve.co.uk address advertised on earlier versions of LTT will not be active after 31 May 2017.

Lead Tokens using Official Dies

The Royal Mint, or its predecessors, striking pieces in lead? Yes, that possibility is the theme of a paper, "Anglo-Saxon and Norman Lead Objects with Official Coin Types", published by former British Museum curator Marion Archibald in 1991. London & Middlesex Archaeological Society, Special Paper 12, pages 326-346, for the record, although unfortunately it does not appear to be online.

The pieces concerned, of which there were some sixty-three known in 1991, were struck using the official dies of a number of kings between the mid-9th cent and the early 12th, although those of the late 11th cent, and particularly William the Conqueror, predominate. They have the names of a variety of different moneyers and mints on them, although London, and one moneyer in particular, stand out. Over half of the pieces then known had a Billingsgate findspot, and the remainder, although widely spread, came with only one exception from the eastern side of England. They are thought to be some form of tax receipt.



Fig.1, although non-typical in that it is uniface, gives the general idea. It shows the reverse of a William I penny, type 6, with the inscription PIMNDONCNTLBI {Wimund on Cant, i.e. of Canterbury} after the initial cross. It dates from about 1080, plus or minus a year or two, which is roughly the high point of the series. This a far cry from the ordinary run of crude lead; the detail is as fine as on a silver piece, and is certainly no local attempt to copy one. Nor does it fit into any other British lead series.

Some previous double-sided examples have appeared in LTT_63, page 2, but this uniface one is new. Another interesting point about Fig.1; the diameter is some 21-22½mm {variable}, and even allowing for the rim the main design is 20mm, maybe a little over. This is about 2mm more than one would expect of a normal silver penny of the same period, but Marion's selection are very variable in terms of weight and size as well; not surprising, given the nature of lead. Fig.1 weighs 5.03gm, two or three times heavier than a lot of hers; having said which, this is a very full piece, whereas some of hers are partially fragmented.



By the end of 2011 the number of known specimens had grown to about 160, but they are still rare. Recently, Belgian reader Hendrik van Caelenberghe has kindly sent in a picture of a continental piece in similar vein {Fig.2}, issued by Philippe von Heinsberg, c.1130-1191. We conjecture that it might be for similar purpose, but have no idea. I'll leave this one magnified a bit, as it is somewhat smaller, but anyone who thinks they might know anything, please write in.

Not exactly imitating coin of the realm, but well executed and almost certainly also issued for fiscal purposes is the lead jeton shown in Fig.3. The style would fit well with the black-letter type N tokens of the early 16th cent, not that this has any wording on it, and the previous owner thinks that, from the patina, it is probably from an East Anglian findspot. All of which nicely leads us into the article on Elizabethan lead and pewter jetons overleaf. Is this a precursor, and likewise from an official source? Read on, and decide!



Elizabethan Lead and Pewter Counters

Frequently encountered {sorry to start with a pun}, and in various parts of the country, are several common groups of distinctive lead and pewter pieces, larger than most tokens of the period, dating from 1574 to 1614. Some of them bear royal symbols, others do not; but all have a certain air of officialdom about them. They are counters rather than tokens, used for balancing the financial books of the day rather than serving as substitute money; think abacus, or child's counting beads in ten rows of ten, and you will get the idea. For anyone who wants to know how they were actually employed, please scroll down <http://www.mernick.org.uk/lnc/jetton/jetton.htm> for Philip Mernick's excellent explanation concerning Nuremburg jetons; these were the English equivalent, or at least they were by the 1570s. We are concerned here with the pieces themselves.

For some reason there were several types of counters, in some cases being issued simultaneously. The three commonest are Exchequer counters and Lyon counters, both of which started up in 1574, and the Crowned Rose counters which started up in 1590 and went through to the end of the series. It has been conjectured that their termination may have had something to do with James I's loathing of commercial lead tokens and his consequent {but unsuccessful} attempt to ban them c.1612-15, but this has not been proved.

As there is a fair amount of detailed design to appreciate, moreso than on most commercial tokens of the period, I have magnified all the following pictures 3:2.



At the front end of the series, there is nothing magic about the year 1574 other than that, presumably, is when the decision was taken to swap over to lead or pewter from the previously used tin alloy.

It would appear from findspots that the Exchequer counters {Fig.1} seem to have been mainly a London phenomenon, whereas the Lyon {Fig.2-4} and Crowned Rose pieces {Figs.5-9} were used extensively in both London and the provinces. Both the early series, Exchequer and Lyon, were predominantly made in good pewter of a fairly consistent standard, whereas the Crowned Roses were nearly all made of lead.

There are some large Exchequer counters, around 28-30mm in diameter and with a rather continental look; namely, a crowned French three-lis shield on the obverse and a classical pictorial reverse depicting Mercury. A few of these are even dated under the exergual line. More common, however, are smaller pieces such as Fig.1, which measure typically 20mm across. The shared feature which combines the two tends to be some reduced form of the phrase "Camerae Computorum Regiorum"; or in English, "of the Chamber of the Royal Accounts".

On the smaller pieces the initials "RK" are often to be seen flanking the eagle's legs, {Fig.1}, and it has been conjectured that these may be the designer's or engraver's initials. This is a more modern practice than is normally associated with the 16th cent, but the theory has not been either proved or disproved. "ER" flanking would be taken as standing for Elizabeth Regina, and does on some of the later Crowned Rose pieces, but "RK" seems to stand for nothing very obvious.

The simultaneously-issued Lyon counters are readily identified by two very distinctive features; namely a couple of pillars with a crown on the obverse, forming an arch and a rampant, i.e. upright,



lion within a garter on the reverse {Figs.2-4}. Most pieces have a shield within the obverse arch, again bearing the three lis of France, and some ornamentation underneath the exergue which in a few cases hides a date; most frequently 1574, occasionally 1576. Figs.2-3 show undated examples. There are a number of different shaped shields, and shortly before the end of the series the crowned shield gives way totally to a crowned rose, with small canopy in between {Fig.4}. With this latter innovation comes the introduction of the phrase “GOD SAVE THE QVENE” around three sides, the ornamentation to the side of the pillars and in the exergue making way to accommodate it. Space is limited; working clockwise round from 8 o’clock, S-A-V-E has to be squeezed, a letter at a time, into the small angles above and around the crown.

The reverse remain more constant. The inscription on the garter is the well known “HONI SOIT QVI MAL Y PENSE”, better associated with the late Georgian silver introduced as part of the great recoinage of 1816.

---:---:---



“GOD SAVE THE QVENE” on the later Lyon tokens paves the way quite nicely for the Crowned Rose pieces which follow them, and which bear that same inscription for the first dozen or so years of the issue {c.1590-1602}. Two old series merge into one new; the Lyon tokens contribute the ideas for the obverse, whilst the Exchequer tokens contribute the double-headed eagle of the reverse. The DK initials are now gone, but the more logical ER {Elizabeth Regina} now flanks the small gap between crown and rose {Figs.5-6}. Although the size remains fairly constant around the 19-20mm mark, the metallic construction starts to vary more widely, as the different colourings of Figs.5-8 illustrate. This may be in some measure due to the possibility of mints other than London issuing; with a geographic range of use extending all along the eastern and southern counties from Norfolk to Hampshire and Wiltshire, it is perfectly possible. It may be that the darker pewter ones tends to come from London and the lighter lead ones from the provinces.

Half way through the series, the inscription “GOD SAVE THE QVENE” changes to “BEATA REGINA”, without any significant change in design other than that the ER initials quietly disappear. The two wordings are about equally common, and by coincidence James I ascended the throne almost exactly half way through their issue. It has been conjectured that BEATA REGINA {=Beatified Queen} is the new wording on the pieces of the new monarch, and that it commemorates the late Elizabeth in the same way as Roman emperors were honoured by deification, usually by their immediate successor, on their death. The alternative “Queen Betty” would be rather an irreverent interpretation.

There are some occasional half-size pieces of the Crowned Rose type, although for what reason is uncertain; pennies and halfpence make sense, but big and little counters less so. Fig.9 is clearly from the 1590-1602 period, because of its ER initials, even if there is not room to accommodate any larger inscription. The damage suggests that it has been used as a pendant, although that was not the fate of all small pieces.



--:--:--:--



There are also some very pleasing minor pieces, or small series, of which Figs.10-11 are two. The portcullis comes paired with various of the ideas on the main series: Tudor rose, double-headed eagle or, as in Fig.10, lion rampant. The example shown is undated, but one known variety with the rose has the date 1584.



Fig.11, despite being in very good condition, is very dark and has extremely slender lettering; it is stylistically very different. The obverse inscription is “DIEU ET MON DROIT”, i.e. God and my right, which does not seem to appear much elsewhere in the these series, around a different rendering of rose and crown. On the reverse, “HONI SOIT QVI MAL Y PENSE” escapes its garter for once and appears as an ordinary edge inscription. Unusually for a token, but very interestingly, a small hand may be noticed at 12 o’clock; the official mint provenance mark for 1590-92, normally only encountered on regal coins. Fig.11c shows a close-up of the hand, at 12 o’clock between the end of “PENSE” and the beginning of “HONI”.

Fig.12 is curious. It is of larger diameter, maybe about that of the early Exchequer tokens, but whilst it looks to be of this period, I am not even sure that it is British.

There are many varieties, for details of which, and lots of photographs, I would refer you to Michael Mitchiner’s “Jetons, Medalets and Tokens of the British Isles, Vol.3 {1558-1830}”; generally agreed to be the best available reference work for this part of the lead series, and on which I have gratefully drawn in compiling this brief history.

The Leaden Tokens of Roman Britain

I am pleased to include this month a guest article by Denise Wilding, who is undertaking a PhD on Roman tokens at the University of Warwick as part of a project entitled ‘Token Communities in the Ancient Mediterranean’: http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/classics/research/dept_projects/tcam/ .

-:-:-:-

Introduction

Roman leaden tokens (tesserae) are found across the Roman empire, but their existence in Britain has previously received very little study. I am currently undertaking a PhD thesis which aims to examine tokens from across the Roman Empire, with a case study focusing on Britain. Some leaden tokens are known from Britain, and bear similarities to those from elsewhere in the western Roman Empire. There are also mentions of ‘leaden disks’ in many excavation reports—are these in fact tokens that are no longer recognisable? Additionally, leaden coin copies appear at some sites; could these have had a token function?

Appearance

Some tokens found in Britain depict imagery similar to that which is found on coins. Deities feature heavily, whilst animals, busts and initials are also present. A variety of objects are also depicted, such as corn modii, palm fronds and boats. Although the imagery is incredibly varied, it is evident that these have parallels elsewhere in the Roman Empire. For example, one token found on the Thames foreshore depicts the goddess Fides on one side, and a corn modius on the other (Figure 1). Parallels to this type are housed in museums in France and Rome, and this is the case with other tokens found in Britain (including that depicting Eros and a flaming torch—see Figure 2). This therefore implies that these tokens are not native solely to Britain, and potentially arrived here from elsewhere, or form a part of an object type recognised and used by Rome. Hundreds of examples from Rome and the provinces are illustrated in a publication in Rostovtsev’s “*Tesserarum Urbis Romae et Suburbi*”, which includes tokens from museum collections across Europe. {Editor: This source has been mentioned before, and is in the LTT bibliography, but until Denise told me I did not know that it was online at: http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/classics/research/dept_projects/tcam/resources/ }.



Figure 1: Token from Britain depicting corn modius and goddess (probably Fides). Private collection.

Figure 2: Token from Britain depicting Eros, and flaming torch with VC. Private collection

Lead coin copies are known from Britain, and amongst them are those from the Piercebridge assemblage. This comprises hundreds of objects that were thrown from the bridge into the river Tees near the fort and settlement of Piercebridge during the Roman period. The purpose of this assemblage is believed to have been votive in function, and many of the lead coin copies add credence to this theory as they have been folded or squeezed, thereby implying a ‘ritualistic’ significance (see Figure 3). Tokens themselves also form part of votive assemblages in Italy, for example in the river Garigliano, therefore perhaps the coin copies of Piercebridge can also be seen to have had a function as a votive tokens, rather than imitation currency.

Furthermore, there are the ‘lead disks’ sometimes catalogued in excavation reports of Roman sites from Britain. Unfortunately, illustrations are not often present, but it is possible that they too were tokens, and that the designs on them have worn away (see Figure 4). One such example from a Roman site in Wiltshire may be associated with a shrine. Research into these ‘lead disks’ is an ongoing avenue of exploration for my study.



Figure 3:
Folded lead denarius from Pierce-
bridge. PAS NCL-125BD7

Figure 4:
Possible token from a Roman site
in Wiltshire



Function

In terms of the purpose of Roman tokens, more research needs to be undertaken. Those from Rome have been interpreted as having various uses including small change to supplement official currency, entrance tickets to games or the theatre, being distributed as largesse or for entitlement to a measure of grain. The Token Communities project at the University of Warwick hopes to shed more light on Roman tokens in order to better understand their purpose. Establishing their function in Britain may subsequently be possible as more tokens come to light.

Distribution in Britain

However, a key problem with the study of lead tokens in Britain is establishing to what extent they may have been present in Britain. Is the fact that they are not obviously prevalent here a genuine reflection of their distribution, or have they now vanished or become degraded due to adverse conditions of deposition? For that reason, the author would be grateful if any readers have any Roman lead tokens, or know of any that have been found in Britain. These could then be added to the dataset for study in order to build a more accurate picture of their presence here. All findspots will be kept confidential, and I can be contacted on D.wilding.1@warwick.ac.uk.

Another line of enquiry for my research is to establish if Roman tokens are commonly found through metal detecting, and to what extent they are recognised and reaching the public sphere (for example through recording with the Portable Antiquities Scheme). Therefore, I would be grateful if any readers who also undertake metal detecting could fill in a short survey for me. This aims to establish how lead objects are perceived and prioritised in comparison to other metals, and to investigate to what extent Roman lead tokens may be found and recorded. Through this, I hope to contextualise their presence in Britain. The survey, which will only take 5-10 minutes to complete, can be found at: http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/classics/research/dept_projects/tcam/survey. Paper copies can be sent out upon request.

As Roman tokens from Britain have received little academic study to date, other forms of token may be present that have not yet come to the author's attention. Therefore, the author would be grateful to hear of any objects that readers may know of that may fall into the category of Roman token, or any further thoughts or comments you may have. Any information that you can provide would be invaluable to my ongoing research. Thank you!

-:--:--:--

Tokens from Britain form one of Denise's case studies, along with those from France, Germany, Egypt and Israel. She can be contacted on D.wilding.1@warwick.ac.uk. Token Communities twitter: @ancient_tokens