

THE PENNY IN THE PENNYLANDS: COINAGE IN SCOTLAND IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

Veronica Smart

During the discussion of pennylands at the St. Andrews meeting of the Society in 1985 the question was raised of how familiar Scotland would have been with the penny – both with the term and the object itself – during the period when this institution was being formed. It was thought that a review of early coinage in Scotland might be useful as a background to this discussion, and it is such a review, though perhaps offering little that is original, that this note is intended to provide.

It should perhaps be explained at the outset for any readers unfamiliar with the early numismatic history of the British Isles that the term ‘penny’ is first given with general consent to describe the broad, thin silver coin, roughly the size of our five-pence piece, which was introduced during the last years of the reign of Offa towards the end of the eighth century (though perhaps in Kent rather than in Mercia), and approximating in size and shape to the Carolingian denier. However, numismatic opinion is more and more inclining to extend the term to take in the smaller, thicker and generally anonymous silver pieces (formerly known, with very weak documentary support, as ‘sceattas’), which go back to the seventh century. Other terms of account, such as shilling, mancus, mark and ora are to be found in Old English documents, but the silver penny was the only *coin* to be issued, and remained so until the groat was introduced by Edward I in 1279. Halfpennies and farthings were obtained by shearing the penny literally into its halves and quarters. The only exception, and one which is very relevant here, is that ninth-century Northumbria replaced the ‘sceat’ not with the broader denier-type penny but with a coinage of much the same weight and format of the ‘sceat’ but struck in copper. It is difficult to believe that this coin was known as a penny, since its value was so much less than its contemporary Southumbrian counterpart.

So far we have referred only to England, and necessarily so since the Scottish coinage was a very late entrant on the European scene. Many of the territories which had been contained within the Roman Empire continued to strike coins with only the smallest hiatus for their new barbarian kings. Even the Scandinavians, in their homelands and in their colony at Dublin (and perhaps also on Man), though hitherto dependent on imported coin, by c. 1000 had begun tentative and imitative coinages of their own. Not until the twelfth century does an official coinage emerge in Scotland. It has been said that the occasion was David I's capture of Carlisle in 1136, and with it the mint that had been recently set up there by Henry I to coin silver from the Cumberland mines. Certainly Carlisle is one of David's early mints, but it seems likely that the beginning of the Scottish coinage may be less dramatic, and owe more to David's establishment and building up of the Scottish boroughs. During his time in England David would have become aware that one of the characteristics of a borough there was the right to a mint. The growth of markets and the increase of trade would have necessitated a ready availability of coined money, quite apart from any reasons of prestige David might have had for striking currency in his own name. It is most unfortunate that the English coinage he took as his prototype was at what must be the worst state ever in terms of craftsmanship. Added to the problems of having only rare surviving coins and no documents dealing with them, the numismatist is faced in these earliest years of the Scottish coinage with not only ill-cut but uncentred dies, which means that the die seldom struck the blank exactly and much of the image and legend is lost, though in some cases an idea of what the original die contained can be built up from a number of surviving coins, some preserving features that are missing from others.

Coins of David are known with mint-signatures of Carlisle, Berwick, Roxburgh, Edinburgh, Perth, St. Andrews and Aberdeen. Curiously Stirling, one of David's Four Boroughs, is lacking, but this may be due to the accident of survival since it was only last year that a new coin revealed the existence of the St. Andrews mint as early as this. The moneyers' names are all continental Germanic; some may be Normans, but the Perth and St. Andrews moneyers can almost certainly be identified with Flemings of the same name known in their respective boroughs. It is not until the reign of Alexander III that the

network of mints becomes more extensive.

Thus the official entry of coinage to Scotland, but coins were known for many centuries before. Leaving aside the fairly plentiful discovery of coins of the Roman Empire, the Scottish coin-hoards of the Anglo-Saxon period have been ably summarised by R.B.K. Stevenson in the National Museum of Antiquities' volume of the *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles* (SCBI 6) and D.M. Metcalf in the *British Numismatic Journal* for 1960.

A few of these finds may indicate an extension of the English use of coinage into Scotland south of the Forth and Clyde. At Cockburnspath a considerable find of Æthelstan pence was made in the mid 19th century, and a large number of ninth-century Northumbrian coppers were found at Paisley in 1782. There are confused accounts of several finds from different sites in Jedburgh, and a scatter of Northumbrian coins came to light at different times on the Glenluce Sands in Wigtonshire. A very rare coin from the seventh century, existing now only as two gold shells, the remains of gold plating on a copper core was found in the lake-dwelling site Buston Crannog in Ayrshire. How it came there, when coins of this type, the forerunner of the English silver coinage, are so exceptionally rare even in England, is uncertain; one might suspect its function was decorative rather than economic but there is no trace of mounting as jewellery.

The majority of coin-hoards from the ninth to the eleventh centuries in Scotland, however, have nothing to do with an Anglian spread from the south. They come from the Northern and Western Isles and the adjacent seaboard and have all the characteristics of Viking hoards, that is, they are mixed hoards of Continental and Oriental as well as English coins, and also other pre-monetary currency of Scandinavia: ingots, silver rings and hacksilver.

From Orkney there are three finds. The earliest is from Skaill, containing one penny of Æthelstan from the Chester mint, one St. Peter penny of the York Vikings, nineteen dirhems from Bagdad and Samarkand, ingots and whole and broken silver jewellery. From about thirty years later, deposited c 980 the Burray find contained three English pennies, fragments of Cologne deniers and again silver

ornaments. In these finds the English element is small but Caldale contained three hundred pennies of Cnut's last issue from forty-two English mints. Shetland is rather poorer in finds, but the hoard variously described as Dunrossness, Fitful Head, Garthsbanks and Quendale may have been of significant size since its chronological spread is over eighty years though only six pennies have been preserved. A single penny of Æthelred was found at Jarlshof.

Three finds from the Moray Firth area are the only examples of mainland finds north of the Tay, with the single example of a lone Arabic dirhem from Monymusk Churchyard in Aberdeenshire. A small find from Tarbat, Ross-shire, date of deposit c. 960, contained a penny of Edgar, ten French deniers, two other unidentified coins and ornaments. Croy produced an earlier find, two pennies of the immediately pre-Alfredian period with ornaments, and a little further east, Burghead produced a single find of the earliest type of Alfred. For all their numerical insignificance, Croy is certainly a Viking-type hoard and together they point to Viking activity in the Moray Firth in the early Alfredian period. The tally of east coast finds is completed by Lindores near Newburgh in Fife which contained coins of Cnut of the 1020s in considerable numbers; it is possible that it also contained continental deniers though there are chronological discrepancies in the accounts.

In the West there is a large group of Viking finds, mostly from the islands but from Argyll southwards a few from adjacent mainland sites. From Lewis only a single find of a penny of Edgar is known, from the extreme north of the island at Galson. In North Uist 'a considerable number of Saxon coins' was found of which the only known survivor, an Æthelred penny of the 980s, was donated to the Society of Antiquaries' collection by Lord Macdonald in 1781. The Trotternish or Portree find from Skye (found near the Storr Rock) is a typical early hoard; from the first half of the tenth century, it contains pennies of Alfred's son and grandson Edward and Æthelstan and Edward's Archbishop of Canterbury Plegmund, St. Peter coins of York and Arabic dirhems, 110 coins in all, with rings and ingots. The Tiree find is larger and later: c. 500 coins of the later tenth century, perhaps with Normandy deniers but no uncoined silver. Inchkenneth off Mull contained over 100 pennies c. 970-1000 including one of

Sihtric the Viking ruler in Dublin, to my knowledge the only Hiberno-Norse coin to be found in Scotland. In 1950 near Iona Abbey 338 pennies from 924- c. 990 were found, including several of the Viking rulers of York, with gold and silver ornaments. Machrie in Islay produced another typical Viking find, almost 100 English and York Viking pennies, fragments of a Cologne denier, oriental coins and ingots. A find from Colonsay was perhaps deposited before the middle of the tenth century; three Northumbrian copper coins were found with various objects including a bronze balance, in a Viking burial. Another Viking burial at Kingscross Point on Arran contained a similar Northumbrian coin.

The coins from Port Glasgow are described only as 'a great number of old Saxon coins' but the presence of 'ornaments' suggests this too was a Viking hoard. From Kilmartin in Argyll came 'a few' but more precise details are lacking. A fragment of a tenth-century oriental coin found on the Stevenston Sands in Ayrshire is indicative of Viking activity. Finally, near the Solway Firth at Talnotrie six Northumbrian and four Mercian pennies with a denier of Louis the Pious, oriental fragments and ornaments was deposited in the third quarter of the ninth century.

To sum up: although the official coinage of Scotland was not introduced until the 1130s the Scandinavian islands and the adjacent seaboard were cognizant of the English penny in the tenth century. A few ninth-century silver pennies have been found on the Moray Firth and in the far south-west, and rather more widespread are the Northumbrian copper coins which were probably not known as pennies. No Anglo-Saxon finds after c. 1000 in the west and after 1035 are known in the East, or any English coins at all before the inception of the coinage by David I. This gap may be only apparent and may depend on the accident of discovery or even the faulty recording of finds; a fragment of an Edward the Confessor penny in the St. Andrews University archaeological museum' was reputedly – but without documentation – found at Tents Muir on the Eden estuary, whilst I have sometimes wondered if an unrecorded Scottish hoard may not account for the run of Edward the Confessor pennies from the middle to the end of the reign in Perth Museum, a hoard being the most likely explanation for the appearance of several coins of the same type

and in one case of two coins from the same dies in a wholly unrepresentative way in a small collection. Even if this were so, such a lost hoard would be unlikely to belong to the Viking pattern of the islands and their neighbouring coasts. The important question is then one which cannot be answered by numismatic evidence: how far is the content of the Viking hoards representative of any kind of money economy in the north and west? Did these coins have any part to play in the life of the islands, or are they the portable treasures of individual Viking seafarers, certainly acquired elsewhere, and perhaps for use elsewhere?

Postscript

It would probably be wrong to regard Whithorn, the site of St. Ninian's Candida Casa and a place of pilgrimage, as yielding a typical sample of how coinage was known and used in the Dark Ages in Scotland. Nevertheless, no survey of finds would be complete without some reference to the recent discoveries made in the excavations there in 1984 and 1986.

The 1984 season produced two coins which, except for the gold shells from Buston Crannog mentioned above, pre-date by at least half a century and perhaps by considerably more any other post-Roman coin-find in Scotland. One is a silver 'sceat' (probably a penny) of the mid-eighth century Northumbrian King Eadberht; the other more suprisingly, East Anglian, one of the curious partly runic coins, transitional in fabric between the earlier small, thick 'sceattas' and the broad denier-type pennies, issued shortly after the middle of the eighth century by a King Beonna.

More predictably Northumbrian ninth century coppers were present in both seasons' finds: 3 of King Eanred (c. 840?) and 1 of Æthelred II, his successor in the mid-ninth century, in the 1984 excavation and 10 of Eanred and 1 of Æthelred II in 1986. Also in the second season there came to light a penny of the Dublin colony of Norsemen c. 1035 (Dolley's Phase III, *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles* 8 pp. 130-1), interesting both by reason of its place of origin and also because of the rarity of eleventh century coins amongst Scottish finds. Future work at Whithorn will be eagerly awaited.

I am indebted to Mr. Richard Oram, St. Andrews, for this information.