

How to Kill Two Birds with One Stone

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Abstract: What at first was thought to be a previously unrecorded sceat, combining a primary phase Series B-related reverse muled with a secondary phase, bipedal animal reverse, was found near Royston, Hertfordshire in late 2022. Research revealed it to be closely related to an unlisted variety recorded in 1986.

Description



Fig. 1, the new variety, *SL22-40*, combining two reverses.

What at first was thought to be a previously unrecorded sceat, combining a primary phase Series B-related reverse muled with a secondary phase, bipedal animal reverse, was found near Royston, Hertfordshire in late 2022. It was posted by Gemma Collis to a Facebook specialist group for identification. Research revealed it to be closely related to an unlisted variety.

Obverse¹: A biped with a long snout, running right. The animal has a beaded outline, with a long, pointed ear above and a tail curling from mid-back. There are long claws beneath. Unusually for a secondary phase, Southumbrian sceat, the head is not looking back as is the convention.

Reverse: Related to Series BII. A bird with a long fantail and wide wing above, possibly a peacock, is standing on cross pattée with a small cross pommée before. There is a pellet-in-

¹ While primary phase should come before secondary, Blackburn and Bonser regarded (what is now recognised as) the 'animal' motif as the obverse, and I have followed this precedent as the arrangement in *Sceatta List* organises animals before birds.

annulet, asymmetrically, in each lower quarter, with three annulets in the left field and one to the right. Such a profusion of privy marks is indicative of a long series of dies.

Both borders are beaded, and the dies are off-centre. The surfaces appear silver-enriched with some slight delamination to the edges. The weight is unknown.

Images of the 2022 Royston find are courtesy of Gemma Collis, 2023.²

Discussion of the Sceat

It transpires that a badly worn specimen of a similar type was listed as item 3 of *Part 1, Finds from a Middle Anglian Site near Royston, Herts.* in Blackburn and Bonser ‘*Single Finds of Anglo-Saxon and Norman Coins – 3*’ in 1986 (fig. 2). They describe the find as follows:



“Series B ('bird on cross' type), imitation (derivative of Rigold Bii). Origin uncertain, c. 700-20?

Obv. uncertain design, a twisted bar surrounded by dots (body of an animal?); in a pelleted circle with traces of an inscription in outer border.

Rev. bird left on a cross, with two annulets and a small cross infield; in a pelleted circle with traces of an inscription in outer border.

3

Weight: 0.85g (13.1 gr.). Struck off-centre.

This is a crude light-weight imitation for which we have found no close parallels. The reverse is a copy of Rigold's variety BII laterally reversed (*cf. BNJ 30 (1960-61), pl. III, BII. 4-11*). The large design and inner circle almost filling the flan is typical of certain BII coins. The obverse is puzzling: one cannot discern the diademed head that should accompany this reverse. BII, a late phase of series B, was represented in the Aston Rowant hoard (dep. c. 710) and an imitation such as this is unlikely to be much later.”



Fig 2, the 1986 Royston specimen, Blackburn & Bonser 3.
Image courtesy of BNJ.

The 2022 Royston find differs from the 1986 report only in that the bird on the former is right facing. We can see clear precedents for the ‘reverse’ of the new Royston specimen in primary Series BII (fig. 3) where the bird has a cross pattée below its breast and there is a pellet-in-annulet either side of the limbs of the cross.



Fig. 3: Series BII; *Sceatta List 16-60* obverse; *SCBI 69, 67*; Spink 21060, lot 725.

² All other images are the author's unless otherwise indicated.

However, it is now clear that on the new specimen the bird is not the round-breasted bird of Series B, but a slender-necked bird with a considerable fantail, much more akin to the badge of Hamwic, the peacock, representing the incorruptibility of the flesh, beautifully displayed on the Series H reverse (fig. 4). Again, we have a cross pommée beneath the neck and a pellet-in-annulet in the field.



Fig. 4: Series H; *Sceatta List* 48-730 obverse; *SCBI* 69 364; Spink 21060, lot 881.

Precedence for the ‘obverse’ animal is harder to find. There are few secondary phase, Southumbrian sceats with a central bipedal animal motif where the beast is not backward-looking. Anna Gannon eloquently informs us that this posture is ‘a traditional position of the ancient animal representations in the art of the nomads of the Steppes (Fig. 4.57), and from them ultimately transmitted, via several mediators, to the Germanic repertoire. Apart from any religious/magical connotations, from the practical point of view of the die-cutter, the arrangement makes it easier for the animal to fit in a roundel.’

Fig. 5 shows examples of the animal defying this convention, whereas fig. 6 displays the motif as Gannon described it:



Fig. 5a: Series QIV, type 44; *Sceatta List* 66-30 obverse; *SCBI* 69 646; Spink 21000, lot 279.



Fig. 5b: Series M, type 45; *Sceatta List* 61-30 reverse; *SCBI* 69 561; Spink 21060, lot 925.



Fig. 6a: Series K, type 42a; *Sceatta List* 41-10 reverse, *SCBI* 69 435; Spink 21000, lot 192.



Fig. 6b: Series K related, type 15(or 17)/41 mule; *Sceatta List* 37-10 reverse, *SCBI* 69 -; Spink 21000, lot 176.

Figs. 3 to 6 exemplify little more than the ‘borrowing’ of motifs throughout the entire inter-related sceatta coinage. Yet perhaps Fig. 6b offers a little more in that it bears a direct resemblance to the Royston specimens under discussion. One can hear Michael Metcalf suggesting that it was cut by the same hand! Indeed, were the Royston animal’s head turned back, the result would not be dissimilar to the Fig. 6b coin, which itself is a mule of types 15(or 17)/41, with a standard bearer obverse.



Fig 7: edge view

Inevitably, the question of authenticity arises when a new variety appears. While the surface of the new Royston specimen exhibits a little silver enrichment, this is no longer thought to detract from the legitimacy of a coin, given the changes to surface chemistry on striking and during a long period in an active medium – the soil. Besides the surface shows no sign of casting and the edge view (fig. 7) eliminates this concern. A struck forgery in contemporary alloy is unlikely as the iconography has every appearance of a genuine eighth-century product. While the execution is convincing, one must remain sceptical until the coin has been forensically examined. In view of the endorsement of the 1986 specimen by such authorities as Mark Blackburn and Mike Bonser, the current judgment is that the 2022 Royston sceat is genuine.

Turning to the paradox of a mule combining primary- and secondary-related reverses, one can assume that the Series B motif is late in the primary phase, or a derivative die prepared later. Given that Series BII continued to the end of the primary (there are later derivatives) and that Series K starts early in the secondary, perhaps the gap is not too great to bridge. Dating of *c.* 710 to *c.* 720 is suggested.

We can now add two new varieties to *Sceatta List* – the 1986 Royston sceat with its left-facing bird as *SL37-13* and the 2022 specimen with the right facing bird as *SL37-16*. Also see the entry in *Sceatta List Additions* on my website at <https://www.anglo-saxon-coinage.co.uk/books/sceatta-list/sceatta-list-additions-from-march-2023/>

Discussion of the Site

Royston is at the strategically significant junction of two of the four most important Roman roads: the London-York Ermine Street and the Wiltshire-Norfolk (and beyond) Icknield Way.

In my thesis, in an attempt to compare the sceatta varieties found on productive sites, I analysed 124 sceats from Royston; all were Southumbrian (Table 1). Forty were Series K and L (K, 28; L, 12) and twenty-five from the Low Countries (Series D, 13; E, 12). Of the ten primary phase coins, 5 different series were represented though there was only one Series B

secat. Of the 33 secondary phase coins (other than Series K and L) fifteen different series were represented.

<u>Sceatta mix</u>	<u>Period</u>	<u>Series/type</u>	<u>Fishergate</u>	<u>Hamwic</u>	<u>Rendlesham</u>	<u>Heckington</u>	<u>Rovston</u>	<u>Sledmere</u>
			Sub-total	Sub-total	Sub-total	Sub-total	Sub-total	Sub-total
Pre-primary	3c	Pa			1			
	3c	Va	0	0	1	0	0	0
Primary	4a	Y		1	1			1
	4b	A			9	2		
	4b	BX			2			
	4b	B	1		18	4	1	2
	4b	C		1	12	6	4	
	4b	F			3	2	2	
	4b	Vernus					1	
	4b	Saraoldo				2		1
	4b	W		3		2		
	4b	Z					2	4
	4b	Athilized		1				3
	4b	?	1	5	1	45	18	10
Primary - Continental	4c	D	2	1	24	11	13	3
	4c	E	1	5	16	6	12	6
	4c	Stepped cross	3	6	40	17	5	30
Secondary - Continental	5c	E	7	11	10	18	9	12
	5c	G	2	1		3		21
	5c	Herstal			2			
	5c	X	9	9	21	1	13	2
Secondary - local	5b	H		48				
	5b	Y	7					13
	5b	R			6	6		
Secondary - other	5a	J	5	5		1		28
	5b	BIIA			1		3	1
	5b	K		2		2	28	1
	5b	L		2	2	1	12	
	5b	M		1			1	
	5b	N+		2	1	1	1	
	5b	O		2			3	3
	5b	Q			6	1	1	8
	5b	QR			3	1		
	5b	R	1	1			3	8
	5b	S					9	
	5b	T					3	
	5b	U		5	1		3	1
	5b	V		1			1	
	5b	?		2				
Secondary - exotic species	5b	Fleeing biped			1			
	5b	Animal mask					1	2
	5b	Celtic cross					1	
	5b	Hen			1			
	5b	Monitascorum					1	
	5b	Victory		1			1	1
	5b	Rosette						1
	5b	Saltire					1	2
	5b	Triquetra	1	1				
	5b	Woden		1	16	1	8	73
			27	107	122	66	124	125
<u>Sources:</u>			<u>Database 1</u>	<u>EMC</u>	<u>EMC</u>	<u>EMC</u>	<u>EMC</u>	<u>SiEMC 2</u>

Table 1: Comparison of Productive Sites

It may be worth quoting from the thesis, although the emphasis is on the economic significance of Fishergate:

“Given that the Hamwic excavation is many times larger than that at Fishergate, the volume of finds is not grossly disproportionate, but of more significance is the rich mix of coins at Hamwic, including several exotic species, in contrast to the limited number and diversity at

Fishergate. Indeed, the lack of variety at the latter contrasts with the abundant array of both the hinterland produce and incoming trade. Perhaps the causal factor is the motivation of the controlling authority. Fishergate may be oppressed by an austere, presumably ecclesiastical, authority with little interest in exploiting economic resources; there is no evidence of such restrictive behaviour at Hamwic, on the contrary, it is likely that a regal power wished to enhance its wealth by participating in broadly based domestic and Continental trade, though this should not be interpreted in terms of a substantivist York and formalist Hamwic - York's cultural strength grew from territorial affluence as much as transcendental conviction."

"Of the other prolific sites included in *Table [1]*, the array at Rendlesham with its distinctly early start for Anglo-Saxon activity, resembles that at Coddenham, and the conclusion, that this is an area far richer and more long-lived economically than Northumbria, is reinforced. Heckington is active in local and overseas trade throughout the gold and silver phases, and the mix is similar to that at Rendlesham except that Heckington does not have its own local coinage and lacks those of Hamwic, Ipswich and York. Heckington is more diverse than Fishergate throughout; and in the Primary phase more diverse than Hamwic, but less so later. Royston had wide domestic and overseas trading relationships but an absence of local control, *i.e.*, there is little recycling, probably because there is no specific emission associated with this area. There is no clear export product at Fishergate comparable with the pottery export of Ipswich. Each of these prolific southern sites can be assumed to have had an economic purpose and the contrast with Fishergate is stark."

Whilst these statistics date from 2016, there is little since to alter the pattern. The new Royston find corroborates what is already understood: this site, located at a strategic junction, has a wide variety of incoming sceats but no sign of these being recycled into a local currency.

References

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