

A Fourth Specimen of the Putative Coinage of Willibrord

Tony Abramson and Ype de Jong

Abstract: An additional find of a rare sceat helps to establish the chronology of the evolving reverse dies.

As noted in *SiEMC* 1, Blackburn & Bonser's 1987 short *BNJ* note defining the four subgroups of Metcalf's variety G (1966), can arguably be extended to a fifth subgroup, G5, by the addition of a curious variety, *Sceatta List* 89-50 (figures 2-4b). G1-5 are very likely to be successive products of a single mint in the Lower Rhineland region.

G5 has a sole obverse clearly late in this series, being essentially the same as G4 (figure 1, right), which introduces a brief, undeciphered legend on the obverse reading **XAZA**.¹ G5 has a reverse of a beaded standard, which Wim de Wit has described as possibly enclosing a crosier. The offer of a new specimen on eBay, in June 2023 (figure 3), brings the corpus of G5 to four. These exhibit an evolving marginal legend possibly commencing **VVILI**...²

While the attribution of this extremely rare G5 subgroup to the Northumbrian emissary Willibrord (658-739) is speculative, due to the incomplete rendition of the inscription, he does have the propinquity to be the initiator of this variant. The general style of this Low Countries issue belongs to the late primary phase, placing it in the right place and time - and duration - for it to be associated with the long-lived Willibrord, a tantalising prospect. Moreover, his attribute is the crosier.

For the purposes of this brief note, Blackburn & Bonser's graphic representation of subgroups G1-G4 suffices to illustrate the sequence (figure 1):

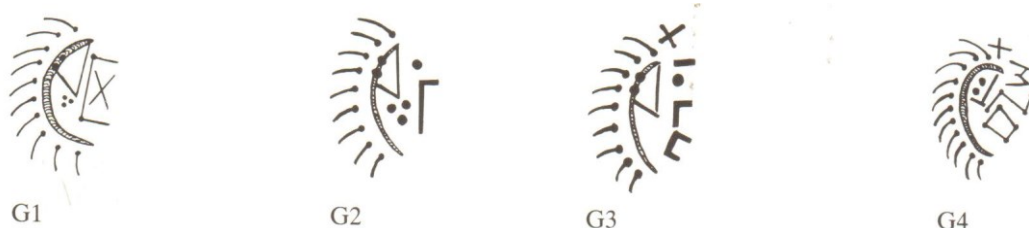


Fig. 1: figure of subgroups G1-G4 extracted from Blackburn and Bonser, 1987, p. 100

The specimens in figures 2, 4a and 4b below, are included in Wybrand Op den Velde and Michael Metcalf's remarkable *tour de force* of Series E in the 2009–10 *Jaarboeken* 96–97.³ Their text acknowledges the suggestion of adding subgroup G5.

¹ Two specimens of G4 with the conventional reverse die shared the same obverse die as the coins presented in this note, see *Jaarboek* 97, 2010, nos. 0553 and 0554. The only continental find is 0553 (Vechten, near Utrecht). Nos. 0554-0557, the present example, and three G4/5 varieties in *Jaarboek* 97 (which were not illustrated), were all found in England. Interestingly, 0553 is the only specimen with the common variety G reverse.

² *Sceatta List* 26-50, part of the **C ARIP** group that the author associated with Canterbury, reads **+VIL**. *Sceatta List* 94-30, part of Series E, variety A, from the Low Countries, reads **V.V...I**.

³ At nos. 0555-0557, p. 316 and pl. 18, p. 427.

Inserting the new specimen into this sequence at figure 3, increasing infill of the sole obverse die can be observed. The die in figure 2 is clean whereas at figure 3, there is filling at the ‘eyebrow’ and in both **As** of the **XAZA** (clockwise) legend. In figure 4a, this extends to fill the gap between **Z** and the ‘nose’ and the crescents above the head. The fragment at Figure 4b, is a worn specimen of the same dies as figure 4a. Enlargements of the infill are shown in figure 5a-c. This progression allows us to sequence the reverse dies chronologically according to the aging obverse die. Interestingly, none of the three different reverse dies show die fill or wear.

However, the reverses in figures 2 to 4 differ in the orientation of the lettering and the content of the central compartment, though clearly closely related. Both the increasing obverse die infill and the evolution of the reverses are indicative of a substantial coinage of some longevity, as would be appropriate for the tenure of Willibrord.

Jaarboek 96 (p. 115) notes that G4 has a die ratio of 1:3 with the majority of finds in England.⁴ G5 does not disturb this pattern.

Subsequent to the original submission of this note, it was revealed to the buyer that the new specimen was found at Hayton which is two miles to the south-east of Pocklington. This is a productive site dominated by coins of the Low Countries and including some eclectic sceats.⁵

G4 is absent from the Aston Rowant hoard confirming the status of the coin as late primary, dating from *c.* 710 to *c.* 715, for the purpose of trade with England. The ex-Abramson specimens at Figures 2 and 4 both weigh 1.10g, which is consistent with the decline in average weight recorded for G4 compared to G1-3.



Fig. 2: J0555, Littlestoke (Ox) Spink 21060, lot 948, SL89-50, SCBI69 216, CR2006.95 EMC 2005.0270⁶

Michael Metcalf had written in *Thrymsas and Sceattas in the Ashmolean Museum*, p. 223, ‘Any idea that one could, by prolonged effort, resolve the detailed information into a tidy scheme of classification is almost certainly illusory.’

⁴ The sources of the 73 finds of G3 recorded in *Jaarboek* 97 are: England 56, Netherlands 9, France 6 and unknown 2. The sources for the 28 specimens of G4 are: England 25, France 3.

Reverse die estimates for G1-3 amount to 207 and for G4 to 62, with output per die assumed to be 10,000.

⁵ BAR 641, p. 127, figures 92-3, dataset 17 and plates 8-9.

⁶ TA: this metal-detector find was acquired from Barry Knight in September 2005. It was a replacement for an inexpensive eBay purchase - what appeared to be a lead trial piece of a sceat of Aldfrith of Northumbria - that the seller sent to the correct house number and street name but with a post code in Beeston, Leeds. I attempted to recover the coin on 7th July 2005 only to find the area crawling with police on the trail of the London bombers.



Fig. 3: SL89-50, eBay 266285539884, June 2023, advised by Alex Bliss



Fig. 4a: J0556, Aylesbury (Bu), Spink 21000, lot 327, SL89-50, SCBI69 215, CR2006-94. EMC2005.0253⁷



Fig. 4b: J0557, Colchester (Es) SL89-50 E variety G5, *Studies in Early Medieval Coinage* 1, p. 35
(Image courtesy of Gosse Hovinga)



Fig. 5a-c: progressive infill of G5 obverse

His father placed Willibrord at the Abbey of Ripon under the auspices of the influential Wilfrid. As a Benedictine, Willibrord spent his twenties at the Abbey of Rath Melsigi in County Carlow, Ireland, a centre of learning. Alcuin dubbed Willibrord ‘a Saxon of the Northumbrians’. He became ‘the apostle of the Frisians’ when Ecgberht of Ripon sent him and eleven companions, at the request of Pepin of Herstal, Austrasian mayor of the Palace, to the Frisian coast to convert pagans.

⁷ TA: this metal-detector find was bought, shortly before the previous acquisition, from Tony Woodley, on the recommendation of Michael Metcalf, who referred to the curious ‘spiral’ reverse, in February 2005.

According to Bede, Willibrord first visited Rome specifically in the role of missionary to the Frisians, not as a pilgrim. On his second visit in 695, Willibrord was awarded the pallium by Pope Sergius I, who consecrated him first Bishop of Utrecht. With the support of Pepin's mother-in-law, Irmina, Willibrord established the Abbey of Echternach.

Soon after Pepin's death in 714, the pagan Radbod recaptured Frisia. Willibrord fled, returning on Radbod's death in 719, to resume his work under the protection of Charles Martel. Willibrord was joined by Winfrid (Boniface), for three years. It is more plausible that minting took place under Charles Martel than in the preceding chaos. This would make production contemporaneous with Series X at Ribe, where the clear stratification of the post office site has resulted in a reliable chronology. Willibrord enjoyed great longevity, dying aged 81, in 739, after 45 years at Echternach. He was soon venerated as a saint.

Regrettably, we are as yet unable to make better sense of the inscriptions and await further specimens to surface. Until then, we must continue to heed Metcalf's warning to avoid 'the cloud-cuckoo-land of happy speculation'⁸

References

Abramson, T. (ed.), 2008, Some New Types in *Two Decades of Discovery, Studies in Early Medieval Coinage*, vol. 1, p. 34-5.

Abramson, T. 2018a: 'Coinage in the Northumbrian Landscape and economy, c. 575 - c.867', BAR British Series 641 (British Archaeological Reports, Oxford).

Abramson, T., 2018b, The Abramson Collection: Coins of Early Anglo-Saxon England and the North Sea Area. *Sylloge of the Coins of the British Isles*, volume 69. London: Spink.

Abramson, T., 2021, *Sceatta List*, third edition. Spink, London.

Bede, 1969, *An Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Edited and Translated by Colgrave, B., and Mynors, R. A. B. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Blackburn, M. A. S., and M. Bonser, 1987, The 'Porcupine' Sceattas of Metcalf's Variety G', *British Numismatic Journal* volume 57, pages 99-103.

Metcalf, D. M., 1966, 'A Stylistic Analysis of "Porcupine" Sceattas', *Numismatic Chronicle*, 7th series, 6, pp. 179-205.

Metcalf, D. M., 1993-4, *Thrymsas and Sceattas in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford*, Royal Numismatic Society Special Publication 276, 3 vols. (London).

Op den Velde, W., and Metcalf, D. M., 2009-10, 'The Monetary Economy of the Netherlands, c.690-c.760 and the Trade with England: A Study of the "Porcupine" Sceattas of Series E', *Jaarboek voor Munt- en Penningkunde*, 96-97, 0555-0557, pgs. 316 & 427.



⁸ Metcalf 1993-4, p. 225.