

An Early Norman Period 'Productive site' in Norfolk.

By Mike Cuddeford

Early medieval so-called 'productive sites' that produce unusually large numbers of single coin finds are well known and are presumed to represent locations where extensive trading took place, and a number of these locations have been studied and published (e.g. Pestell & Ulmschneider 2003). The majority of coins recovered from such sites date from the 7th to 9th centuries, with 'sceattas' predominating. In England, it is highly unusual for single broad flan pennies to be prolific on any site until the 12th century and later.

However, between 2014 and 2021, seven coins of the first three Anglo-Norman monarchs were recovered as single finds in a field some 10 kilometres from Fakenham in Norfolk. The first two, both William I Type 2, were declared Treasure. These were later followed by two further fragmentary coins, both William II Type 1 and these two were also declared Treasure. It was considered unlikely that the two groups could be related on account of the date range, which does not accord with the fairly close issue periods which prevailed at the time. In 2019 a fragmentary William I Type 6 penny was found, to be followed in 2021 by two further Norman period coins, A William I Type 5 and a Henry I Type 3. The two William I coins were declared as a separate Treasure group, the Henry I being excluded. This note examines the circumstances of the finds and their possible interpretation.

The Location

The field in which the coins were found is immediately adjacent to a road which was of pre-Conquest origin and the main east - west route across Norfolk until the 17th century. A lane flanking the site is thought to be a Roman road. The site has produced a substantial scatter of Roman period coins and other small finds, as well as several kilogrammes of Romano-British pottery, some tegula roof tile fragments and a comb-patterned probable flue tile fragment. This suggests a small 'villa' type structure once stood there. With the exception of a single abraded Thetford Ware sherd, a cut halfpenny of Stephen and a 'Tealby' penny of Henry II, all other post-Roman finds have been from the late 12th century onwards.

Another possibly relevant detail is that the location is only two kilometres along the road from a Norman castle, which was constructed in around 1100 and comprised a motte with a stone keep, two baileys and a further embanked enclosure just across the main road from the castle. The positioning of the castle astride the road is thought to have been connected with raising revenue from a possible market and also with tolls on travellers. It is probable that the castle fell out of use by about 1300.

Interpretation

The problem posed by the Norman coins is what do they represent? There are several possible explanations for their presence which are (1) They all formed part of a single dispersed group (2) They represent several small dispersed groups (3) They were votive offerings (4) They represent single site losses (5) They represent at least one small dispersed group plus single site losses. To consider each in turn, it is highly improbable that the coins ever formed a single dispersed group, which would be

contrary to all other known hoards of the period. Even before the finding of the Henry I Type 3, a single group was highly unlikely and with it even more so (e.g. Allen 2014, Appendix). That the coins derived from three separate 'mini hoards' would also be statistically highly unlikely and unprecedented even in a major urban setting, let alone a small rural one. Although votive activity in association with a ruined Roman structure is not unparalleled (Andrews 2019, 192), the date-limited range of the coins makes this highly unlikely. If the coins were single site losses or one small dispersed group plus single site losses, it would imply an unusual level of activity on the site over a period of around 35 to 40 years, being the probable date range from the earliest to latest coin. The finding of the Henry I Type 3 was perhaps the one thing that does make single site loss the most plausible explanation, but what was going on? The answer may be the proximity of the castle - the date of its construction cannot be ascertained precisely and so some sort of activity from the last quarter of the 11th century would be quite possible. The Roman remains on the site would be an obvious source of building material for the castle, which may have been built in phases, and so there may have been intermittent robbing out of the Roman site over a period. Given that the castle also had a possible market and that the coin find site is easily accessible, it is possible that some ancillary commercial activity also took place there, perhaps livestock trading, which might explain the apparent lack of any other contemporary artefact other than coins.

In respect of dispersal, comparison might be drawn from other finds, such as 2020 T83, a scattered late Roman silver coin hoard published on the BNS Blog (Cuddeford 2020). Here it can be seen that whilst most of the coins remain fairly nucleated, a few were found over 100 metres apart. It should also be noted that 2020 T83 comprised over 400 coins but that even more search time had been invested at the site under discussion (covering a nine-year period), resulting in over 300 Roman coins. This might suggest that by comparison, the Norman coins were few in the first place. It should also be noted that no Roman coins were found as far away as the W1:5 by a good 50 metres, which suggests it was a single loss, albeit connected to activity on the site during the relevant period. The distance between it and the William I Type 6, with the clearly unrelated Henry I Type 3 in between, further strongly suggests non-association. Apart from the two William I Type 2s, there is no evidence of any nucleation of any of the other coins. It might also be noted that the distribution of the coins lies within the boundaries of a then much smaller long and narrow field illustrated on early Ordnance Survey maps and which was amalgamated into the modern large field in more recent times. If this pre-dated the Enclosures it might also indicate an area in which some sort of activity took place in the Norman period. This field has been extensively metal detected east to west as well as north to south and so this narrow vertical alignment is an accurate reflection of distribution, and not limited by any search bias. One further note is that there is a William II Type I cut farthing on the EMC database recorded as coming from the same parish, although probably not from this field. There was also a fragmentary William II Type 1 found just under two kilometres away and adjacent to the same road. This would seem to indicate a surprisingly high level of commercial activity in the area within a very narrow time frame.

Conclusions

Taking all the above into account, the notion of three 'mini-hoards' is as improbable as a single multi-period hoard. The only possible conclusion must be that the coins

represent single losses with perhaps a small 'purse drop' included, but that overall the site would seem to be a most unusual Norman-period 'productive site' associated with construction and/or trading activity during a very specific period of time. The precise location of the site is recorded on the Norfolk Historic Environment Record.

References

- Andrews, M. 2019: *Coin hoarding in medieval England and Wales, c.973-1544. Behaviours, motivations, and mentalitiés*. BAR British Series 651 (Oxford).
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- Cuddeford, M.J. 2020: *The Spatial Distribution of Coins Within the Ploughzone Horizon* <https://britnumsoc.blog>
- Pestell, T and Ulmschneider, K. 2003: Markets in Early Medieval Europe. Trading and 'Productive' Sites, 650 - 850. (Bollington)

SF No.	Description	Date from	Date to	Ref	Wt.	Dia	Axis
0001	William I AR Cut halfpenny Type 2 Norwich GODEFV[RTHONN-]	1068	1070	N842	0.63	18.9	180
0002	William I AR Penny Type 2 Canterbury MANNAONCAN	1068	1070	N842	1.29	20.3	180
0003	William II AR Penny Type 1 (fragment) [-]	1086	1089	N851	0.59	18.3	-
0004	William II AR Penny Type 1 (fragment) [-]NL[-]	1086	1089	N851	0.51	17.3	-
0005	William I AR Penny Type 6 (fragment) [-]GRI[-]	1077	1080	N846	0.23	-	
0006	William I AR Penny Type 5 London GODPINEONLVN	1074	1077	N845	1.13	18.7	260
0007	Henry I AR Penny Type 3 London E[DPI]NEONLVND	1103	1103	N859	1.29	16.2	290



The coins



Distribution of coins to within 10m²