



Clover king or clover queen?

The story of three rare gold trefoil staters and a unique bronze trefoil horse mount

Queen Boudica (left) ruled in Norfolk, Queen Cartimandua in Yorkshire. Did a queen briefly rule in north Lincolnshire?



This unusual trefoil coin and unique trefoil mount, both made around the same time, were found within 40 miles of each other in the same tribal territory. Were they made for the same tribal ruler?



Found at South Ferriby, N.Lincs., in 1906, sold for £18 in 1917 and £5500 in 1992.



Found near Kirmington, N.Lincs., in 2000 and sold for £3200 by Chris Rudd.

On 17 March this year I paid £9600 for a gold stater struck two-thousand years ago by the Corieltavi, a tribe based mainly in Lincolnshire. Their name means 'army of the broad land' or 'army of many rivers'. I bought the coin for a private collector – the same collector who last year paid £12,650 for a Corieltavian gold stater of Cartivellaunos. Ancient British coins don't normally cost this much. But both of these are very special. I'll tell you about the one I got this year. It's called the trefoil type. It displays a unique floral motif – a central flower with three oval leaves – and it's exceedingly rare. Only two other examples are known.

The first trefoil type gold stater was found over a hundred years ago. It came from the famous South Ferriby hoard of 1906, when 65 gold staters and 45 silver coins were washed out of the south bank of the river Humber, which the Corieltavi called *Abos* 'river'. This trefoil stater has been in some well known collections – Roth, Lockett, Norweb – and is currently owned by the distinguished American numismatist Robert Van Arsdell, author of *Celtic Coinage of Britain* (Spink 1989). Bernard Roth believed it could be a pattern piece, on account of the obverse being so well designed, so original and so different from any other British or Gaulish coins.

The second trefoil gold stater was found near Kirmington in 2000, less than ten miles away from the first. The late Dr Jeffrey May of Nottingham University wrote: "At last, another Corieltavian trefoil stater! Known from a single example said to have come from the great South Ferriby hoard of 1906, the trefoil stater became the Holy Grail of collectors of this series. Another example appeared in Seaby's in 1981, but was pronounced a modern forgery. The present specimen is therefore the first convincing example to appear for

nearly a century. The issue was presumably short-lived and limited. Will we have to wait another hundred years for the next one to turn up?"

No, we didn't have to wait that long. The third trefoil gold stater – the one I bought recently – was discovered only two years later in December 2002. It came from a small iron age site near Market Rasen, north of Lincoln, which the Corieltavi called *Lindo* 'lake river'. The fact that all three trefoil gold staters have been found in north Lincolnshire suggests that they were issued by a king (or queen) who ruled in the northern half of Corieltavia. When? The trefoil type was apparently struck towards the end of the South Ferriby series of gold staters, which Van Arsdell dates to about 45-10 BC. So my tentative date for the trefoil gold staters would be within a decade of the birth of Christ, circa 10 BC/AD.



Found near Market Rasen, N.Lincs., in 2002 and sold by DNW in 2009 for £9600.

The ruler who commissioned the distinctive floral design of trefoil gold staters was an innovator. Throughout the previous half century all Corieltavian gold staters – there were dozens of different types, sub-types and varieties – all showed an abstract head of Apollo on the obverse which went through many subtle changes, but which remained basically the same motif for fifty or so years (Dr John Creighton of Reading University calls this process of gradual change 'serial imagery'). When the familiar and hallowed male head of Apollo was suddenly changed for a flower the elite of north Lincs must have been shocked. It would be like the Royal Mint replacing the head of Queen Elizabeth II (on British coins

since 1953) with the three-pointed star of Mercedes cars; even though Her Majesty is of German origin, most folk would be startled – as startled as if the 45,000 nudist followers of *Freikörperkultur* went skinny-dipping at Skegness.

It isn't easy to say which species of wild flower, if any, may be represented on trefoil gold staters, because the design is possibly too stylised to permit a positive identification. Indeed it may be an entirely symbolic fantasy flower dreamed up by the engraver, but this seems unlikely to me. Ancient British die cutters were acute observers of their local flora and fauna and often incorporated plants and creatures in their coin designs with surprising accuracy. I asked Dr Kevin Leahy for his advice. Nobody knows the archaeology of Lincolnshire like Kevin does and his wife is a botanist. He says: "This is a tricky one as the flower is so highly stylised as to make identification difficult. My wife can't think of any flowers that have only three petals laid out in a regular design like this. However, if they are leaves, not petals, the three leaves could represent any of several families that have three leaflets making up their leaves. The clover family are the most common, but while the clover is indigenous I don't know when any particular family appeared. While this might represent a clover, clover leaves are less ribbed than are shown on this coin." Despite Kevin's commendable caution, I feel confident that the trefoil stater portrays a clover flower (*Trifolium pratense* perhaps?) with the three lobes of its leaf spread out symmetrically to achieve a better balanced design which, as a former creative director, I consider to be legitimate artistic licence. Likewise I'm not overly concerned that the engraver has emphasised the ribbing of the leaf lobes. A much simpler trefoil symbol occurs on many



The trefoil motif broke a tradition of Apollo-head designs which had lasted half a century.

ancient British coins and is by no means exclusively associated with the Corieltavi.

However, it may be significant that a unique 'horse brass', acquired last year by the British Museum, also displays a floral trefoil design, not dissimilar to the trefoil gold staters, and was also found in the land of the Corieltavi. Made of tinned bronze and exquisitely decorated with bright red 'enamel' and incised cross-hatching, this late iron age harness mount has a central trefoil symbol which is encircled by six semicircular 'petals'. Jody Joy, curator, department of prehistory and Europe, dates it to the mid first century BC/AD and says: "This is an exceptional example of its type. It skilfully combines two major decorative techniques used in later iron age art – coloured glass and inscribed decoration – into one piece. There are only a small number of other mounts, with glass inlays, that are also inscribed with cross-hatched decorative motifs in the 'mirror-style'. There is no mount of comparable form in the British Museum's collections. Its exact form could be unique as I can find no other parallels in collections elsewhere. Although the manufacture and decoration are iron age in cultural origin, the form of the mount is circular, which is more reminiscent of Roman period mounts. We cannot assume that it was owned by a man; although this likely, there are chariot burials from East Yorkshire containing women." The mount was unearthed by a metal detectorist a few years ago at Farnsfield, Nottinghamshire.

When we consider that no similar trefoil 'horse brass' has reportedly been found anywhere else in Europe, that no similar trefoil gold staters have been found anywhere else in Europe, and that both the trefoil 'horse brass' and the trefoil gold staters were made during the same period (late iron age), apparently in approximately the same part of the East Midlands and presumably by the same tribe, we may



Bronze horse mount, 7.4cm, found at Farnsfield, Notts. "We cannot assume that it was owned by a man," says the British Museum.

reasonably wonder if there could be some connection between them. In fact, dare we speculate that the trefoil 'horse brass' was specially made for the same king (or queen) who issued the trefoil gold staters? It may be implausible, but it is not impossible.

Why would a ruler of the Corieltavi suddenly decide to break with a long and well entrenched tradition, abandon the conservatively masculine head of Apollo (albeit unrecognisable as such) on gold staters and replace the head with a floral motif – specifically with a clover flower?



Addedomaros of the Catuvellauni set the trend in floral motifs (a, b) followed later by the Icenii (c, d, e). Note the trefoil (c).

Like Barack Obama, he (or she) clearly wished to make a strong statement of change. Could it be because a new ruler in north Lincolnshire, perhaps based at Dragonby, was a woman? A floral symbol would seem more fitting for a queen than a king; in Irish legend clover is associated with Ceridwen. Or could it be that the ruler was a druid? Philip and Stephanie Carr-Gomm say: "Clover has acted as a magical plant for centuries throughout Ireland, Britain and continental Europe. Some



Clover probably inspired the floral motif on trefoil gold staters.

scholars believe that the popular motif in Celtic art, the 'triskele' is a stylised representation of the trefoil – the three-lobed Clover leaf. To Druids it represents one of their most important symbols – the three bars of light that symbolise the solstice and equinox sunrise points and the three branches of their learning: Bard, Ovate and Druid."

Or could it be that the clover on these rare gold coins was a graphic reference to the ruler's name or part of his (or her) name? Such pictorial word-play was sometimes used by Roman Republican



The Gaulish word for clover, visumaros, means 'great knowledge', which may be why clover is associated with druids. Prof. Miranda Aldhouse-Green says 'three' was the most sacred number to the Celts.



The trefoil on this stone head could be clover. 31cm, Heidelberg, Germany, 5th/4th cent. BC.

moneyers and also occasionally, I think, by iron age tribal rulers; for example, the dog on coins of Cunobelin 'the bound of Belinus.' The ancient Gaulish word for clover was visumaros 'great knowledge', cognate with English 'wise' and 'wisdom'. Maybe the ruler's name was Visumaros or Visurix 'king of wisdom'? We will probably never know. For their help with this article I thank Dr Kevin Leahy, Jody Joy, Michael O'Bea, DNW, Jane Bottomley, Elizabeth Cottam and Carol Rudd.



Sold by DNW for £12,650 in 2008 to the collector who now has the £9600 trefoil stater, also from DNW.

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