

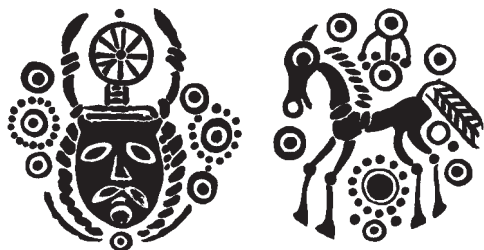
Horned god or druid priest?

CHRIS RUDD

Early in 1982, or earlier, a silver coin with a horned facing head was found near Petersfield, Hampshire, and was acquired by the National Museum of Wales. Since then three more have been found, all from the same dies, all from West Sussex. Having bought one recently, I feel prompted to ask: who made them? and whose head is it?



1. Petersfield Cernunnos silver unit (SCMB 769, 1982), National Museum of Wales. Only three others known (see this list, no.17).



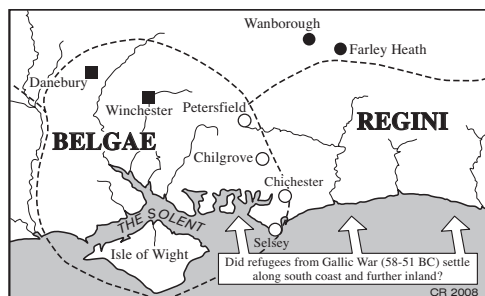
2. Die reconstruction of Petersfield Cernunnos showing long plaited hair and antlered headdress with solar wheel.

The Petersfield type is one of over fifty uninscribed silver coin types which have been found in and around the Solent area and its hinterland. I've previously tried to ascribe these fifty very diverse types to the Belgae of Hampshire and the Regini of Sussex with varying degrees of unsuccess.¹ The Petersfield type is particularly hard to pin down because three of the four known specimens come from what I consider to be the tribal borderland of the Belgae and Regini. However, these fifty or so coin types have three features in common: they are all minor issues, they are all highly localised and they are all of brief duration, apparently struck sometime between c.50 BC and c.30 BC at the latest.² No other part of Britain has produced such a disparate and seemingly disconnected ragbag of early silver coins.³ Having struggled to make sense of them tribally, and failed, I now conclude that they are *not* tribal coins issued by tribal kings. So what are they? I think that they may mostly be the commercial coins of many different individuals – wealthy individuals – who fled from northern Gaul during the Gallic War, who settled in and around the Solent – up the Test to Danebury, up the Itchen to Winchester – and who relaunched their lives, their businesses and their trading relationships on the British side of the Channel.⁴ In

other words, these fifty silver coin types of the Solent region, including the Petersfield type, may mostly have been minted by war migrants – Gallic War migrants, political refugees and their families – who located to the south coast and were probably welcomed by the indigenous Belgae of Hampshire and Regini of Sussex. Dr John Sills, who sparked this idea, will add more solid fuel to it in May.

Like the Selsey Diadem (VA 78) and Sussex Thunderbolt (VA 143) gold quarter staters, the Chichester Thin Silvers (VA 1280) and the Chichester Cock bronzes (BMC 657-659), the Petersfield silver unit (SCMB 769, 1982, fig. 1) was possibly inspired by prototypes in northern Gaul – specifically by the facing-head bronzes of the Ambiani and especially by DT 400 and DT 402. Which brings me to my second question: whose head is it? In 1982 George Boon argued that the antlered head was that of Cernunnos, the horned god of Gaul and Britain.⁵ I think he was right. He also suggested that the head might be of “a priest and not the god himself.” Again I think he was right. In 1985-86 five priestly headdresses were excavated at the Romano-British temple at Wanborough, Surrey; three of them had a spoked wheel on top, like the wheel on the Petersfield coin.⁶

Julius Caesar says: “The druidic doctrine is believed to have been found existing in Britain and thence imported into Gaul; even today those who want to make a profound study of it generally go to Britain for the purpose.”⁷ Is the Petersfield type a druidic coin? I think so. Indeed, it may originally have been made for mainly votive purposes. Moreover, the man who minted it may perhaps have been a druid himself – a rich Gallic druid of noble birth who studied druidism in Britain as a young man and who later returned to Britain, as a high priest of Cernunnos, to escape the religious persecution of Julius Caesar.⁸



3. Silver ‘Cernunnos’ coins with antler-and-wheel headdress have been found near Petersfield, Chilgrove, Chichester and Selsey. Five priestly headdresses, including three with solar wheel, found at Wanborough. Another at Farley Heath.



4. The antler-and-wheel headdress on this silver unit (Evans N2, Mack 86, BMC 579) is like the one on the Petersfield Cernunnos type.



5. Chichester Cernunnos silver unit (CCI 99.1271) with a boar between antlers and spiral sun above the horse which has same tail as Petersfield type.



DT 400

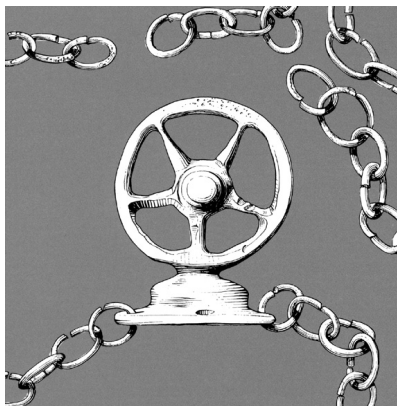


DT 401

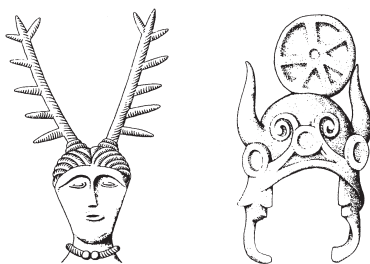


DT 402

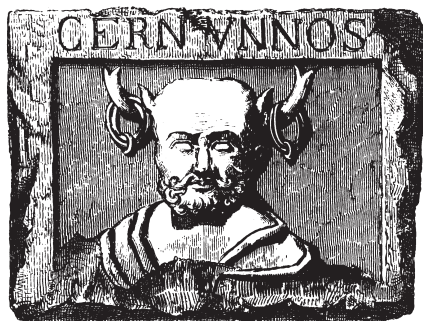
6. Bronze coins of Ambiani (c.60-30 BC) which may have inspired antlered facing head of Petersfield type. Note long plaited hair on DT 402. Did druid priests wear their hair like this?



7. One of five chain-type headdresses excavated at Wanborough Romano-British temple, Surrey, 1985-86.



8. Antlered head from Gundestrup Cauldron and horned helmet with solar wheel, detail from Arc d'Orange.



9. Sculptured block from Pillar of Paris Watermen, erected c.AD 17 and excavated from choir of Notre Dame, Paris, 1711, now in Musée Cluny. Note rings on antlers, like Petersfield Cernunnos coin.



10. Romans butchering British druids on Anglesey c.AD 60. Caesar's treatment of druid dissidents in Gaul was possibly as brutal.

Notes and references

1. Chris Rudd, *The Belgae and Regini, Celtic Coinage: New Discoveries, New Discussion*, ed. Philip de Jersey, BAR 2006, 145-181. I'm still convinced that the Belgae and Regini (or whatever these two groups were called before the Roman conquest) both issued unscripted tribal coinages in gold and silver, such as Chute (VA 1205) and Cheriton (VA 1215) gold staters; Sussex Thunderbolt (VA 143), Petersfield Wreath Face (BMC 568-70), Phallic Geometric (VA 1227) and Willett's Nipple (VA 1229) gold quarter staters; and Danebury Corded (VA 292), Danebury Ex Type (BMC 614-28), Clanfield Anemone (VA 1662) and Sussex Lyre (BMC 635) silver coins. It is the rarest gold quarters and rarest silver units and half units – types where only two or three examples are recorded – that I feel uncertain about. There are simply too many little pockets of these excessively rare types, dotted throughout Hampshire and West Sussex, for them to be plausibly catalogued as centrally struck, tribal coins of tribal rulers. Some of them could well be regal issues, but not *all* of them. Their localised distribution and diversity of design remind me of 17th and 18th century trade tokens.

2. By around 30 BC the Belgae seem to have declined as an independent political group and been completely eclipsed by the Regini and the Atrebatas. By then there were certainly no more small decentralised issues of coins in the Solent area – not in Hampshire nor in West Sussex, as there had previously been. The obvious explanation for this is the expansion of the Commian dynasty at Chichester and at Silchester.

3. We can see the influence of the Ambiani in several early unscripted coins of Essex and East Anglia – the Two Boars bronze (BMC 402) and Bury Diadem silver (VA 80), for example – and we might infer that some Gallic War migrants came to eastern Britain. They probably did, but they didn't have anything like the same impact as they apparently did on the south-coast coinage of the Solent area, probably because the rulers of the Trinovantes and Iceni were much stronger at that time and more centrally organised than their Solent counterparts, and therefore less swayed by an influx of refugees.

4. Caesar's conquest of Gaul was harsh by any standards, with hundreds of thousands slaughtered, hundreds of thousands enslaved and hundreds of thousands impoverished. Many rich families in northern Gaul, who resented the rapacity of Rome, must have abandoned their farms, sold their cattle at cut price, packed up their portable wealth and taken a cross-Channel ferry to freedom, especially those families with blood ties and trade links in southern Britain. In those days the 'French' spoke the same language as the Brits and boatloads of Gallic gold and Gallic silver will have said "*Bienvenue en Bretagne!*" For hundreds of years Britain has benefited greatly from wave after wave of political, religious and economic refugees. The Walloons gave us weavers. The Huguenots gave us textiles and paper-mills. The Dutch gave us dykes. The Irish gave us railways. The Chinese gave us takeaways. The Italians gave us ice cream. The Germans gave us our *Messiah* (by Handel), our *Titanic* (by Harland & Wolfe) and our present Royal Family (by marriage). The Jews gave us banks, money lenders, Marks & Spencer and Tesco. The Hungarians gave us billions of ballpoints (by Lajos Biro) and some of Britain's best films (by Alexander Korda, Emeric Pressburger, Joseph Losey and Karel Reisz). The Indians gave us doctors. The Jamaicans gave us nurses, ganja and Jimi Hendrix. The Poles gave us 14,000

airmen in World War II (we wouldn't have won the Battle of Britain without them); today Poles are giving us cheaper builders and plumbers. So what did those Gallic War émigrés give us 2,000 years ago? More than we bargained for. For example, the Atrebatas of the Arras region (medieval Artois) gave us Caesar's former war-mate, King Commios, who gave us Britain's first branded coins, King Tincomarus, King Eppillus and King Verica who, somewhat ironically, gave us the Claudian invasion of AD 43 and 400 years of Roman domination, plus our first black faces.

5. George C. Boon, A coin with the head of Cernunnos, *Seaby's Coin and Medal Bulletin* 769, 1982, 276-272. Prof. Miranda Aldhouse-Green sees the wheel as a symbol of a Celtic sky and sun god. Joanna Bird says: "The head-dresses probably, therefore, identify the presiding deity of the Wanborough temple as a type of Celtic Jupiter, with specifically solar attributes. Although horns or antlers are normally attributes of the god called Cernunnos on the *Nautae Parisiaci* column, (Lavagne 1984, fig. 179), their presence on the Petersfield coin need not invalidate this interpretation. Ross (1967, 181-2) notes the probable association of the Celtic Jupiter with Cernunnos in certain aspects of his cult, while Green discusses the early evidence for the stag and, more specifically, its antlers as solar symbols in their own right (1991, 54-6). Clearly the evidence does not lend itself to a rigid interpretation, nor, in the context of Celtic religion, where names and attributes of deities were often very localised, should it be expected to" (M.G.O'Connell and Joanna Bird, *The Roman temple at Wanborough, excavation 1985-1986, Surrey Archaeological Collections*, vol. 82, 1994, 94). Personally, I think that the horned heads on the three Solent coins (figs. 1, 2, 4, 5) and the three Ambiani coins (fig. 6) may all be *dual-purpose* images which depict not only a horned god (possibly Cernunnos), but also a druid priest of the horned god, wearing his priestly head-dress. For me the key detail which links the Petersfield coin type to Cernunnos are the rings on the antlers – rings which are also clearly displayed on the antlers of the Paris Cernunnos (fig. 9). A small quibble: Joanna Bird says "there is a chain hanging own from the sides" of the head on the Petersfield coin; the 'chain' looks more like plaited or corded hair to me, as it does on the Ambiani bronze DT 402 (fig. 6). A larger quibble: without thinking, we automatically label the Britons and their religious beliefs as 'pagan', i.e. having many gods and no supreme deity. If a Martian visited a dozen different parish churches in pre-Reformation Britain, each dedicated to a different patron saint (St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Thomas, etc), and saw the many different icons being revered in each 'temple', might he not be forgiven for assuming that medieval Britons were 'pagan' and pantheistic, without a supreme deity, with the exception perhaps of a ubiquitous mother goddess holding a baby, and that they sacrificed their victims on a wooden cross? "Aha!" you may say, "Christian monotheism is made clear in the Holy Bible." That's true. But the druids had no sacred scriptures. So how can we be sure that their many local 'saints' were regarded as no more than different manifestations of a single supreme deity? We can't.

6. For a full discussion of these headdresses, with excellent illustrations of them, see *Surrey Archaeological Collections*, vol. 82, 1994, 93-106. Spoked solar wheels occur frequently on gold and silver coins of the southern tribes, especially on the Three Wheeler gold quarter stater, VA 236.

7. *De bello gallico*, VI. 13, trs. S.A. Handford, Penguin Classics, 1982. The druids in Gaul and Britain were probably a source of irritation to Caesar, though he doesn't say so. The druids still had political power in both countries and they probably used that power to encourage resistance to Rome, though again this is speculation. Being influential, the druids may have been a special target for Caesar to win over or knock over. Those druids in northern Gaul who weren't susceptible to Caesar's diplomacy may have sought refuge in southern Britain, rather than risk being eliminated for openly opposing him.

8. Modern commentators tend to present Roman dictators and emperors as being very tolerant of rival religions, and in general this may have been true. However, Rome's early treatment of druids, Jews and Christians was nothing short of brutal. Why? I think it was because druidism, Judaism and Christianity were philosophically and fundamentally unable

to accept the self-proclaimed divinity of Rome's early dictators and emperors, and consequently presented a serious ideological (if not actual) challenge to their political authority.

Acknowledgements

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Picture credits

1 National Museum of Wales/CCI. 2 Jane Bottomley © Chris Rudd. 3 CR/EC. 4 Paul Sellier. 5 CCI. 6 © Louis-Pol Delestreé & Marcel Tache, *Nouvel Atlas des monnaies gauloises*, vol. 1, 1992. 7 David Williams, *Surrey Archaeological Collections*, vol. 82, 1994 © Surrey Archaeological Society. 8 George Boon, *SCMB* 769, 1982, figs. 3 and 9. 9 Bernard de Montfaucon. 10 Dudley Wright, *Druidism*, 1924.

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