

# Druids and coins

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Dr John Creighton, a lecturer in archaeology at the University of Reading, has proposed that the production of early Celtic gold coins may have involved some ritual and that the images on early gold staters may have been influenced by shamanic practices.<sup>1</sup>

Right on, Dr Creighton! I'd go one step further. I'd say that the Druids played a key role in deciding what designs should be stamped on early Celtic coins, especially the uninscribed coins made in Britain in the first century BC, before Roman imagery was more widely espoused north and south of the Thames. Evanescent evidence of Druidic influence on coinage wafts towards us, like whiffs of incense from a swinging censer, from three sources: from classical texts, from ritual deposition and from the coins themselves.



Woodcut of Druid from Aylett Sammes' *Britannia Antiqua Illustrata*, 1676

Julius Caesar, Diodorus Siculus and Strabo – all writing in the period when Britain's first coins were made – describe the Druids as being influential in statecraft, with special responsibilities in matters of public ritual.<sup>2</sup> Apart from the business of warfare, there can have been few activities more costly, more crucial and more coloured by counselling than striking the modern equivalent of, say, £1 million's worth of gold coins. Minting a large issue of gold coins in the Late Iron Age would have needed not only top-level technology, but top-level management too. Many important decisions would have been required about sourcing bullion, estimating quantity, controlling quality, commissioning artwork, supervising production, ensuring security, and determining the right time, right place and right method for delivery or distribution.<sup>3</sup> It seems plausible that, for each stage of the minting process, the chief executive officer (tribal king) will have consulted his closest advisors and that the voice of his chief Druid will, among others, have been heard in the boardroom and that his wise words, particularly concerning the imagery of the coins and the ritual of their production, will have carried weight.

How influential were the Druids in Britain during the first century BC? If we can believe the testimony of Caesar, then the Druids were perhaps more powerful in Britain than they were in Gaul. Commenting on Druidic teaching, Caesar says: "It is thought that this system of training was *invented in Britain* [my italics] and taken over from there to Gaul, and at the present time[53 BC] diligent students of the matter mostly travel there to study it."<sup>4</sup> There is also an early Irish reference to a *fili* (Druid 'seer') returning to Ireland after studying the craft in Britain<sup>5</sup>. It therefore seems that, at the very time the first coins were being minted in Britain, graduates of the arts and sciences, including students from overseas, were obtaining their doctorates in poetry, prophecy, astrology, philosophy, theology and divination from British universities of Druidism. This suggests to me that the Druids could have been incredibly influential in Britain.

Moreover, when we consider how several huge hoards of Celtic coins were buried – the Wanborough hoard in Surrey, the Snettisham ('Bow') hoard in Norfolk, the Market Harborough hoard in Leicestershire – we must conclude that there was a strong element of ritual in their deposition. Writing about the recent Market Harborough hoard, archaeologist Dr Neil Faulkner confidently declares: "Without doubt, the field was a religious site. Up to 3,000 gold, silver and base-metal coins had been ritually deposited in pits within an enclosure... There was no evidence for settlement, for domestic occupation, for people going about their ordinary everyday lives. No one had lived here in the late Iron Age, but they had come here, quite often, and when they came it was for a very special purpose. In Ken's field of coins, we penetrate deeply into the religious mysteries of the ancient Celts."<sup>6</sup> And who were the masters of religious ceremonies and sole custodians of ritual sacrifices in Late Iron Age Britain? The Druids, surely. If not, who else?

Caesar tells us: "The Druids officiate at the worship of the gods, regulate public and private sacrifices, and give rulings on all religious questions."<sup>7</sup> The supremacy of the Druids in conducting and controlling votive offerings is confirmed by Diodorus Siculus who says, "It is a custom of the Gauls that no one performs a sacrifice without the assistance of a philosopher [i.e. Druid]"<sup>8</sup> and by Strabo who also says "they never sacrifice without the Druids."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Dr Philip de Jersey recently speculated that the Celtic silver minims of southern Britain may have been minted specifically and exclusively as votive offerings, in other words, as sacrificial coins. He says: "There seems to be an undeniable association between Celtic minims and temple sites... *more than nine out of every ten minims are likely to have been found on a temple site*... It would be nice to be able to say that these tiny, inconvenient coins had a function in southern Britain specific to ritual sites – perhaps struck deliberately for use as offerings."<sup>10</sup> And who is likely to have been in charge of these temple sites and the princely sacrifices of silver coins made at them? The Druids, of course.

Finally, when we examine the early uninscribed coins of Late Iron Age Britain – gold, silver, bronze and potin – we see that most of the images depicted on them are unquestionably of a religious



*Excessively rare Ambiani bronze, LT 8472 (see No. 10, this list), shows Druid sitting cross-legged, hands raised in prayer. The symbols on both sides of this coin are all of sacred significance. Drawing by Philippe Chauchoy, Cahiers Numismatique 126, December 1995, p. 10.*

or ritual character: the heads of gods and goddesses, many sacred or totemic animals, and an amazing array of magical and astrological symbols. Even the ubiquitous Celtic horse was of sacred significance. Professor Miranda Aldhouse-Green says: "Horses were of great significance within Celtic belief systems. There is substantial evidence for ritual associated with horses; equine imagery abounds, and many different Celtic deities adopted the horse as their emblem... Coins consistently depict horses in a close relationship to solar symbols, anticipating the unequivocal link between Roman-Celtic sun/sky-gods and horses."<sup>11</sup> "Dr John Creighton offers an additional dimension to the sacred nature of the horse on Celtic coins. He says: "I believe that the head/horse image on early northern European coin remained trenchantly on the coinage for so long because it symbolised a mystic union between the individual and sovereignty, representing 'sacral kingship'.<sup>12</sup>

It is only when the influence of Rome is manifested by the rulers of the southern and south-eastern tribes of Britain, in the first half of the first century AD, that we see the religious and ritual imagery on their coins being replaced by largely regal and political propaganda. Just as Henry VIII, 'Defender of the Faith', defied the papal power of Rome in the 1530s, so pro-Roman rulers such as Tincomarus, Verica, Tasciovanos and Cunobelin may gradually have defied or diminished the power of the Druids in Britain. As a consequence, the once all-prevailing influence of Druidism in Albion possibly shifted northwards and westwards; which is maybe why the coinage of the Durotriges, Dobunni and Corieltauvi stayed more static in style, more Celtic in character, because their designs may have remained under the sway of the Druids.

## References

1. J. Creighton, *Coins and Power in Late Iron Age Britain*, 2000, pp. 40-54.
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3. For authoritative accounts of Celtic coin production see R.D Van Arsdell, *Celtic Coinage of Britain*, 1989, pp. 46-55; A Chadburn, 'Tasking the Iron Age: the Iceni and Minting' in *Land of the Iceni*, ed. J. Davies & T. Williamson, 1999, pp. 162-172; J. May, 'Minting Coins in Iron Age Britain', *Coins & Antiquities*, May 1999, pp. 57-60; P. de Jersey, 'Striking Celtic coins', Chris Rudd list 30 (1998), pp. 1-2; 'Casting Celtic coins', Chris Rudd list 38 (1998), pp. 2-3; M. Dennis, 'Die alignments in Celtic coins?', Chris Rudd list 62 (2002), pp. 2-5; K. Gruel & E. Morin, *Les monnaies celtes du Musée de Bretagne*, 1999, pp. 20-23, Chris Rudd list 47 (1999), pp. 2-3.
4. Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, VI.13.
5. K. Jackson, quoted by S. Piggott, *The Druids*, 1975, p.108.
6. N. Faulkner, *Hidden Treasure: Digging up Britain's Past*, 2003, p. 74.
7. Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, VI.13.
8. Diodorus, *Bibliothèque Historique*, V.31.
9. Strabo, *Geographica*, IV. 197-8.
10. P. de Jersey, 'Minimum impact', Chris Rudd list 71 (2003), pp. 2-4.
11. M. Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, pp. 121-122.
12. J. Creighton, *Coins and Power in Late Iron Age Britain*, 2000, p. 54.