

COIN OF THE MONTH

In June 1996 this remarkable Celtic silver coin of the Catuvellauni tribe, struck about 50–30 BC, was found in Ashwell, Hertfordshire. CHRIS RUDD tells the story . . .



DUCK HELMET

FOR many years archaeologists have known that Celtic warriors sometimes wore elaborate helmets decorated with birds, either when going into battle or perhaps just for parade purposes. This Catuvellaunian coin is important because it is the first to feature one of these bird helmets. It is also the first to display a reasonably lifelike duck.

Dr Miranda Green, author of *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend* writes: "Diodorus Siculus refers to the wearing of horned or animal-crested helmets by the Celts. This increased the men's stature and made them appear more fearsome to the enemy. Such helmets are known archaeologically: a superb horned helmet comes from the river Thames at Waterloo Bridge, and one of the panels of the Gundestrup cauldron depicts soldiers wearing boar- and bird-crested helmets. A goose surmounts the helmet of an Iron Age goddess depicted by a bronze figurine at Dinéault in Brittany. A 3rd or 2nd century BC helmet from Ciუმesti in Romania bears the figure of a raven on top. This piece is especially interesting because the wings are hinged so that when its wearer ran towards the enemy, the raven's wings would flap up and down in a realistic and unnerving manner".

Rainer Kretz, Celtic numismatist and amateur ornithologist, has identified the duck's head on the helmet of this coin as probably indicative of the common mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*). He says: "I believe this coin may contain yet another duck's image, this time almost the entire bird, in front of the face. Although somewhat stylised, it clearly portrays an unusual shape of the head and an elongated very pronounced beak. If it is indeed a bird, it is almost certainly a duck. Taking into consideration the distribution of the different duck species in southern England, I believe the image may depict a Shoveler (*Spatula clypeata*). This bird receives its name from its specially

adapted huge bill, which it uses for feeding on the surface of ponds and lakes. A colourful bird, it is particularly frequent in East Anglia, but occurs throughout much of Southern England. It may be that for some reason this bird was especially revered by that particular tribe".

It is interesting and perhaps not coincidental that various wings and wing-like ornaments frequently occur on early coins of the Catuvellauni, especially on Whaddon Chase gold staters. Maybe the duck was a personal mascot of King Cassivellaunos, leader of the British coalition against Julius Caesar in 54 BC?

Equally fascinating is the possible identity of the goddess wearing the helmet. Dr Anne Ross, author of *Pagan Celtic Britain and The Druid Prince*, writes: "Caesar comments that the Gauls worshipped Minerva, i.e. that for Gauls and Romans alike, Minerva, apart from any other qualities, 'first instituted the arts and crafts'. She is often depicted wearing a helmet, with shield and lance at her side. Her Celtic equivalent is the powerful and widely-worshipped Brigit or Bride, one of the three daughters of the god of druidism, the 'Dagada', 'good god', all called Brigit. She too was a culture goddess and her cult has survived in Celtic societies vestigially down to the present day. The goose was a sacred creature, it was tabu for the Celts to eat it and it was also the bird of war. It could be benign or sinister. I suggest that this coin depicts Brigit, helmeted, as would befit Minerva, thus demonstrating a certain conflation with the classical deity. All water birds had a certain sanctity, the duck being invariably a benign and much-loved creature which presides over thermal waters from the Bronze Age on. Perhaps the goddess of the Source of the Seine was also a Brigit figure, standing graciously in her duck-shaped boat on the Seine which bears her name, Sequana. Brigit too was a healer; and Brigit also is linked with springs and thermal lakes and waters. She became Saint Brigid in the Christian era. There are early Irish traditions of geese or



Celtic iron helmet with bronze raven with hinged wings, c. 3rd/2nd century BC, 25cm high, from Ciუმesti, Romania. (Drawing by Paul Jenkins from *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth* by Miranda Green.)

other water birds, ducks included, that are magical, transformed human beings as their necklets of gold or chains of gold linking them together indicate. In Wales there is a tradition of witches swimming in a lake in duck-form at a certain time of year".

Stylised portrayals of ducks occur on two other extremely rare Celtic coins: on a Gaulish bronze coin of the Ambiani (La Tour 8497), and on a British silver unit of the Atrebatas (*British Numismatic Journal* 1992, plate 29, no. 188, and Chris Rudd List 27, no. 37).

My attribution of the Duck Helmet coin to the Catuvellauni is speculative; it could have been issued by the neighbouring Trinovantes tribe in Essex and the style of the reverse would support this origin.

Dr Philip de Jersey, who manages the Celtic Coin Index at the Institute of Archaeology, Oxford, says: "On the reverse the horse is similar in style to some coins of Addedomaros and it is undoubtedly somewhere amongst his territory that one should be looking for an origin of this coin. It is probably dated about 50–30 BC".

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