

# A mystery bronze

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The subject of this short article is undoubtedly one of the most extraordinary bronze Celtic coins to have been found in Britain. Its unusual design and exceptional condition combine to make it a quite remarkable object. But where was it made? And what are we to make of its bizarre design?

The coin was found at Kirmington, about ten miles due west of Grimsby and six miles southwest of the nearest point on the Humber estuary. There are many well-known Celtic sites in the immediate vicinity, including Ulceby, Caistor and South Ferriby. This region formed the northernmost part of the territory of the Corieltauvi, centred on Lincolnshire, and which probably extended to the Humber. The Corieltauvi had absolutely no tradition of producing bronze coinage, indeed the only association of bronze with their coinage would appear to be as the core of plated forgeries of their gold staters and silver units and half-units. In addition, there is little or no resemblance in the style of this bronze unit to any Corieltauvian issue, including those with a boar on the obverse. In other words, we will almost certainly need to look somewhere other than the territory of the Corieltauvi for the origins of this coin.



*Wolves and Boar bronze, CCI 97.1301,  
no.10 in this list. Drawing by Jane Bottomley.*

Might it come from elsewhere in Britain? Again, the possibilities are quite limited. Only the North Thames kingdom, and to a lesser extent Kent, produced significant quantities of bronze coinage (as opposed to debased precious metal coinages which in some cases were effectively bronze, such as certain types of the Durotriges and the Dobunni). And once again, there are no good stylistic parallels.

We will clearly need to look still further afield, and the obvious region to study is Belgic Gaul, much of which had a flourishing bronze coinage in the early

and mid-first century BC, and from where numerous coins were exported to Britain. Indeed there is at least one other unusual Belgic bronze recorded from near Kirmington: Derek Allen, in his *Origins* paper (1960, p. 277, pl. XIV.18), illustrates a bronze of the Ambiani, type Scheers 88, found at South Ferriby (though apparently with no connection to the famous South Ferriby hoards), a type which incidentally seems to have provided the obverse prototype for the Abingdon Zoo silver unit (see P. de Jersey, *Spink Numismatic Circular* May 1998, pp. 150-151).

First though, we should consider exactly what is represented on this bronze unit. The main feature on the obverse is a creature facing right. It is almost certainly a wolf; it lacks the bristles seen on the boars, it has gaping jaws – which seem to be characteristic of numismatic depictions of wolves – and it has a simple tail, not curled as on a boar. It also has sharp claws, and what must be ears. Above it, or possibly behind it – it is difficult to know quite how to interpret the relationship between these two elements of the design – there is what might be a tree, or perhaps more likely a human figure. This tree or figure has one stumpy arm (or branch), and a much longer arm which is splayed at the end, rather like a child's depiction of fingers. Elsewhere on the obverse, we have a small boar represented below the wolf's head; and below the ringed pellet beneath the wolf's stomach, a curious, five-pointed design. What is this? It's very difficult to be certain, but it might well be a representation of an Iron Age terret ring, through which passed the reins of cart or chariot horses. Examples of these objects can be found on the British Museum webpages (type "Polden Hill" into Google and go to the first link), and in some cases (particularly the "transverse winged terret") they really are very similar to the motif on this coin. It should be joined across its base, of course, between the two lower bosses, but perhaps that vertical 'tongue' is intended to represent the rein running through the terret?

Above and to the left of the possible terret ring is a still more difficult object. It just might be a human head: with a bit of imagination it's possible to see an eye and a nose, curly hair and a beard, but this is far from certain.

The reverse of the coin is dominated by two marvellous boars. Both are on standards, or as the OED helpfully defines: "A flag, sculptured figure, or other conspicuous object, raised on a pole to indicate the rallying-point of an army...; the distinctive ensign of a king, great noble, or commander, or of a nation or city." It's very tempting to imagine that these boars thus represent the standards of some Iron Age king or tribe. Around the larger boar there is a ring of heart-shaped decorative motifs; further out still is another ring of decoration, seemingly composed of small torc-like motifs, plus what looks rather like a stirrup (at six o'clock on the flan); but the stirrup hadn't been invented at the time this coin was produced, so this is presumably coincidental..

It's relatively straightforward, then, to describe most of the decoration on the coin. Now comes the difficult part: what does it mean? And where does it come from? It's likely that we'll never know the answer to the first question. It's possible that the coin records some event, mythological or actual: perhaps the boars represent one tribe, the wolf another, the latter apparently triumphing over the boar on the obverse. The terret ring could be interpreted as a sign of horsemanship, perhaps an important element in the combat between the forces represented by the wolf and boar. On the other hand, this may be completely inaccurate: perhaps what we are seeing is some aspect of Celtic mythology, the boars and the

wolf not necessarily in opposition but just constituent parts of a myth or legend. But given the presence of boar standards, rather than boars on their own, I would favour some sort of association with war or combat.

And what, finally, of its origins? This is nearly as much of a problem as the meaning of the design. But it may just be possible to identify a few parallels in Belgic Gaul, and in particular to a group of coins from the west of the region, traditionally attributed to the Veliocasses. Compare for example Delestrée and Tache 325 (Scheers 67, fig. 372), which bears a human figure with outstretched arms on the obverse, and a small boar in the same position below and to the right as on our mystery bronze. If that's a human figure behind the wolf on the Kirmington bronze, then it's not entirely dissimilar to the figure on the bronze coins of the Veliocasses; another of that group (DT 317) has a boar standard on the reverse, though admittedly in wholly different style to our coin. But quite frankly, there appear to be few if any closer parallels available: the Kirmington wolf and boars bronze really does stand alone. I suspect it may have been produced in western Belgic Gaul, probably around the middle of the first century BC, but in most respects it remains a fascinating mystery.

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