Celtic Hoard May Be Linked To Caesar

Chris Rudd

A hoard of 362 Iron Age coins and coin fragments, which may have been hidden in a hurry at the time of Julius Caesar's raids on Britain in 55 and 54 BC, were recently unearthed at the little Anglo-Saxon village of Thurnham ("place of thorn trees"), near Maidstone, Kent. Composed of tin-rich bronze, called "potin" by collectors, and cast in long thin strip-moulds made of clay, these coins were issued by an unknown ruler of the Cantiaci tribe, "people of the corner land", who gave their name to the present-day county of Kent and its capital, Canterbury (Celtic Duroverno - "alder-fort" or "fort by the alder-swamp"), where Saint Augustine founded a monastery in 602 and where Thomas à Becket was murdered in 1170.

Originally derived from Gaulish bronze coins of the ancient Mediterranean seaport of Massilia (modern Marseilles), they are among the earliest coins minted in Britain and probably date from the first half of the 1st century BC, possibly around 85-60 BC. The hoard was discovered last November by two metal detectorists, Peter and Christine Johnson, who live at Sittingbourne, Kent. Peter and Christine made their first big Celtic hit on Wednesday, 5 November, the day Guy Fawkes tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament in 1605 with 36 half-barrels of poor quality gunpowder.

They turned off the Pilgrim's Way near Thurnham and walked onto a field, Peter with his Fisher CZ 6A, Christine with her Fisher 1236 X2. This was their first experience of field-work. Previously they had confined their treasure hunting to the beaches of Kent, such as Margate beach and Ramsgate beach. They soon found the farmer on his tractor. He granted them permission to metal detect the land and requested them to explore an adjacent field, rather than the field they were on, where crops were starting to sprout. In their three years of metal detecting this swiftly proved to be the most rewarding instruction they had received. At 10am, within minutes of walking onto the field next door, Christine found the first potin coin. "Great! Brilliant! Well done!" said Peter, "Keep searching in that spot." Then, a few feet away he, too, found a coin. Within the next three days they found 165 coins within a 15ft square of that field. But it wasn't until Peter scanned several websites on the Internet that he realised that the coins were over 2,000 years old. He says: "My jaw dropped. I just couldn't believe it."

After he had shown the coins to the farmer, Peter reported their discovery to Dr. Andrew Richardson, their local Finds Liaison Officer of the national Portable Antiquities Scheme, who works with Kent County Council.

On 7 December Dr. Richardson conducted an exploratory investigation of the hoard site with a team of 15 helpers who included Liz Wilson, the Sussex Finds Liaison Officer; Peter and Christine Johnson; Kent County Council archaeologists; members of Kent Archaeological Society; and members of Mid-Kent Search & Recovery Club.

This was yet another great example of archaeologists working in close co-operation and complete harmony with metal detectorists. Last year Estelle Morris, Minister of State for the Arts, said: "I would like to acknowledge the role of finders in reporting their finds promptly, as required by the Treasure Act. Metal detector users have found the great majority of treasure finds reported here [Treasure Annual Report 2001]; without their active co-operation the Act would be ineffective."

As a direct result of such co-operation another 197 potin coins and fragments were found at Thurnham, bringing the total to 362. Of these, 204 are complete coins, many with their original casting sprues still attached, and 158 are fragments, probably broken by recent cultivation. Dr. Richardson tells me that his excavation revealed no signs of Iron Age occupation of the site and no evidence of a metal, pottery or wooden container for the hoard, which he believes was an isolated deposit.

He says: "To my eyes the coins look virtually un-circulated. They are crude and have stylised linear drawings on them. It seems they were buried in a fairly remote location, probably in a leather bag, with the intention of recovery on another day. We won't ever know why they were hidden, or precisely when, but it isn't inconceivable they were buried at about the time of Caesar's landings in 55 and 54 BC. The latest coin in the hoard dates from around 60 BC, which would not be inconsistent with the coins being buried five years later. Maybe they were buried by someone who realised things were about to get unpleasant but was optimistic he would still be around when it was all over. He stashed his coins and then went off to face whatever fate had in store and never came back. There's no way we will ever know, but it is not impossible."

When potin coins are dug up after 2,000 years underground they mostly have a very dark patina on them, sometimes as black as coal. However, when they were freshly minted they had a bright silvery appearance, rather like polished pewter, due to their

Fig.1. The first time that Peter and Christine Johnson searched in a field they found the Thurnham hoard within minutes of walking onto it.

You will observe that the face on this coin seems to have a slight smile. Or am I imagining it? You will notice, too, that there are vertical striations running right across the flan. These lines are not a deliberate part of the coin design and must have been made earlier because, as you can see, they run under the lines of the head. The Celtic numismatist, Robert Van Arsdell, suggests that the striations were caused by a block of wood being pressed against the mould to smooth the surfaces of the clay before an image was scribed into it.

The idea that wood was used in the minting process was first put forward in 1864 by Sir John Evans, who wondered if "the moulds may have been burnt into the wood by the use of a model in brass, or some less fusible metal than tin."

An ingenious explanation for the striations, but incorrect. The coin moulds were undoubtedly made of clay, not wood. The technical expertise involved in casting the Thurnham potin coins was considerable. Robert Van Arsdell says: "Most of the time the aesthetic qualities were carefully controlled. In general, cast coins tend to become thick and dumpy in appearance and this posed a problem. The Kentish tribes wanted their coins to be more aesthetically pleasing. Casting large, thin coins posed many technical problems and so the success the moneyers achieved is a tribute to their metal-working expertise. All the coins were cast in chains, using clay moulds with a runner system connecting the cavities. The methods used to manufacture the moulds changed over time as the workers perfected their techniques. For most of the series, the images were scribed freehand into the clay moulds. Traditionally, these images have been used to establish a type sequence widely used in archaeological work. Today, however, the coins are seen to be mass-produced items. The stylus work

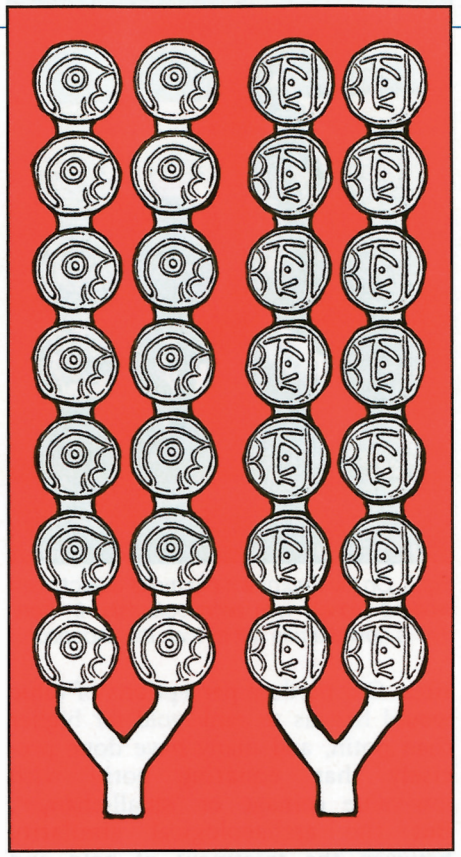

Fig.6. Kentish linear potin coins were cast in strips, usually with the runner going vertically through the head and horizontally through the bull. Tentative reconstruction of obverse and reverse moulds by Chris Rudd.

was done as quickly as possible and thus the images provide little basis for establishing the sequence."

Not surprisingly, no clay moulds survive, because they had to be broken open to extract each strip of coins after the tin-bronze alloy had cooled. The runners between the coins were then broken probably with a chisel blow, to separate each coin. Part of the runner - sometimes called a "sprue" or "tang" - can often be seen on the edge of the coin. We don't know how many coins were on each strip, nor how the strips were arranged on both halves of the clay mould.

Eight years ago we came close to learning more. In 1996, not far from Folkestone, Kent, a metal detectorist unearthed a group of seven Thurrock type cast bronze coins, which were the immediate prototypes for the flat linear potin coins of the Cantiaci. Issued circa 120-100 BC, Thurrock bronzes are comparatively common. What was most unusual about these seven examples - in fact, unique - was that all seven were found joined together in a single strip of bronze, each with a slightly different head of Apollo on the obverse. This was the first and only time that such a strip of cast Celtic coins had been discovered in Britain and thus a find of enormous importance. Perhaps sensing the significance of his discovery, the finder took the strip of seven cast coins to Dover Museum to be identified and possibly valued. This unique group of Kentish coins, all still intact on their original moulding chain, naturally stimulated intense interest at the museum, who wished to record and hopefully acquire the find, so that scholars could study it. Realising now that his seven coins were of much greater importance than he'd previously imagined, the finder said he'd consider the museum's request and took the coins back home with him to think it over.

I don't know if somebody at the museum may have quoted a specific sum of money to the finder, but he'd certainly got the idea that the strip of coins were very valuable. In fact, having thought carefully about the excitement that his discovery had generated, he concluded with almost faultless logic that the seven coins would be worth a lot more if each one was sold singly to a different buyer. I don't need to tell you what he did next. But, yes, I'm afraid it's true. The unique strip of Thurrock coins no longer exists.

I thank God that the majority of metal detectorists in Kent are not motivated by greed and that, like Peter and Christine Johnson, finders of the Thurnham hoard, they behave responsibly and in the best interests of their county's prehistory. "What greater reward can there be", says Peter, "than seeing those coins in a museum with our names alongside them?" TH

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Picture credits

Fig.1. Peter Johnson.
Figs.2&5. Dr. Andrew Richardson. Kent County Council.
Figs.3&6. Chris Rudd.
Fig.4. Leu Numismatics, auction 83, no.689.