

Was Britain's First Coin Die A Forgery?

Chris Rudd

At 4pm on a sunny Sunday, 15 September 2013, a Late Iron Age coin die was unearthed by metal detectorist Jon Barrett at Bredgar, north Kent (Fig.1.). No bigger than a thimble and cylindrical in shape, the die is made of bronze and may be dated to the 2nd century BC or possibly later.

It is engraved with the image of a stylised horse (Fig.4.), and was made to mint gold coins known by numismatists as Gallo-Belgic A or Gallo-Belgic broad flan staters (Fig.2.). Probably made for military purposes, these Gallo-Belgic A gold staters are found across the northern half of Belgic Gaul and throughout south-east England. Some of those found in England may have been brought home by British mercenaries fighting in Gaul. The design of Gallo-Belgic A staters was ultimately derived from Greek gold staters issued in the late 4th century BC by Philip II of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great (Fig.3.).

Only two other Iron Age coin dies and a matrix punch have been found in Britain, all from north Hampshire in the borderland between the Atrebates, Belgae and Regini, which seems to have been a focal area for British coin copying and counterfeiting c.150-40 BC, until

king Commios took control of minting in this region (Fig.5.). The Bredgar coin die is the first found in the Kent and could well be the earliest recorded coin die found in Britain. The numismatic importance of the Bredgar coin die is huge, which is why it has been acquired by the British Museum and is currently displayed in the Citi Money Gallery.

Dr. Ian Leins, curator of Iron Age and Roman coins at the British Museum says: "It is almost certainly the earliest coin die found in the UK. The most significant aspect of this discovery is the fact that it is a British find. This raises the intriguing possibility that the earliest known coins from Britain were actually made here and not just imports from the Continent. Around 250 Gallo-Belgic A coins are known from Britain and France, but unfortunately the new die cannot be linked to any of them. This fact has been used to suggest that it may have been a forger's die. In reality, however, we can read very little into the fact that we do not have an example of a coin struck using this die. Little is known about the mechanics of coin production in the Iron Age and, in particular, about the authorities that produced

Fig.1. Bronze coin die for reverse of Gallo-Belgic A gold stater. Found at Bredgar, Kent, 15 September 2014. Now in British Museum.



Fig.2. Gallo-Belgic A gold stater, maybe struck by Bellovaci c.175-120 BC. ABC 4, DT 63-65. Found at Essendon, Herts., 1994. Sold by Chris Rudd in 1995 for £3,000.



Fig.3. Posthumous gold stater of Philip II of Macedon, Amphipolis, c.323-315 BC. Such staters were paid to Gaulish mercenaries and inspired 300 years of imitation in Gaul, then Britain.

What is on the Bredgar coin die

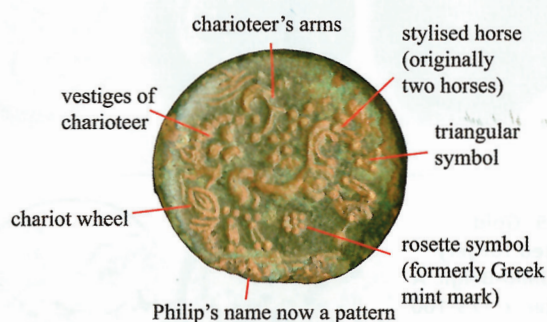


Fig.4. Though it seems in relief on this photo, the design was actually sunken into the die, engraved by a highly skilled die cutter in mirror image, so when the coin is struck the horse faces left (see Fig.2.).

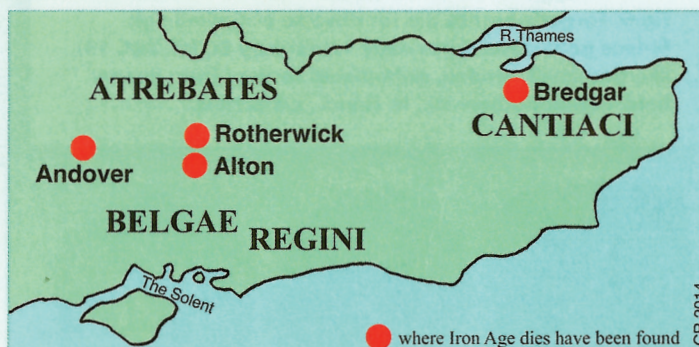


Fig.5. Only three Iron Age coin dies and a matrix punch have been found in the UK, all by metal detectorists: Rotherwick (1993), Alton (2003), Andover (2012), Bredgar (2014). I think they were all made for forgery.

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them. The distinction between an 'official' and a 'forger's' die may not have been relevant in Iron Age society. A programme of scientific analysis will tell us more about how the die was made and used, but its precise origins are likely to remain a mystery."

Precise origins may be mysterious, but I see three possibilities:-

1. The die was made in Gaul to strike official Gallo-Belgic gold staters, but got lost or stolen and was brought to Kent by a British mercenary or Gallic refugee. Highly unlikely. These dies were the priceless private property of powerful tribal chiefs and guarded more closely than their virgin daughters.
2. The die was made in Britain for an enterprising Cantian ruler who wanted to mint gold staters that looked just like those that were being imported into Kent. An intriguing possibility, as Dr. Leins speculates. But why have no coins from this die been found? Maybe one will surface one day or maybe not.
3. The die was made in Britain for producing gold-plated forgeries which will have looked and felt just like the imported Gallo-Belgic originals. There

are three possible reasons why no plated staters from this die have yet been found: (i) the number minted is likely to have been smaller than an official issue and therefore the survival rate would be smaller too, (ii) plated coins with a bronze core don't survive well in damp British soil (see Figs.6 & 9.), and (iii) the fraud may have been discovered quickly and most of the counterfeit staters destroyed.

In my view the distinction between an official solid gold coin and a plated fake was as relevant in Iron Age society as it is today – even more so because coins had an intrinsic metal value in those days. I'd be thrilled if future research indicated that the Bredgar coin die was used for minting official British gold staters – the first gold coins made in Britain. I'd be thrilled because it would partially vindicate the brave claim, made by my numismatic hero Sir John Evans in 1864, that these gold staters are "beyond all doubt the earliest of the British series" (*The Coins of the Ancient Britons*, p.25). But, at present, I'm inclined to think that the Bredgar die may be a forger's.

There is compelling evidence that unofficial counterfeit copies of Gallo-Belgic

gold coins were made in Britain, perhaps as early as the mid 2nd century BC. Two bronze dies, both apparently made to make counterfeit Gallo-Belgic gold coins, have been found in the south of England. On about 8 August 1993 detectorist David Walsh discovered a worn obverse die for a Gallo-Belgic bi-face gold stater (ABC 13, DT 157-161) at Rotherwick, east of Basingstoke, Hampshire (Fig.6.), and in a nearby field he found a gold-plated Gallo-Belgic bi-face stater, which suggests that it may have been made locally (Fig.6.). Ten years later, on 22 April 2003, a forger's die for striking Gallo-Belgic Crossed Lines quarter staters (ABC 37, DT 94-97) was found by detectorist Christopher Stephens on his parents' farm near Alton, Hampshire (Fig.7.), only 10 miles from where the Rotherwick die was discovered. That's not all. On 27 February 2011 a gold-plated forgery of a Gallo-Belgic A stater (ABC 4 var., DT 66) was found by another detectorist near Andover, Hampshire (Fig.9.); no other plated examples of this variety (Sills Ab1, class 4b) have been recorded – not from Britain, not from the Continent – so there's a fair chance that it is a British forgery, perhaps made in north Hampshire.

In the light of these four finds – the Rotherwick forger's die, the Rotherwick



Fig.6. Forger's bronze die for obverse of Gallo-Belgic bi-face gold stater, circa early 1st century BC (cf. ABC 13), like this small, eroded, gold-plated forgery from nearby field. Found Rotherwick, N. Hants., c.8.8.1993.



Fig.7. Forger's bronze die for reverse of Gallo-Belgic Crossed Lines quarter stater, circa mid to late 2nd century BC (cf. ABC 37), like this gold-plated forgery from France. Found near Alton, N. Hants., 22.4.2003.



Fig.8. Forger's bronze matrix punch for obverse of Sussex Lyre silver unit, c.55-40 BC (cf. ABC 647). Found near Andover, N.Hants., 5.8.2012.

Fig.9. Gold-plated forgery of Gallo-Belgic A stater, c.175-100 BC, Sills Ab1, class 4b. No others recorded like this. Made in Britain? Found near Andover, N.Hants., 27.2.2011.



plated stater, the Alton forger's die, and the plated stater from near Andover – I'd say there is strong evidence that Gallo-Belgic gold coins were being forged in Hampshire. So why not in Kent as well, where Gallo-Belgic A staters appear to have been more popular and presumably in greater demand? For example, 16 Gallo-Belgic A staters are recorded from Kent, compared with only two from Hampshire.

I believe that the Bredgar die, designed to strike Gallo-Belgic A type staters, may be a forger's die. My belief is shared by Britain's foremost authority on Gallo-Belgic staters. Dr. John Sills, author of **Gaulish and early British gold coinage** (Spink 2003), comments on the Bredgar die as follows: "It's a Gallo-Belgic Ab1 stater die and it's almost certainly for a class 7 reverse or copy thereof. It doesn't match any known genuine die, and as the survival rate for class 6 and 7 coins is quite high this makes it likely it's a forger's die; the pellet triangle in front of the horse ties

it down to the latter half of the Ab series and the unusually small rosette below the horse is seen on a couple of class 7 dies. Class 7 was the final issue, probably struck on the Continent somewhere between c.150 and c.110 BC, but if it's a British forgery it could have been used any time up to the mid 1st century BC. The die is more or less the same size as an actual coin, in other words it's slightly smaller than one would expect a genuine die to be, consistent with its having been used to strike copies. I can't be certain of this because the dies for this type weren't much bigger than the actual coins and the style and quality of the engraving is quite good (Fig.4.), but a couple of small details such as the 'eye' motif above the horse's head and the lines below the second 'eye' chariot wheel remnant behind the horse finish abruptly, suggesting that the die was copied from a coin. On balance it's probably a forger's die and the known Gallo-Belgic Bb and Ca forger's dies from Britain tend to support this; it's

extremely unlikely that a genuine die of this type would have been legitimately exported, it would have been like exporting a set of banknote plates to a foreign power. Gallo-Belgic A staters circulated in south-eastern England for anything up to a hundred years after they were struck on the Continent and many of the known plated forgeries were probably struck here; no regular Ab staters are likely to have been struck in Britain; the only possible candidates (my nos. 316-317) are in a very different style."

Even if it turns out to be a forger's die, the Bredgar die is still a dramatic numismatic discovery and Jon Barrett, 46-year-old house-husband, is to be congratulated on finding it with his Minelab Explorer SE detector, for reporting it to PAS finds liaison officer Jennifer Jackson, and for permitting it to be examined by the British Museum. Jon had been detecting for seven hours on the day he found the die and was about to go home when he got a copper signal. "Here we go, I thought, another piece of blasted shrapnel! Or is it another Vicky penny?" He says: "I dug down about six and a half inches and pulled up what I first thought was a piece of medieval pot leg. Then I scraped the mud off to reveal the pattern. Nice one, I thought, a seal matrix and put it in my pocket. I switched off the detector and headed back to the car. I put my stuff away and pulled it out for another look. The pattern didn't look medieval and the horse reminded me of a stater I'd found a couple of years earlier. When I got home I showed it to my wife. 'What is it?' she said. 'I reckon it's a coin die', I said."

Due to their large size and lavish style, Gallo-Belgic A gold staters are highly prized by collectors and exceptional examples occasionally command exceptional prices. A few modern fakes exist. One possible suspect was spotted in a sale earlier this year; doubts were voiced but not verified. For their help with this report I thank Jon Barrett, Elizabeth Cottam, Dr. Ian Leins and Dr. John Sills.

Picture Credits

Fig.1. Jennifer Jackson © PAS

Figs.2, 5, 8, & 9. Chris Rudd

Fig.3. Numismatica Ars Classica, Zürich 6.10.2009

Fig.4. Die © British Museum/notes by CR

Fig.6. Die © British Museum/coin Jeffrey May

Fig.7. Die Kay Ainsworth © Hampshire County Council/coin CR

Fig.10. Geoff Cottam

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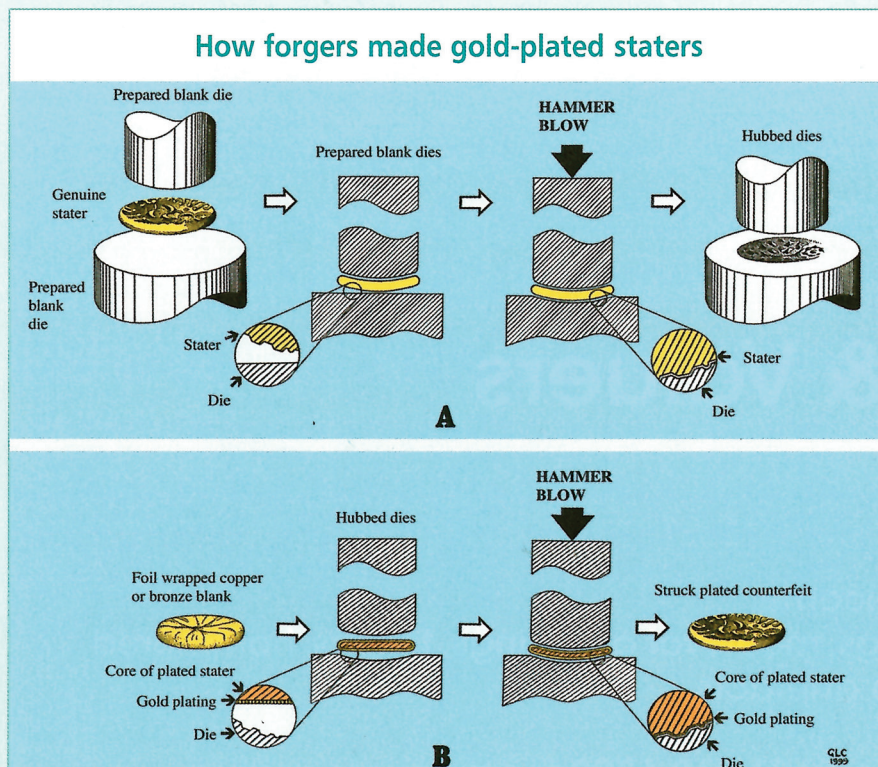


Fig.10. A genuine gold "mother" stater was used to produce counterfeit hubbed dies (A). The hubbed dies were then used to strike counterfeit gold plated staters (B).