

Why I like Celtic coins

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Why do I like Celtic coins? Because of their mystery!

We have become used to coins which tell us everything about themselves: their country of origin, their value and the year they were made. No Celtic coin is so revealing. None of them, from the prestigious gold stater to the humble potin, gives this information. On those very rare occasions where the name of a tribe, or a ruler, or a sign of value appears on one of these coins, we must try to confirm our interpretation from other sources of information.



1. Cast potin of the Sequani, not the Turones. LT 7011.

If you assume from the inscription, for example, that the bronzes reading TVRONOS/CANTORIX (fig.1) were struck by the Turones, that's incorrect: the findspots show that this was a production of the Sequani. The figure 'X' occurs on some bronze coins, but it's wrong to interpret this as the sign of the denarius, which occurs only on silver coinage. The name of Sedullus, in the form of CONNOS EPILLOS/SEDVLLVS, occurs on coins attributed to the Lemovices - and his name occurs in Caesar's account of the Gallic Wars. But hold on - this bronze coin is copied from a Roman denarius of 47 BC, and Caesar tells us that Sedullus died in 52 BC... and it's highly unlikely that coins were struck in his name after the Roman conquest.

Nothing, or next to nothing, is given away easily. The Celts flirt with us - but if you're patient, if you look closely, if you're interested enough to consider whole series of coins, then you won't be deceived. Take for example some small silver units struck in the north-east of Gaul. They are not the most beguiling of Celtic coins. Usually inspired by Roman denarii, they are

neither the most valuable nor the most beautiful, but they tell us something which no ancient author - and certainly not Caesar, who keeps his real motives well hidden - tells us. They reveal the economic alliance which existed in this region, a generation before the Germanic invasions and the Helvetic migrations gave Caesar a pretext for invading Gaul. It's an exclusive! And it's the coins which are telling us this.

Vercingetorix is a familiar figure to schoolchildren studying the history of France. But all that we know about him has come from Caesar's *Gallic War*... and what if Caesar had invented this powerful enemy, to give a better gloss to his campaign? We would be right to doubt his existence, were it not for his name on both gold and bronze coins, (fig.2) coins which must have been struck shortly before the defeat which ultimately led to his death.



2. Gold stater of Vercingetorix, struck by the Arverni. LT 3774.

And the Longostaetes, do you know where they lived? Don't look for them in Caesar's memoirs. The great geographer Strabo ignores them, and Posidonios, born in faraway Syria, makes nothing of them. Their name occurs only on some large bronze coins found in the Languedoc, in the area of Béziers. Without these coins, the Longostaetes would have swelled the long ranks of peoples forgotten by history.

Enough examples... we could continue with many more and it would get boring. We should turn to the heart of the matter: the images which decorate these coins.



3. Gold stater of the Redones
with female warrior. LT 6759.

Where do we start? There's an embarrassment of riches. Should we single out the large flan staters of the Ambiani? Such small heads, and such huge hair! The twists and curls fill up the whole flan, like waves sparkling in the setting sun. And what about the Amazons of the Redones (fig.3): don't they have a particular appeal? They're mounted like warriors; the boldly brandished shield is not an object just for display, they're ready for a fight. Fast, athletic, energetic, they're ready to strike before the enemy knows what's hit them.



4. Gold stater of the Petrocorii
with man-boar. LT 4305.

And what do you think of the amazing boar with a human head, found on the reverse of the staters of the Petrocorii, from Périgueux? (fig.4) And what about the Arvernian staters bearing a head with a long, droopy moustache?

How about stars? They're a common motif on gold, silver and bronze, taking us far from our earth-bound existence; with sunbursts and crescent moons they take us to the skies which our ancestors scanned, looking to foretell their future from these heavenly bodies.

The horse is the most commonly represented animal on Celtic coins, and deservedly so. It was a companion

throughout the long days of ploughing, reliable and trustworthy for journeys both local and long-distance, intelligent and untiring in cavalry fighting. A few rare Ambiani half-staters show a laurelled head, superimposed on a galloping horse, ready to burst the limits of the flan, like the elegant horses on Persian manuscripts, jumping through the golden borders of the image.

There are horses with human heads, of different styles: with a helmet among the Pictones, sometimes with neat and tidy hair, sometimes with curly flowing locks on the coins of the Armorican peoples. And as with an exceptional horse, so there is an extraordinary charioteer, far from the charioteer on the staters of Philip II of Macedon which provided its inspiration. The Celts quickly rejected this lifelike copying - their charioteers sometimes have a human head on the body of a bird or insect, or some kind of ant-eater like monster, on half staters attributed to the Baiocasses.

Don't think that we invented riddles - the Celtic engravers showed us the way. With these coins, it's a case of hide and seek. It takes effort to see the dagger below the neck on the half-staters of the Unelli, and its twin on the other side, beneath the horse. And how about those rare silver drachmae, copied from coins of Ampurias, which show a different image when you turn the face upside down? It's become the carnyx, or war trumpet, ringing out the call to arms. A great gathering of warriors, the Celts are coming!



5. Gold stater of the Aulerci
Cenomani with man-horse. LT 6852.

Watch out, the human headed horse of the Aulerci Cenomani is bolting, mane flowing in the wind! (fig.5) It's no use trying to shut the stable door, thanks to his wings he's up and away... get mounted up in your dreams and race along with him, you won't regret it!

In our world, everything is standardized and uniform.

Among the Celts, the imagination is infinite, fantasy unlimited, and freedom absolute. The artist had only to obey his imagination, his universe had no boundaries; men, plants and animals were melded together, entangled. One form led into another. This movement, this teeming of ideas, is everlasting, like

life itself. And that's why, more and more, I like Celtic coins!

Dr Brigitte Fischer, a research associate of the Centre of Celtic Studies in Paris, has written extensively on Celtic coins and will be speaking at Celtic Coinage 2001 in Oxford, 6 December.

Chris Rudd fixed price List 59, 2001.