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# When we were free

**T**HIS November, towards the end of a brexitly-vexing year, a coin is coming up for sale that should make millions of Britons feel better about themselves. It is a Christian coin—Christian in the sense that it was struck around the time of Jesus's death (*circa* AD 30 if he was born *circa* 6 BC). And it is a patriotic coin, symbolic of the time when Britain was "leader of the free world" in western Europe. I refer to the first half of the 1st century AD, when nations now known as France, Germany (west of the Rhine), Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Spain and Portugal had all surrendered to the military might of Rome and to the fiscal fist of the dominant *denarius* (Rome's "euro currency") and when Britain alone (or more accurately the British Isles alone) remained free from imperial enslavement—uncrushed, unconquered and still minting its own tribal monies. That patriotic freedom-symbolic coin is a corn-ear gold stater of King Cunobelinus of *Camulodunon* (modern-day Colchester, Essex). More specifically I refer to his Classic Type gold stater, struck at the height of his power as the most potent "leader of the free world" in Atlantic Europe. Before I discuss the coin, let me briefly describe the man behind it.

Cunobelinus ("Hound of Belenus"), Cuno for short, was a son of Tasciovanos ("Killer of Badgers"), King of the Catuvellauni ("Men Excelling in Battle") of Hertfordshire, and may have been born in or near *Verlamion* (St Albans, Hertfordshire), perhaps around 20 BC. As suggested by Geoffrey of Monmouth (*circa* 1136), Hollinshed (1587), Carte (1747), Barnard (1776) and Professor John Creighton (2000, 2006), Cunobelinus may have been raised and educated by Augustus in Rome, as an *obses*, a sort of "foster-hostage", along with other young "native" princes from the fringes of the Roman Empire. The *obsides* system was a way of grooming young princes to be compliant future kings and of meanwhile guaranteeing the good behaviour of their fathers back home.

Regardless of whether Cunobelinus was schooled in Rome, he seems to have been an extraordinarily forceful and effective ruler, apparently friendly to Rome, or at least respectful of Rome, and apparently modelling himself on his (possible) former mentor, Augustus. Early in the first decade of the 1st century AD, he acquired *Camulodunon* while his father was still alive and made it his capital. During a reign of over 30 years Cunobelinus consolidated the merger of the Catuvellauni and Trinovantes ("Battle Slayers"), although it was actually more of a total takeover, and turned *Camulodunon*, formerly a large defended royal farm, into Britain's most important *oppidum* and international trade centre, covering ten square miles.

By the time of his death (c. AD 41–42) Cunobelinus and his family had mastered most of southeast Britain, with his brother Epaticcus ("Leader of Horsemen") ruling the Atrébates in north Hampshire and his son, Amminus, ruling the Cantiaci in Kent. Cunobelinus also seems to have carried some clout with the Dobunni in the West Midlands, the Iceni in northern East Anglia and the Corieltavi in the northeast. He was called "King of the Britons" by the Roman

historian Suetonius (*Caligula* 44), remembered by medieval Welsh chroniclers and immortalised as *Cymbeline* by Shakespeare. Moreover his beloved *Camulodunon*, mentioned on no fewer than 44 of the 75 different coins he issued, was "most probably the source of Camelot, which figures prominently in Continental and English Arthurian literature from the 13th century onwards," says Professor John Koch (*Celtic Culture*, Vol. 1, pp. 337 and 339). Cunobelinus, in my view, was the last great independent king in iron age Europe. It would be 700 years before Britain would have another independent king—Offa of Mercia—of similar power and prestige, both at home and abroad.

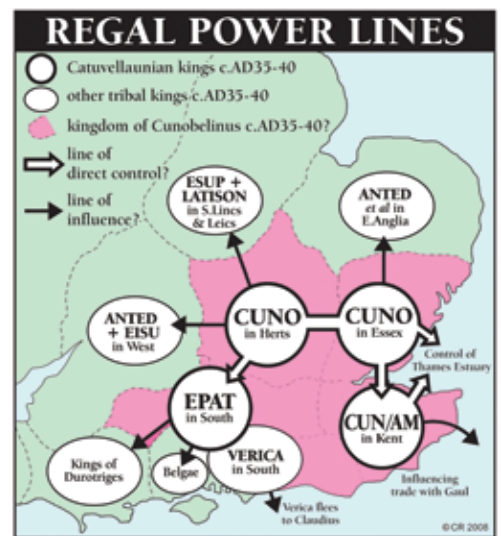
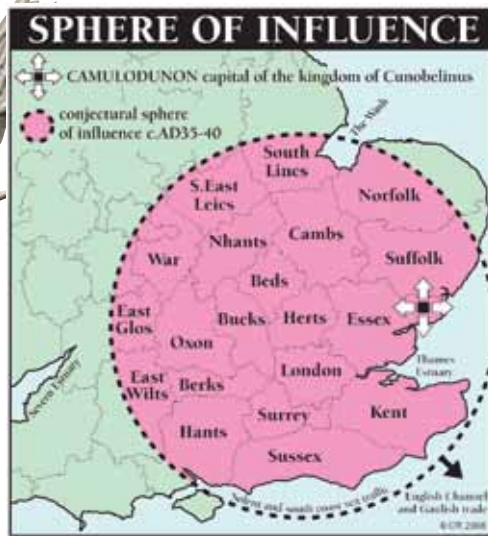
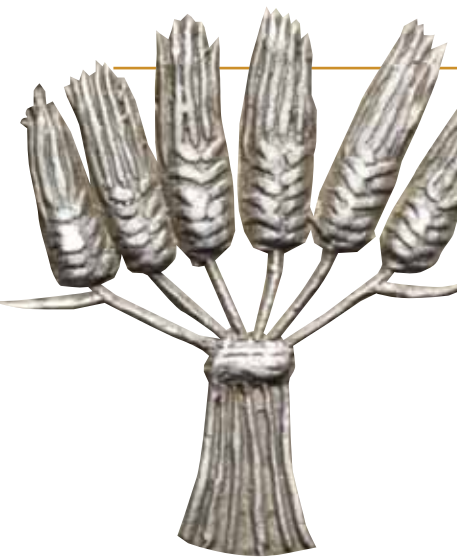
It has been estimated that during his long reign as "leader of the free world" in Atlantic Europe Cunobelinus issued about a million gold staters (Derek Allen, "Cunobelin's gold", *Britannia* 6, 1975, p. 6). Of all these coins the one that best sums up the success of their creator is the Classic Type corn-ear gold stater. The whiskered ear of barley, thrusting up through CAMV (short for *Camulodunon*, "Fort of Camulos"), symbolises male potency, female fertility and commercial prosperity. The ear of barley may also be indicative of a regal brewery at *Camulodunon*; in ancient Ireland it is said that beer brewed by Gobniu, smith of the

*In Atlantic Europe Britain alone remained free until the Claudian conquest of AD 43.*



*Symbol of Britain's pre-Roman freedom and prosperity. Cunobelinus Classic gold stater c. AD 30–40, ABC 2798 var. To be sold November 18.*





Cuno's kingdom in AD 40 probably covered Essex, Herts., Beds., S. Suffolk, S. Cambs, S. Northants, S. Oxon, London and N. Kent—maybe Berks, N. Hants and Surrey too. His sphere of influence was surely much wider.

Cuno's power probably extended well beyond the borders of his kingdom. Did other kings pay homage and tribute to him? And did he, like Augustus, rule with the aid of client kings?

gods, was called "the drink of kings". Geoffrey Ashe says that Cunobelinus featured an ear of barley on his coins "as a retort to Verica's vine-leaf, opposing British beer to imported [Roman] wine. Fragments of many wine jars in his own country suggest that his nobles did not live up to this sturdy patriotism" (*Kings and Queens of Early Britain*, 1982, p. 31).

Cunobelinus was employing a Roman-trained engraver at his mint. This shouldn't surprise us. Cunobelinus was evidently a pro-Roman ruler, importing Roman luxury goods, using Roman imagery on many of his coins and doubtless in diplomatic contact with the Roman administration. As Professor John Creighton says, "I think the British court was probably riddled with Romans" (*Coins and Power in Late Iron Age Britain*, 2000, p. xi).

The Cunobelinus Classic Type gold stater illustrated on page 35 will be auctioned in Aylsham by Elizabeth Cottam on November 18.

Did this tetradrachm of Augustus, c. 27–26 BC, inspire Cuno's corn-ear staters? Sold by Numismatica Ars Classica NAC AG, Zurich, May 9, 2018, Auction 106, lot 539, for CHF 5,000. (© Numismatica Ars Classica NAC AG.)

If Cunobelinus had grown up in Rome, as some have suggested, then I think it's likely that his corn-ear gold staters were inspired by a silver tetradrachm of Augustus which has six bunched corn-ears dividing AVGV-STVS just as Cuno's barley splits CA-MV. The heavily muscled rearing stallion is clearly an untamed unbridled wild stallion which symbolises the strength and independence of Cunobelinus himself. The realistic manner in which this horse is portrayed and the neat lettering strongly indicate that

Not all Britons were free. Cuno could have traded British slaves for Roman wine. This silver coin from Kent (ABC 231) shows a wine amphora and slave-chains.



Most heads on Cuno's coins are Roman style. This doesn't mean he was educated in Rome nor that he was pro-Roman. But it could be a clue, couldn't it?

Ubiquitous barley on Cuno's gold coins might suggest this "Essex boy" was a big-time brewer. Ancient Irish tradition says beer was "the drink of kings". (Image from Wikipedia/ EC—(coin) F.W.Fairholt 1864 (beer and barley).



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