

CHRIS RUDD

Hidden faces on Celtic coins

ON Thursday, May 17, 2018, metal detectorist Dean Whale unearthed an exceedingly rare Ancient British gold coin near Little Shoddesden, Hampshire, in the former territory of a tribe or tribes known today as the “Hampshire Belgae”. Only two other examples are known of this coin, a gold quarter stater we call “Corded Crescents”. The first was found over seven years ago near Newbury, Berkshire; the second came from near Winchester in 2014 (see COIN NEWS, August 2014, p. 16).

The most remarkable feature of this Corded Crescents quarter stater is that it conceals no fewer than six stylised faces. At first glance you may find it hard to believe that there is even one face on this coin, never mind six. However, if you look more closely at the reconstructed die drawings, I think you will agree that there is at least the possibility of some hidden faces here. I’m by no means the only person who can see—or imagines he can see—such faces.

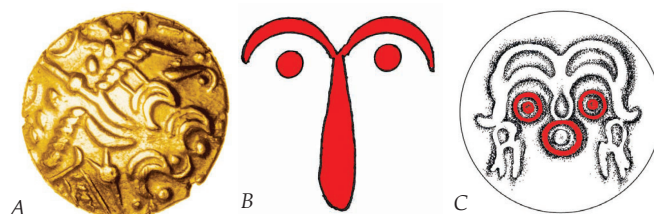
In 1988 the American numismatist, Robert Van Arsdell, wrote:

“A hidden face on an Ancient British stater has eluded numismatists for 200 years. Tasciovanos hid the face on his staters—and it only took me seven years of owning one of them to see it. I should have been on the lookout, mind you. It’s no secret Celtic artists liked to hide faces in their artwork. Take any harmless-looking abstract pattern and, chances are, there’s a face lurking there for you to find. It was partly a challenge to the viewer: ‘So how long is it going to take you to see THIS?’ Well, seven years is about right, I guess. But there’s more to it than that. The Celts had a fine appreciation for the surreal. They loved now-you-see-it/now-you-don’t images, Cheshire-cat faces appearing and disappearing, foregrounds that fade into backgrounds as new images leap to your attention. The art tied in with their religion—things are not what they seem, behind everyday scenes lurk unseen forces manipulating the action. Forces that must be reckoned with and—at times—placated.” (Numismatic Circular, April 1988, p. 78).



Corded Crescents gold quarter stater with hidden bearded head, not dissimilar in style to head on a bronze flagon, c. 450 BC, from Basse-Yutz, NE France. (picture B (flagon head) from Paul Jacobsthal, *Early Celtic Art*, OUP 1969, pl. 180, 381b, © The British Museum.)

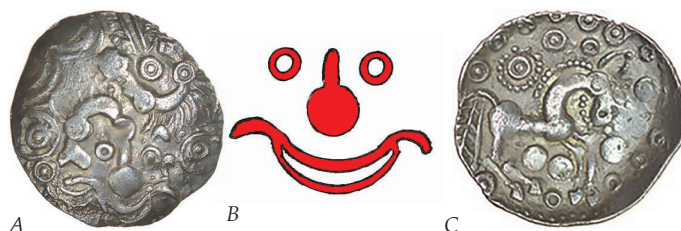
Die reconstruction reveals that no fewer than six stylised faces are concealed in the Corded Crescents gold quarter stater. (Drawn by EC/CR.)



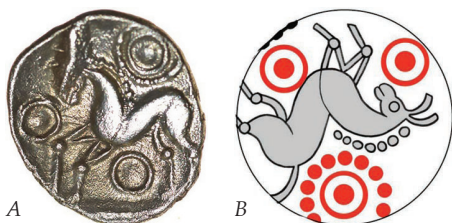
Crescentic faces and ithyphallic faces are hidden within the wreath motif of many early Ancient British gold coins. (B drawn by EC/CR; C drawn by Jane Bottomley.)



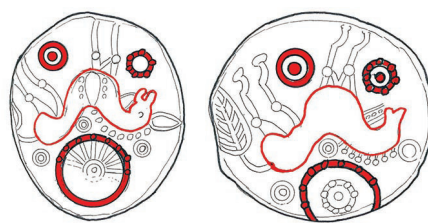
Two crescents are often used to form little faces that can seem sad or glad, depending which way up you look at them.



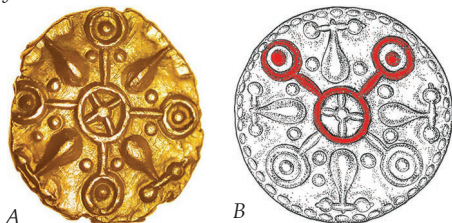
This newly discovered silver coin, unpublished and apparently unique, conceals a comical blob-nosed face not seen before. (B drawn by EC/CR.)



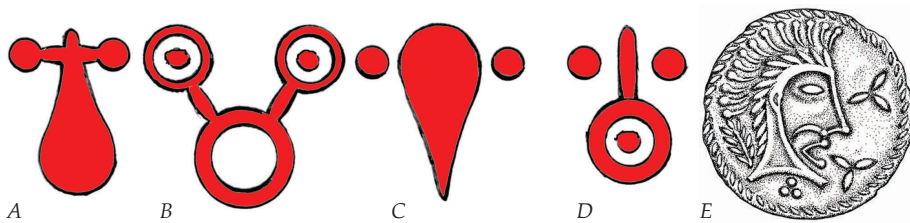
Many silver coins of the Iceni and Corieltavi have well-hidden shouting faces, visible only when the horse is upside down (Rich Type 16a). (B drawn by Matthew Rich.)



Shouting-face coins often use the upturned horse's body to make a Celtic warrior-style walrus moustache (ABC 1516). (Drawn by EC/CR.)



The Gisleham Glory gold quarter stater (ABC 1492) conceals as many as 16 stylised faces. Here's just one. (B drawn by Jane Bottomley.)

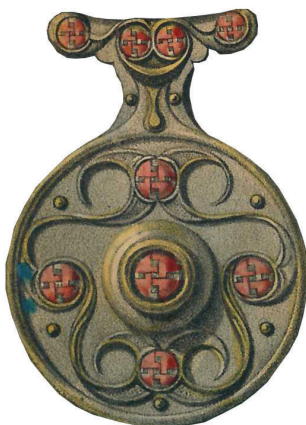


Phalloid faces (A, C) and shouting faces (B, D) from Gisleham Glory gold coin. V-shaped "shouting mouth" occurs on coins such as the Norfolk God (E). (A–D drawn by Jane Bottomley.)



Addedomarus gold stater (ABC 2514) with well-hidden shouting face. Such faces can be seen on many different iron age artefacts.

Detail from the Battersea Shield, c. 350–50 BC, showing small phalloid hidden face with crescentic horns and colossal shouting mouth. (Detail from lithograph by O. Jewitt in John Kemble, *Horae Ferales*, 1863, pl.XV.) ▶



Some of the many hidden faces tucked away on gold and silver coins of the Corieltavi of Lincolnshire. (Drawn by Jane Bottomley.)



Cheriton Smiler gold stater of the Hampshire Belgae (ABC 755) and smiley silver coin of Verica, king of the Regni and Atrebatas (ABC 1220).



Smiley faces on Iceni gold stater (ABC 1441) and Dobunni bronze mirror, c. 10 BC–AD 70, from Birdlip, Glos., now in British Museum. (C drawn by Jody Joy (after E. M. Jope, 2000, pl. 244), *Iron Age Mirrors: A biographical approach*, BAR British Series 518, 2010, p. 93, fig.A6.)



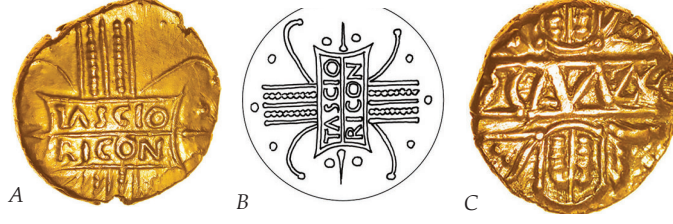
Smiley faces on two Iceni gold quarter staters and rare Iceni silver unit struck from die of gold quarter stater.



Gold stater of Tasciovanos "Killer of Badgers". The hidden badger-faces play on the king's name.



The same faces occur on this rare gold stater of Andoco (ABC 2715). How many can you see?



Two heart-shaped faces (of the war-god Camulos?) are hiding on this Tasciovanos gold stater and Cunobelinus gold quarter stater. (B drawn by Rainer Kretz.)



A



B



C

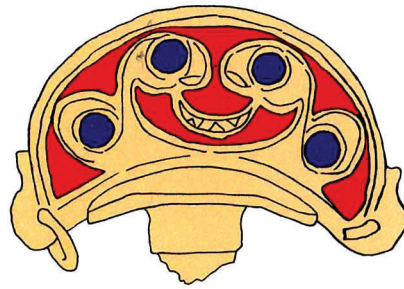
Hidden faces are also found on a few bronze coins of Celtic Britain (ABC 737, 2190, 2688). (A and C drawn by Jane Bottomley.)

Two questions spring to mind: one, whose little faces are these that we see concealed on British Celtic coins? Two, who is primarily responsible for incorporating these faces in the design—the engraver, the ruler who commissioned the coins to be minted or someone else?

Looking at these highly stylised faces with their almost childlike features, I cannot conceive that they are meant to represent human beings; indeed, in a few cases the faces look more like animals or birds. I think they are more plausibly regarded as “spirit faces”—otherworldly faces or Celtic deities or supernatural forces.

I feel these human faces have a religious, mythological or magical meaning—a shadowy meaning that is unknown to us today and likely to remain unknowable. If, as I suspect, these faces were imbued with some sort of sacred or shamanic power, then I believe the people behind them—the people mainly responsible for them appearing in coin designs—were Druids.

How influential were the Druids in Britain during the hundreds of years when Ancient British coins were being minted? If we can believe the testimony of Caesar, then the



The smiley face on this Iceni linchpin from Colne Fen, Cambs., is like the smiley face on Iceni coins. “The art tied in with their religion” says Van Arsdell. (Drawn by Jennifer Foster in *Celtic Art in Europe: Making Connections*, ed. C. Gosden, S. Crawford and K. Ulmschneider, Oxbow, 2014, pl. 16.)

Druids were perhaps more powerful in Britain than they were in Gaul. Commenting on Druidic teaching, Caesar says: “It is thought that this system of training was invented in Britain and taken from there to Gaul, and at the present time [c. 53 BC] diligent students of the matter mostly travel there [Britain] to study it” (*De Bello Gallico* 6.13). This suggests to me that the Druids could have been incredibly influential in pre-Roman Britain.

As you can see from the examples illustrated in this brief review, hidden faces on British Celtic coins take different forms. Some are sad, others glad. Some are friendly, others fierce, especially those with a shouting mouth. Some are easy to spot, once you know what to look for, while others will always be difficult to discern. Some 12 of the coins shown here, including the first, will be auctioned in Aylsham on November 17, 2019. For a free catalogue email liz@celticcoins.com. For their help I thank Rainer Kretz, Dr Jennifer Foster, Dr Jody Joy, Robert Van Arsdell and Elizabeth Cottam.

Picture credits

Images courtesy Chris Rudd unless otherwise stated.