

CHRIS RUDD

The Belgic Boat People

They came as migrants and became kings

OVER 2,000 years ago, it seems that wave after wave of Belgic migrants from northern Gaul crossed the Channel and settled in Britain, especially during and immediately after Caesar's Gallic Wars (58–51 BC).

Some evidence of these migrations comes from archaeology and from Caesar himself, who wrote that, "*Belgic immigrants came [to Britain] to plunder and make war—nearly all of them retaining the names of the tribes from which they originated—and later settled down to till the soil*" (*De bello gallico* 5.12). Other evidence comes from British coins issued by Belgic tribes north and south of the River Thames. I'll briefly describe seven such coins, all from our 30th Anniversary Sale (Norwich, November 19, 2023). References cited are *Ancient British Coins* (ABC), Chris Rudd 2010, and John Sills, *Divided Kingdoms: The Iron Age gold coinage of southern England* (DK), Chris Rudd 2017.

South of the Thames

Belgic peoples south of the Thames ("Southern Region") included the Regni ("the proud, stiff ones"), the Atrebatas ("the settlers") and the Belgae of Hampshire, who included many rich Belgic migrants who issued coins. They were all welded into a single kingdom for a while by Commios, a royal Belgic migrant.

One of several British quarter staters from Dorset,



Hampshire Thunderbolt gold quarter stater of the Belgae, c. 55–45 BC, ABC 767, (DK 304). Found near Whitchurch, Hants.

Hampshire, Kent and Essex whose boat-and-thunderbolt imagery is derived from Continental Belgic quarter staters, particularly those of the Morini, a coastal tribe whose name means "sea people". Dr Daphne Nash Briggs, author of *Coinage in the Celtic World* (Seaby 1987, Spink 2004), suggests that this coin shows a mythical sun-boat carrying twin brothers of the sun-maiden and that one of the Heavenly Twins is fending off a sea-serpent (*Chris Rudd List 104*, March 2009).

Celtic boars commonly signify courage in combat, making



Droxford Two Boars silver unit of the Belgae, c. 50–30 BC, ABC–, unpublished new type. Found near Droxford, Hants.

them apt tribal mascots of the bellicose Belgae, who gave their name to Belgium. However, as denizens of dark forests where Druids worshipped, they can also represent the wisdom of the night and be bringers of the light. Druids measured time in

nights, not days. That's why I think these two ever-revolving boars are night-boars and why each has a big beaded sun between their legs which they deliver each dawn; "*as the day follows night, from the darkness comes light*". This new British type is blatantly Belgic. Its obverse is almost identical to the obverse of two bronze coins of the Continental Belgae. Indeed, I think that the same engraver—a Belgic migrant—could have cut the dies for this British coin. Dr John Sills and Dr Daphne Nash Briggs think so too.

Commios, a former ally of Caesar who made him King of the



Tincomarus Tincom Commi gold quarter stater of the Southern Region, c. 25 BC–AD 10, ABC 1073, (DK 340). Found Stratfield Mortimer, Berks.

Atrebatas, a Belgic tribe in northern Gaul, was unquestionably the most famous of the Belgic "boat people" to migrate to Britain. He had already crossed the Channel twice before, in 55 and 54 BC, on behalf of Caesar. Some years after he fled to Britain in about 50 BC, Commios seems to have taken total control of all the tribes and sub-tribes in Hampshire and West Sussex, including all the recent coin-issuing migrants, and made himself the strongest king south of the Thames. With this mint-state quarter stater, brashly branded TINCOM COMMI, Tincomarus, the eldest son of Commios, legitimises his succession to his famous father's Belgic throne. Tincomarus means "the big fish" (*COIN NEWS*, July 1996).

Verica ("the high one", as in "His Highness") was the third



Verica Vine Leaf, Prancing Horse gold stater of the Southern Region, c. AD 10–40, ABC–, (DK 366). Ex Reading Hoard, Hants., 1991.

so-called "son of Commios" and by far the most successful king of this powerful Belgic dynasty, which apparently continued to thrive after the Roman conquest of Britain. The vine leaf on this magnificent gold stater from the Royal Berkshire Collection suggests that King Verica probably imported many boat-loads of fine Italian wine.

North of the Thames

“Belgic immigrants came [to Britain] to plunder and make war—nearly all of them retaining the names of the tribes from which they originated—and later settled down to till the soil” (*De bello gallico* 5.12).

The two main tribes north of the Thames were the Trinovantes (“battle slayers”) and the Catuvellauni (“men excelling in battle”) who were probably related to migrants from the Catalauni, a minor Belgic tribe in northeast France. By the AD 30s, the Catuvellauni were the most powerful tribe in Britain.

Named after the huge gold hoard found at Whaddon Chase, Bucks., in 1849 (*COIN NEWS*, May 2007), this gold



Middle Whaddon Chase gold stater of the Catuvellauni, c. 55–45 BC, ABC 2445, DK 470. Found near Silchester, Hants.

stater was almost certainly struck by Cassivellaunos. Belgic by birth and belligerent by nature, he was commander of the British coalition against Caesar in 54 BC, probably King of the Catuvellauni, and most likely the founder of Britain’s richest and strongest Belgic dynasty. How many hidden faces can you see on the obverse?

Like the previous coin, this too was almost certainly issued by Cassivellaunos. Moreover, both of these and many other



Whaddon Bird silver unit of the Catuvellauni, c. 55–45 BC, ABC 2481. Found near Kettering, Northants.

early Catuvellauni coins, have winged motifs—two under the head, another in front of the horse—plus a big bird flying above the horse. Is this the head of a winged war-goddess? Was she called Bodua (“the crow”) or Catubodua (“battle-crow”)?

Another silver unit (ABC 2471, DK 595) thought to be a portrait coin of Cassivellaunos shows him wearing a winged helmet. So maybe a winged battle-goddess for the winged warlord of “men excelling in battle” (the Catuvellauni) isn’t so fanciful after all.

This very Belgic, very warlike, gold stater shows that Tasciovanos (“killer of badgers”) is *rigon*, which means



Tasciovanos Tascio Rigon gold stater of the Catuvellauni, c. 25 BC–AD 10, ABC 2580, (DK 515). Found near Lichfield, Staffs.

“king” or “high king”, and shows him riding into battle wearing chain-mail armour and a helmet. Possibly a nephew of Cassivellaunos, he was definitely the daddy of Cunobelinus, the most potent tribal king of his time in Atlantic Europe, and definitely the granddad of Caratacus, a great Belgic warrior and Britain’s first famous freedom-fighter.

They became kings



The first British bronze coin to show a ship, probably built for cross Channel use. Struck c. AD 15–35 by the Belgic king, Cunobelinus (ABC 2939).

The Belgic “boat people” transformed the culture and politics of southeast Britain. They created the two most dynamic dynasties of pre-Roman Britain—one south of the Thames and the other north of the Thames. They came as migrants and became kings. Yet, unlike the Anglo-Saxons and Normans, hardly anyone has heard of the Belgae. If you want to know more, study their coins.

Images shown twice actual size.

My first article about Celtic coins was published over 30 years ago by the late John Mussell (*COIN NEWS*, October 1991). I respectfully and gratefully dedicate this one to him.

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