Kings And Coins In Medieval England

William II (1087-1100)

Fig.1. Carlisle Castle as it appeared in a photograph taken c.1890-1900 (Library of Congress).

"He appeared to be… a man void of understanding, and inconstant in all his ways, impious towards God and grievous to the church; a disregarder of marriage, thoroughly wanton, draining the resources of the kingdom by the most lavish expenditure, and, when these failed, seizing on the property of his subjects for such like purposes."

William of Newburgh (1136?–1198?) **Historia Rerum Anglicarum**

Introduction

In last month's feature I explored the impact on the coinage of the Norman Conquest under William I, this month I look at the coins of his successor William Rufus and examine how they were manufactured at the mint and found use in society under the first two Norman kings of England.

Background

The death of William I in 1087 posed a serious problem of succession in England and Normandy. William had three surviving legitimate sons – Robert, William and Henry, but was adamant that it should be William, not Robert, who succeeded him in England.

He left instructions with Archbishop Lanfranc to this end and William II was crowned at Westminster on 26 September 1087 thus temporarily dividing the realm from Normandy. William was born around 1060. The Rufus moniker was applied posthumously and alludes to his red hair and complexion. He was a short, muscular man with a protruding belly and was always dressed in the latest fashion. He was brave and chivalrous but lacked eloquence in public and was known to frequently shout the oath "by the face of Lucca".

Upon his assumption of the throne at the age of 27 one of his first acts was to distribute his father's treasure among the churches and the counties as had been

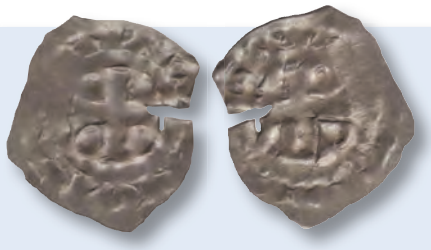

Fig.2. Silver denier of Normandy (Dumas Group D) (© Fitzwilliam Museum).

his wish before he died. Despite this early currying of favour the chronicles are not positive about William II's reign as the quote from William of Newburgh shows, but from the Norman perspective he did achieve a number of important things. In terms of the extending of his kingdom he defeated an invading force under Malcolm III of Scotland in 1092 and pushed the northern frontier into Cumbria, establishing an English borough there, raising a castle at Carlisle in 1093, and planting settlers under the lordship of Ralph de Briquessart (Fig.1.). Although unsuccessful in invading Wales in 1096 and 1097 he was able to establish settlers around Abergavenny, Caerleon and Glamorgan. A rebellion orchestrated by his brother Robert was crushed by William in 1080 and was followed up in 1091 by an invasion of Normandy which forced Robert to come to terms with William.

Brothers In Arms – Curthose & Beauclerc

William's elder brother Robert had effectively governed Normandy for their father and although missing out on the English crown he did succeed to the dukedom of Normandy probably thanks to the urging of the barons rather than the wishes of the Conqueror. The immobilised coinage of Normandy was of very poor workmanship by the time of Robert's reign (Fig.2.) and has defied a classification to individual dukes.

William and Robert each agreed that should either of them die childless the other would be named his successor thus unifying the two realms as they had been under the Conqueror. Robert was known as "Curthose" based on his French nickname "short boots".

In 1096 after Pope Urban II's sermon

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Fig.3. Billon denier of Cyprus struck for Guy de Lusignan (1186-1196) depicting the Holy Sepulchre on the reverse (© Trustees of the British Museum).

Fig.4. Silver penny of William II (BMC I) struck by Niall at Thetford (© Fitzwilliam Museum).

Fig.5. Silver penny of William II (BMC II) struck by Aelstan at Rochester and found near Eastbourne, East Sussex (© PAS: SUSS-CBA1F6).

Fig.6. Silver penny of William II (BMC III) probably struck by Wibern at Cambridge and found at Chinnor, Oxfordshire (© PAS: BERK-D90D06). The obverse of this type is reminiscent of his father's two stars type, harking back to the appearance of comets and the good omens these were thought to be.

Fig.7. Silver penny of William II (BMC IV) struck by Sprot at Southwark (© Fitzwilliam Museum).

Fig.8. Silver penny of William II (BMC V) struck by Ordgar at London (© Fitzwilliam Museum). Type V coins are generally of a smaller module and carry neater and more elaborate designs than the earlier types.

at Clermont Robert joined the expedition which became known as the First Crusade which sought to take the Holy Land back from the infidel. In fact, he was so cash-strapped that he was forced to mortgage the duchy to William for 10,000 marks of silver in return for the custody and revenues of Normandy for three years. Robert set off towards Rome and southern Italy, alongside his uncle, Bishop Odo of Bayeux. Robert wintered in southern Italy among the Norman settlers there and stayed for a period at Constantinople entertained by the emperor Alexius.

Robert saw action against the Muslims at Nicaea, Dorylaeum and Antioch and advanced on Jerusalem with the Christian force which took the city in 1099. William of Malmesbury asserts that, after the capture of Jerusalem, Robert declined the crown, although his chaplain Arnulf became acting patriarch. Robert commanded the centre of the crusading forces at the battle of Ascalon when the standard of the emir Malik al-Afdhal was captured and Robert presented it to the church of the Holy Sepulchre (Fig.3.).

Robert was widely well regarded thanks to his part in the First Crusade but he was still travelling back from the Holy Land when his brother William died. However, this is not the last we'll hear from Robert. For his part, Henry Beauclerc had played his two elder brothers off against one another to his own advantage, but eventually both came together in 1091 to oust him from his stronghold at Mont St Michel. By the second half of the 1090s Henry was once again in the king's favour and against Robert with the **Anglo-Saxon Chronicle** reporting that he "crossed back to Normandy with great treasures, in fealty to the king against their brother". Henry would be well positioned to benefit from the death of William while Robert was on crusade.

The Coins

Five coin types have been attributed to William II and very much follow in the style of his father's issues. The first type depicted the king in profile (Fig.4.) as was the case in William I's first type. The drawn sword might be seen as a device to intimidate his subjects as William was certainly a successful military leader. The second type reverts to a facing bust (Fig.5.). The king again is shown in militaristic stance brandishing a sword similar to type IV pennies of his father. In the third type we see the return of stars flanking the king as we had seen under the Conqueror's type V (Fig.6.).

The appearance of comets was seen as fortuitous. The **Anglo-Saxon Chronicle** for 1097 records that "then at St Michael's mass there appeared an extraordinary star, shining in the evening, and soon going to its setting. It was seen in the south-west, and the ray that stood from it seemed very long, shining south-east; and almost all the week it appeared in this wise. Many men supposed that it was a comet".

Rufus' fourth type returned to the militaristic holding of a sword over the right shoulder (Fig.7.). In the final type of William II the sword is replaced by a sceptre with a fleur head with the reappearance of a star to the right of the king (Fig.8.). It has been suggested that the

Fig.10. Silver cut farthing of William II (BMC III) found at Fincham, Norfolk (© PAS NMS-6918C0).

Fig.9. Coin die of William I. This upper or trussell die carries the less-complex reverse image of the coin, naming mint and moneyer. These upper dies would wear out more quickly than the lower ones as they bore the brunt of the hammer. The inscription shows that it was used to strike coins in the name of the moneyer Ethelric of Wareham (© Trustees of the British Museum).

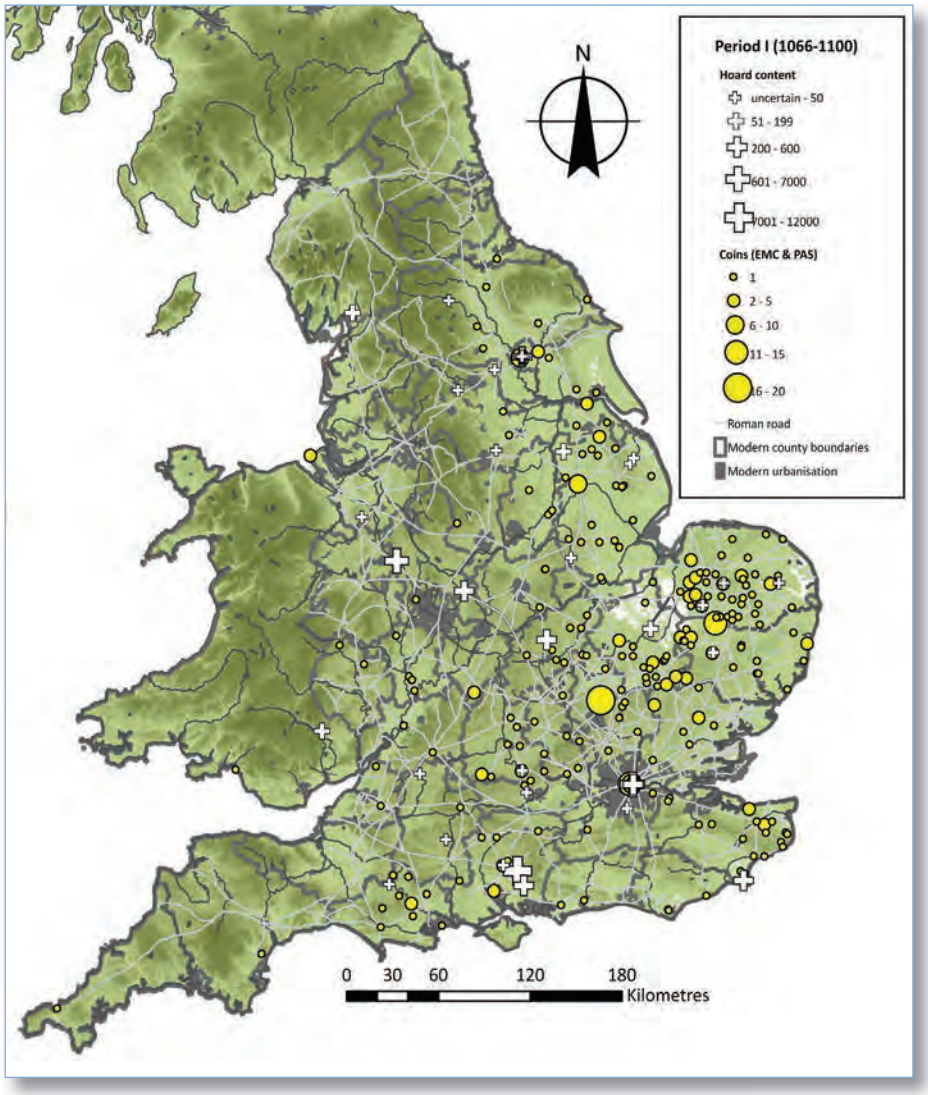

Fig.11. Distribution map of hoards buried in the reigns of William I and II compared against single finds (© Richard Kelleher).

sceptre was an indication that the king would do justice to his subjects in his new Palace of Justice at Westminster.

Manufacture & Circulation

In this period coins were produced by beating silver into a sheet and cutting discs out of this. The blank silver flan would then be struck between two iron dies bearing the obverse (front) and reverse (back) designs of the coins. The top die, called a trussell, bore the reverse design and as these dies would take the majority of the impact of the hammer they would break more often than the lower die, or pile. Because of this the less elaborate reverse design was engraved on this die (Fig.9.) and studies have shown that two reverse dies were used for each obverse die.

The only coins minted under the first two Norman kings were pennies which would be cut into halves and quarters to produce halfpennies and farthings (Fig. 10.). This system was to remain in place for the next 200 years until Edward I introduced round fractional coins on a permanent basis. For the vast majority of the peasantry, coins had yet to become a staple of everyday life. However, we do know that coins were beginning to permeate society beyond the urban centres and high status sites we would expect to find them in and into the countryside. Metal detector finds have been a vital tool is establishing this fact.

In last month's article we saw a distribution map of single finds of the coins of William I and II; this month we'll take a look at the pattern of hoarding. There are almost 40 hoards dated 1066-1100 from England and Wales and these are generally better spread than the single finds (Fig.11.).

There is correlation visible in areas like East Anglia, London, Oxfordshire/Berkshire, Hampshire and Dorset as well as parts of Northamptonshire, Lincolnshire and York. In contrast to this the eastern Pennines, the East Midlands, South Wales and Cumbria include hoards where single finds are virtually absent, such as the Abergavenny hoard of 199 coins found in 2002 (Fig.12.).

This hoard comprised both William I

Fig.12. The Abergavenny hoard of silver pennies to William I (© Portable Antiquities Scheme).

Fig.13. Interior of Westminster Hall looking south drawn by Frederick Nash (1782-1856) (© Trustees of the British Museum).

coins (69) and those of Edward the Confessor (130) but the absence of Edward's latest types in the hoard led the numismatist investigating the find to conclude that the hoard combines two sums of money gathered several years apart. This fact hints at the variety of circumstances under which coins could be hoarded and thus the different conclusions one can draw from different "types" of hoard. Interestingly the larger hoards tend to be in the south and west of the country away from the densest single find concentrations with the largest and most famous hoards coming from Beauworth (Hants.) and Oulton (Staffs.).

The shifting hoard patterns in the northern earldoms and the clustering of finds around York (c.1069-75) have been plausibly linked with the uneasy conditions brought about by the Norman advance and the putting down of northern rebellions in 1069 and 1070.

Death & Legacy

William II was killed in a hunting accident probably near Brockenhurst in the New Forest (Hampshire) on 2 August 1100. A stray arrow reportedly fired by a nobleman named Walter Tirel pierced the king's chest, killing him instantly. By all accounts the king's noble companions, including his younger brother Henry (who was crowned three days later), abandoned him where he lay, but the body was later taken by cart to Winchester Cathedral where some of the long bones remain scattered among the royal mortuary chests to this day.

Much of William's bad press came from the fact that those responsible for writing his history were churchmen and his reputation was as an impious man who extorted the church. They saw his death as an Act of God and just punishment for a wicked king. He had, however, maintained good order and justice in England and restored good peace to Normandy and under his rule his father's White Tower in London was completed, Battle Abbey was consecrated and the Great Hall at Westminster was built (Fig.13.). His effect on the coinage was barely perceptible continuing, as he did, his father's system unchanged. However, under his brother Henry, who we will meet in the next article, the story of the English coinage takes a new direction.

Further Reading

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