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# How King Sam of Kent came back from the dead

**S**HORTLY after daybreak on a chilly Saturday morning, January 16, 2016, in a grassy field near Deal on the east coast of Kent, metal detectorist Charlie Gibbens unearthed a 2,000 year old gold coin of the highest rarity, possibly unique (figure 1). It was an Ancient British gold stater struck early in the 1st century AD by a little known ruler of the Cantiaci ("people of Cantion"), a confederacy of four tribes who occupied the county of Kent in the late iron age. What makes this coin particularly important is that it is believed to be the first known gold stater—the only known gold stater—of King Sam of Kent. "A fantastic coin", says Dr John Sills, "Almost as important as the Anarevito stater" (see COIN NEWS, December 2010, p. 10; *Current Archaeology* 250, January 2011, p. 7).

Some 20 years ago nobody had heard of King Sam of Kent. Bronze units inscribed SA (ABC 375 [ABC number refers to *Ancient British Coins* by Chris Rudd]) had been recorded from Kent since 1864, and silver units (ABC 369) since the early 1980s, but nobody knew who had issued them (figure 7). The man who really brought King Sam "back from the dead" was archaeologist Dr Philip de Jersey of Guernsey (figure 5), author of *Coin Hoards in Iron Age Britain* (Spink 2014) and co-author of *Ancient British Coins* (Chris Rudd 2010). Following the discovery of a bronze half-unit inscribed SAM (ABC 381), Philip realised that SA and SAM were one and the same person—a man who ruled in north and east Kent around the same time as two other Cantian rulers, Dubnovellaunos and Vosenos. Philip's publication of the SAM half-unit in 1997, together with the conclusions he drew from it, effectively resuscitated King Sam after two millennia of oblivion (*Numismatic Circular*, May 1997).

By 2000 Cantian coin specialist David Holman had recorded 48 coin finds of Sam. He said: "The silver coins have so far been found in west Kent only, but the bronzes have a county-wide distribution . . .

Both Sam and Vosenos can be dated to the very end of the 1st century BC, perhaps overlapping with the latter stages of Dubnovellaunos' reign" (*Archaeologia Cantiana* 120, 2000, p. 213). Four years later Philip de Jersey said that "Sam is known to us only through some 60 coins of three types" (ABC 369, 371, 381). He pointed out some stylistic parallels with early bronze coins of Cunobelin (ABC 2954, 2993) and said: "If we accept these parallels to Cunobelin's bronze, then this has several important implications for the chronology of Sam depending on the direction of influence [my italics]. If the Sam silver unit and bronze half-unit were stylistically influenced by the coins of

Cunobelin, then this presumably cannot have happened until after AD c. 10, when Cunobelin came to power. If the influence operated in the other direction, the Sam coins may have been produced shortly before, or perhaps, during the earliest years of Cunobelin's reign (the Cunobelin bronzes under discussion here seem likely to be among his earliest coins). And to throw another hat in the ring, where does Eppillus fit in? He too has a silver unit (ABC 399) with more than a passing resemblance to the SA issue (ABC 369) and VA 2087 (ABC 2954). At present it's impossible to resolve these problems. But we can suggest any number of possible scenarios in Kent in the first years

of the 1st century AD: could Eppillus have succeeded Dubnovellaunos, in turn replaced by Sam? Or did Sam rule just part of the territory under Eppillus' overall control? Could he have ruled in Kent during the early years of Cunobelin's reign, before Cunobelin's influence became stronger in Kent? And if so, what was his relationship to Cunobelin? (I won't invent another son, not just yet!). Where

does Vosenos fit in to all this? There are no clear answers to any of these questions, but we may yet discover that Sam

overlapped with the early years of Cunobelin, rather than with the later years of Dubnovellaunos, and that he may have had a closer relationship with Cunobelin than has previously been suspected" (Sam, *Chris Rudd List* 74, March 2004, pp. 2–4).

The year 2010 was a landmark one for King Sam of Kent. Having remained unrecognised as a ruler by previous authors of Celtic coin reference books—Evans (1864, 1890), Mack (1953, 1964, 1975), Van Arsdell (1989), Hobbs (1996)—Sam at last won his place in the numismatic sun (his name means "summer"). In *Ancient British Coins* Sam was given his own listing as a Cantian ruler with five different coin types to his

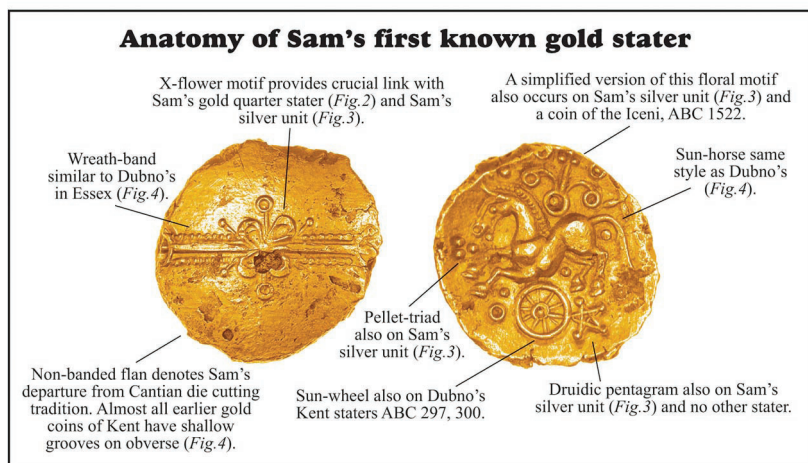


Fig. 1. Even though it bears no name, the style and imagery of this gold stater leave little doubt that it was issued c. AD 1–15 by Sam of Kent. Ex Grant Hilton, to be sold by Chris Rudd, July 17, 2016.



Fig. 2. Sam Cantian Cross Band gold quarter stater, ABC—Unique? Sold by Chris Rudd in 2012 for £4,600.



Fig. 3. Sam Pentagram silver unit, ABC—Only one other recorded. Sold by Spink in 2008 for £2,250.

name—two silver and three bronze—but as yet no gold coins, like other Kentish rulers of his time had been given since the mid 19th century. By 2010 Sam of Kent had truly come back from ancient Britain's long list of dead and forgotten kings. Today no fewer than 90 provenanced coins have been recorded for Sam, all with Kentish findspots, thanks mostly to metal detectorists and the meticulous recording of David Holman.

### Why Sam?

Charlie Gibben's new Sam stater has no name on it. So why am I so sure that it belongs to Sam and not to another Cantian ruler of this period, such as Dubnovellaunos? I offer seven reasons:

1. The four-petal floral motif on a cross (figure 6) also occurs on a silver unit (ABC 372) inscribed [ ]A—almost certainly SA—which has been attributed to Sam (figure 7).
2. This four-petal motif can't be seen on any other Cantian ruler's coins and there is nothing even remotely like it on coins of Dubnovellaunos. So, if silver unit ABC 372 belongs to Sam, then Charlie's gold stater probably does too.
3. The three-branch symbol seen in each angle of ABC 372 seems to be a simplified version of the three-branch symbol seen above the horse on Charlie's stater (figure 6).
4. This three-branch symbol does not occur on any coin of Dubnovellaunos or any other Cantian ruler. Like the four-petal floral motif, it is exclusively Sam's symbol.
5. The pentagram on Charlie's stater (figure 7) is identical to the pentagram on an unscripted variant of ABC 372 which had already been attributed to Sam in 2010 (figure 3).
6. A two-petal version of the floral motif on Charlie's stater also occurs on a Cantian gold quarter stater (figure 2) which is also unscripted and which has a horse identical to the horse on a bronze unit of Sam (ABC 378). If the horse/two-petal no-name quarter stater is Sam's, then the four-petal no-name stater must surely be Sam's as well, and vice versa. The two-petal and four-petal floral motifs, each intersected by a big X, are too similar to belong to different Cantian rulers. They unequivocally signify a denominational pairing (full stater and quarter stater) from the same ruler and, because the four-petal flower is featured on a Sam silver unit (ABC 372), then that same ruler has to be Sam.
7. Other significant Cantian rulers of Sam's era (Dubnovellaunos, Vosenos, Sego, Eppillus, Anarevito) all have at least one gold stater and quarter stater attributed to them. The only significant Cantian ruler of this period (circa 25 BC to AD 15) who has hitherto had no stater or quarter stater assigned to him is King Sam of Kent. The omission is oddly glaring and glaringly odd. In view of the fact that Sam seems to have been a more prolific issuer of coins

(figure 7) than two of his close contemporaries, Vosenos and Anarevito, this apparent absence of Sam gold coinage is all the more puzzling. If Charlie's gold stater and its accompanying gold quarter stater aren't Sam's, whose are they? I can see no other convincing claimant in sight.

I'm not the only person who thinks that the stater belongs to Sam. Dr John Sills, author of *Gaulish and early British gold coinage* (Spink 2003), says: "I reckon it's the first known stater of Sam. The obverse is identical in typology and especially style to the Cantian Cross Band quarter stater (figure 2) and the quarter in turn has a very similar horse and box to ABC 378 bronzes (figure 7), which definitely read SAM, and an obverse that's close to Sam's ABC 372 silver. . . . The absence of a legend on the quarter ironically, increases the likelihood that the stater belongs to Sam".

David Holman, the leading expert in iron age coins of the Cantiaci, says: "An attribution to Sam seems entirely possible . . . The central quatrefoil (figure 6) clearly links with ABC 372, and the object above the horse is of the same basic shape as the objects in the angles of the wreath of ABC 372".

Dr Philip de Jersey, the former keeper of the Celtic Coin Index who first "discovered" Sam in 1997, says: "The case



Fig. 4. Sam's gold stater was inspired by Dubno's Essex stater, ABC 2392. Found Kelvedon, Essex, 15.2.2001. Sold by Chris Rudd for £2,000.



Fig. 5. Dr Philip de Jersey and his son Sam.



Fig. 6. Sam's sunny name (cognate with Samson, Samhain, summer and the Somme) is echoed on his stater by the sun-wheel, four-petal flower and three-stem flower.

for attributing this stater to Sam is persuasive. . . . The parallels in style between this coin and others which we can more reliably attribute to Sam are significant, in particular the floral motif at the centre of the obverse, the three-branch motif above the horse, and the form of the horse itself. . . . The likelihood is that this is a gold stater of Sam”.

### Why no name?

Why didn't Sam stamp his name on his two gold coins? Good question. My short answer is: he probably didn't have the authority to do so because he was probably subservient to a more potent king, who insisted that the only gold coins that could carry his potent royal name were those that he struck himself; silver and bronze coins were less important, less “regal”, so Sam was permitted to put his name on them. My longer answer is as follows:

In the century preceding the Roman invasion of Britain in AD 43 I see the royal politics of the four kingdoms of Cantion—Caesar names four Kentish kings in 54 BC (BG 6.22)—developing in three broad phases:

**Phase 1**, c. 55 to 25 BC, was when *Cantion* was a very prosperous, very powerful confederacy, self-governed by four strong local kings of Kentish origin—Carvilius, Cingetorix, Segovax and Taximagulos—and later by their successors, whose names we don't know. Such was the power of the Cantiaci in the mid-1st century BC, perhaps based on tin trading (the origin of tin-rich potin coins?), that they seem to have had two “colonies” north of the Thames—the main one controlling coastal Essex south of the river Stour including *Camulodunon* (Colchester), and a smaller one to the west, centred on Braughing (*Treasure Hunting*, June 2016, pp. 48–50).

**Phase 2**, c. 25 BC to AD 15, was when *Cantion*, still divided into maybe three or four separate kingdoms, each defined by Kent's three big rivers—the Stour, Medway and Darent—became hotly contested. Phase 2 was when Dubnovellaunos

### Sam's eight coin types

All shown actual size with *Ancient British Coins* reference and approximate rarity. Source: D. Holman.



Sam Hilton Wreath  
gold stater. ABC—. **Unique?** (1)



Sam Cantian Cross Band  
gold quarter stater. ABC—. **Unique?** (1)



Sam Pentagram  
silver unit. ABC—. **RRRR** (2)



Sam Wreath  
silver unit. ABC 372. **Unique?** (1)



Sam Griffin  
silver unit. ABC 369. **RRR** (13)



Sam Boar Branch  
bronze unit. ABC 375. **R** (48)



Sam Lion and Horse  
bronze unit. ABC 378. **RRRR** (4)



Sam Sam  
bronze half unit. ABC 381. **RR** (17)

(figure 4), a Kentish king and maybe grandson of one of the four kings cited by Caesar, emerged as the main contestant in Cantion, dominating north and east Kent and reclaiming Camulodunon, previously lost to Addedomaros of the Catuvellauni. Phase 2 was when Cantion began losing its independence as a self-governing confederacy and was invaded by rulers of more powerful tribes—first by Tasciovanos of the Catuvellauni, then by Eppillus of the Atrebatas with a bit of help from Verica of the Regni. Between c. 10 BC and c. AD 15 the names of five “minor” rulers—Vosenos, Sam, Sego, Touto, Anarevito—appeared on Kentish coins. Quite how these five related to the three “major” rulers—Dubnovellaunos, Tasciovanos, Eppillus—is still unclear. Judging from his banded gold flans, I'd guess Vosenos was allied to Dubnovellaunos and Cantian by birth; maybe Sam was too, but I think he came after Vosenos. Sego was definitely linked to Tasciovanos., and Touto and Anarevito were associated with Eppillus.

**Phase 3**, c. AD 15 to 43, was when Cunobelinus, high king of the Catuvellauni and Trinovantes, took full and lasting control of Cantion, its three or four kingdoms and its eastern gateway to the riches of cross-channel trading. King Sam of Kent may have continued to rule briefly in the early years of Cunobelinus. Sego certainly retained some influence because he is mentioned on a bronze coin of Cuno (ABC 2939) and on three silver coins of Cuno's son Amminus (ABC 459, 462, CR 132.9). The final “minor” king of Kent to be named on a coin was Solidus (ABC 474, 477).

King Sam of Kent didn't place his name on his gold coins. But his name now has a place in the history of pre-Roman Britain.

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**Picture credits:** Figures 1–7 © Chris Rudd.

Fig. 7. Some 20 years ago nobody had heard of Sam. Today about 90 coins have been attributed to him.