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Why a change of direction could mean a change of ruler

ON Tuesday, October 4, last year a metal detectorist discovered an extremely rare gold coin not far from Stansted airport in Essex. Minted 2,000 years ago at *Camulodunon* “The Fort of Camulos” (modern Colchester, Essex), this elusive ancient British coin is a gold stater which is normally attributed to Cunobelinus, “The Hound of Belenus”, who for 40 years was one of the most powerful independent rulers in late iron age Europe, known and respected from the North Sea to the Mediterranean.

I say the gold stater is “normally attributed” to Cunobelinus because, until very recently, that has been the generally accepted view for a century and a half since Sir John Evans published the British Museum’s first specimen, acquired in 1855, in the *Numismatic Chronicle*, volume 20, p. 157. Indeed, it is entirely possible—many would say highly likely—that this beautifully crafted coin was issued by Cunobelinus. After all, the inscription under the horse clearly states CVNO.

However, I believe that there are three reasons for questioning the long-held assumption that Cunobelinus himself struck this Stansted gold stater (*Ancient British Coins* [ABC] 2804), which is commonly known as the “Classic Left” stater:

Firstly, the Classic Left stater comes at the end of a long-running series of corn ear gold staters which probably commenced in the first decade of the 1st century AD and continued without any major change in design for over 35 years until shortly before the Roman invasion of AD 43. For over 35 years Cuno’s corn ear staters consistently and conservatively maintained their same basic format—a whiskery ear of barley

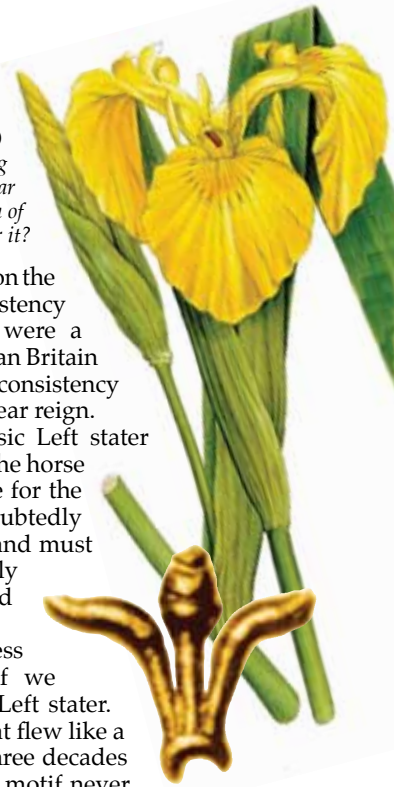


Classic Left gold stater ABC 2804 found near Stansted, Essex, October 4, 2016.



Classic Left gold stater from Somerton hoard, Suffolk, 1990.

Flower on crescent moon from Classic Left stater, with Yellow Flag (Iris pseudacorus) which 2000 years ago may have grown along the marshy banks of the river Colne, near Camulodunon. Was it a personal emblem of Cuno’s wife? Was she named after it?



on one side with a right-facing horse on the other side. Such extraordinary consistency and such conspicuous continuity were a mark of Cuno’s strength in pre-Roman Britain and, in my opinion, symbolised the consistency and unbroken continuity of his 40-year reign.

Secondly, the fact that the Classic Left stater suddenly and unexpectedly shows the horse facing **left**—not right as it had done for the previous three decades—was undoubtedly a radical departure from the norm and must surely have signalled an equally radical change in the royal household at *Camulodunon*.

Lastly, less obvious though no less significant is the change in motif we see above the horse of the Classic Left stater. Instead of the usual victory palm that flew like a royal flag above Cuno’s horse for three decades there is now a floral motif—a floral motif never previously encountered on any gold coin of this king. Just as changing the direction of the horse cannot have been a mere artistic whim on the part of the engraver, so too the decision to replace the king’s victory palm with a flower cannot have been taken lightly.

Four years ago, when we sold a Classic Left gold stater from the Somerton hoard, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, 1990, I suggested that it could have been a posthumous issue of Cunobelinus. I said:

“The Classic Left stater may have been issued by Cuno’s widow shortly after his death, to pay key people to help her restore stability and keep the peace between the two main heirs, Caratacus and Dubn (alias ‘Togodumnus’), until the succession could be established. I like this idea because it explains the left-facing horse (turned around to take Cuno back home to the land of his ancestors) and the flower, which may have been the widow’s personal emblem—something everyone in the court of Camulodunon would have known, so there was no need for her name to appear on the coin. If Cuno had been pro-Roman (at least commercially, if not politically), then it’s highly likely that his wife would have been pro-Roman too and that she might have sought Roman aid in her hour of need when Cuno died, or was killed. I think it is significant that the final four gold coins inscribed CVNO (ABC 2798, 2801, 2825, 3008) are the four with the most obviously Roman-style horses and I suspect that all four horses were engraved by the same Roman-trained die cutter. I also think



Whereas the sun is male in ancient myths, the moon is female and associated with water. The woman on this Cuno silver unit (ABC 2867) has a crescent moon on her head. (Drawing by Philip de Jersey.)

it is significant that three of these four gold coins (ABC 2801, 2804, 2825) carry a small crescent moon, as does the Cunobelinus Flower silver unit (ABC 2885). Women on Roman coins of this period often wear crescent diadems or are associated with crescent moons, which is why I think it could be a woman who issued the Classic Left stater" ("Who struck the Classic Left stater?", Chris Rudd List 127, January 2013, pp. 2-3).

Did Cuno's widow strike the Classic Left stater? In 2012 I asked Dr John Sills, author of *Gaulish and early British gold coinage*. He replied:

"Entirely possible, of course, that Old King Cole's missus took over for a while after his death, but how do we know he only had one wife? And we know Cunobelin installed two or three sons in and around his territory during his lifetime, because he allowed them to mint coins. Given the known tendency of distant relatives, let alone sons, to try and seize power after the death of medieval monarchs, my money would be on his brother Epaticcus (if still alive) and/or Caratacus and Togodubnus immediately claiming the throne, and in the circumstances of an elderly ruler with several sons I'd be surprised if Cunobelin hadn't designated a successor, although, of course, that would have been no guarantee of an undisputed transition."

Upon reflection I think that Dr John Sills is correct in proposing that the Classic Left may have been struck by one of Cunobelin's sons rather than his widow. But which son? In his forthcoming book *Divided Kingdoms: The Iron Age gold coinage of southern Britain* (to be published by Chris Rudd shortly), John speculates that it was Dubn (the historical Togodumnus?)



Apart from the first and last, all CVNO staters show his horse facing right. The first (ABC 2771) was probably struck while Tasciovanos was still alive, hence **two** horses. The last (ABC 2804) was probably issued after Cuno had died, perhaps by Dubn (Togodumnus?).

Coin finds clearly indicate that Dubn (Togodumnus?) is more likely to have inherited the north Thames kingdom, rather than Caratacus whose territory lay well to the southwest of Camulodunon.



rather than Caratacus who inherited the north Thames kingdom of Cunobelin and that "the left-facing staters could have been struck during a brief interregnum that in the event was truncated by the Claudian invasion". John and I both feel the Classic Left stater was struck **after** the death of Cunobelin and that changing the direction of the horse signalled a change in sovereignty.

Images courtesy of Chris Rudd unless otherwise stated.