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Celtic mystery coin from Spilsby

IN October 2016 a mysterious silver coin, minted around 2,000 years ago, was unearthed by a metal detectorist near Spilsby, Lincolnshire, in the former tribal territory of the Corieltavi ("Army of the Broad Land"). Situated about ten miles west of Skegness and named after Spilli (an Old Norse nickname for a waster), Spilsby is best known as the birthplace of Sir John Franklin (1786–1847), the Arctic navigator. However, for devotees of Ancient British coins Spilsby is the home of the Spilsby Stag, an extremely rare silver coin of the Corieltavi—once in the collection of Henry Mossop "The Flying Farmer" (COIN NEWS, November 1991, pp. 38-39), now in the British Museum (BMC 3203)—which shows a stag with large antlers and which was found near Spilsby in 1984.

The silver coin recently found near Spilsby is mysterious because it was discovered in the land of the Corieltavi, yet looks nothing like a Corieltavian coin. Several experts have examined this exceedingly rare coin—the only one recorded of its type—but nobody is sure who issued it. Nobody can be certain which tribe it came from, nor where it was minted. And nobody really knows what to make of the names inscribed on the coin, because they may all be blundered names, perhaps engraved by an illiterate die cutter who wasn't familiar with the Latin letters he was cutting.

Iron age coins with garbled legends are frequently found in northeast England. There were many among the 5,000 mostly silver Corieltavian coins in the famous Hallaton hoards found

in east Leicestershire, 2000–05 (COIN NEWS, June 2003, pp. 23-24) which I valued for the original finder, Ken Wallace. Commenting on these, Dr Ian Leins, formerly curator of Iron Age and Roman coins at the British Museum, writes:

"All of the main inscribed coinages show a degree of inscripational variation, including the interchange of letters and symbols, which hints at their engraver's basic lack of understanding of the Latin alphabet and language. Whilst the earliest forms of the legend may have been accurate and comprehensible, becoming corrupted through repeated and blundered copying, it is equally possible that the inscription was never fully intelligible... The appearance of writing on the 'peripheral' coinages, such as those of the East Midlands, reveals the partial adoption of a new 'Roman cultural package'. In this light it could be argued that the emergence of inscriptions on North-Eastern coinage reveals a deliberate cultural alignment with the 'kingdoms' of the south. The suggested links between the local inscriptions and those of Cunobelin and Verica may reinforce this point. Perhaps it was more important that the coinage was inscribed, than that the inscription should be intelligible? The inscriptions on North-Eastern coinage should be taken as no more than an approximate guide to the names of their issuers (if indeed that is what they represent)." (Hoards, Hounds and Helmets, ed. Vicki Score, Leicester Archaeology Monograph No. 21, 2011, pp. 47-48).



The Celtic mystery coin from Spilsby—a unique silver coin of uncertain origin, hitherto unrecorded and unpublished.



Corieltavian legends are often blundered, as shown by these silver units of Aunt Cost (top row) and Lat Ison, all 1st century AD.



Note how many letters these two legends have in common, also their sequence. Was the second a corrupt copy of the first?

Despite Dr Leins' cautionary words about Corieltavian inscriptions, I think it is worth trying to solve the mystery of the Spilsby coin, starting with the two-line legend on the obverse. The first line clearly reads AOTA, a word previously unrecorded on Celtic coins or indeed any other type of ancient inscription. Assuming that the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) wasn't located in Lincolnshire 2,000 years ago, what might be the meaning of this hitherto unknown word? It is unusual for British personal names to begin with two vowels, but not altogether unknown. For example, we find the name Eisu on coins of the Dobunni (ABC [Ancient British Coinage] 2075–81), Aunt on coins of the Corieltavi (ABC 1929–53), and Aesu on a silver coin of the Icenii of Norfolk (ABC 1707), where it occurs again in the name of a 2nd-century potter working in Brampton, Norfolk (only a few miles from where I live) who stamped his pots with the name AESVMINVS (Bruce Robinson & Tony Gregory, *Norfolk origins 3: Celtic fire and Roman rule*, 1987, p. 59). Interestingly, three of

these personal names—Aunt, Aesu, Aesuminus—all occur in the east of England, all within 100 miles of each other. Now we have a fourth such name, Aota, also from the East Midlands. A coincidence? Maybe, but I don't think so. My guess is that Aota, like the other three, is a personal name or the first part of a personal name. What does it mean? I've no idea. Naturally it reminds me of aorta, the main arterial vessel that carries blood from the heart (Greek *aortē*, from *aerein* "to raise up"), but I'd be amazed if there was any connection.

The second line of the obverse legend is as mysterious as the first. It may be read as COSN with a retrograde S, as in Cosnac (Charente Maritime, W. France) or as *Cosnium*, Latin for the River Couesnon at Mont Saint-Michel, Brittany (both cited as possible Celtic words by Alfred Holder, *Alt-Celtischer Sprachschatz*, Leipzig 1884, p. 1139). Or it may be read as COSVN with VN ligate or, at a stretch, as COSVAN with VAN tied together, as in Cosuanetes, one of 48 Alpine peoples defeated by the generals of Augustus, cited by Pliny the Elder. Rainer Kretz thinks the second line might read CORVL or even CORIVL, "bringing it dangerously close to the tribal name Corieltavi and all that might imply". And the finder perceives



Coins of Esuprasu, a Corieltavian ruler, c. AD 40-47. The same name (IISVP) in the same style is on the new Spilsby coin.



Was the Spilsby name-panel copied from Tasciovanos, king of the Catuvellauni, c. 25 BC-AD 10? Both have concave sides. (Image courtesy of F. W. Fairholt/Chris Rudd.)



Did this Tasciovanos griffin inspire the Spilsby griffin? Note that OTA also occurs on both coins. Coincidence? Probably.

a wispy downstroke before the third letter and wonders if the legend might read CORVI or CORN, as in the tribal name Cornovii, which occurs in ancient Cornwall, Wiltshire, Shropshire and Caithness. I see what he means, but don't share his vision. Indeed, none of the above interpretations of the obverse inscription makes much sense to me. I suspect that AOTA and COSN may both be gibberish—a very clumsy attempt to copy the name(s) of Aunt Cost, a Corieltavian ruler (or rulers) whose coins often carry blundered legends, some of which are split into two lines (see ABC 1944-50).

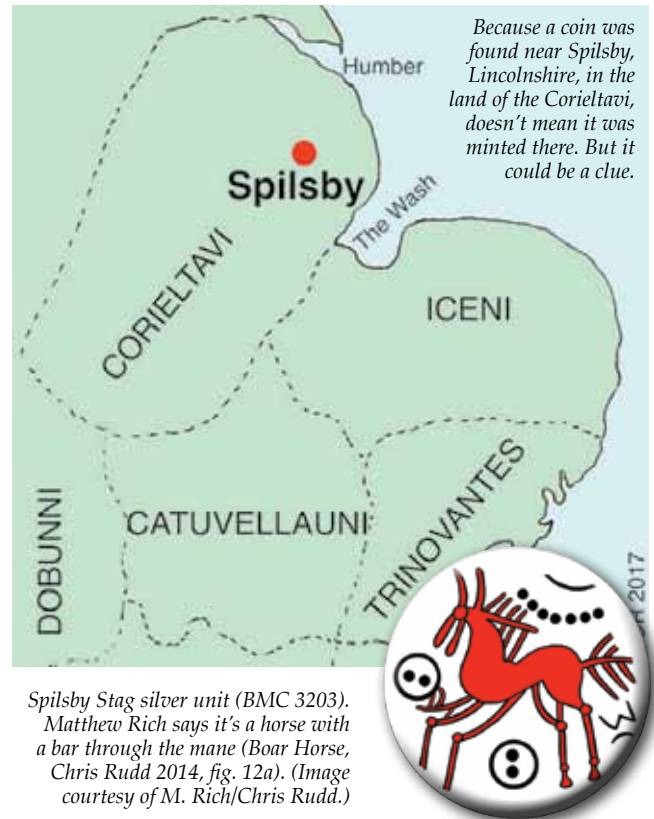
The inscription on the reverse of this coin is much less problematic. I read it as IISV, with a retrograde S and possibly ending with a backwards P tied to R; giving us IISVPR, which I'd interpret as Esupr(asu?), a late Corieltavian ruler, c. AD 40-47 (ABC 1917-20), whose name may mean "Lord Protector" or "Priest-Chief" (yes, he may have been a druid as well as a ruler). The neighbouring Iceni also had a ruler called Esuprasto, c. AD 35-45? (ABC 1711). Dr Jonathan Williams and Dr John Sills have both speculated that they could have been one and the same person (see J. Williams, *Numismatic Chronicle* 160, 2000, pp. 276-81, and J. Sills, *Chris Rudd List* 70, July 2003, pp. 2-4).

The Spilsby A and Lat Ison A (see ABC 1959) both have a diagonal bar. Were both cut in the same era and same tribal area?



Iceni silver unit of Esuprasto (ABC 1711)—historical Prasutagus, husband of Boudica and "rex Icenorum" of Tacitus? Was he a druid? (Image courtesy of Sue White.)

My speculation is that this coin may have been minted in Lincolnshire, around the time of the Roman invasion of AD 43, by the Corieltavian ruler Esuprasu who for some reason wished to honour the name(s) of Aunt Cost, even though his illiterate engraver got the name(s) disgustingly garbled. Geoff (no relation to my colleague Liz) Cottam, the leading authority on such coins and author of *The Inscribed Coinage of the Corieltavi* (forthcoming), doesn't believe this new coin from Spilsby is Corieltavian, neither does Dr John Sills. I understand their disbelief and concede that their skepticism may be well founded. After all, this odd silver coin doesn't look Corieltavian; it looks decidedly Catuvellaunian. The concave name-panel and horsey griffin are both apparently copied from coins of Tasciovanos, king of the Catuvellauni, c. 25 BC-AD 10, (see ABC 2577-80 and ABC 2646-49).



Because a coin was found near Spilsby, Lincolnshire, in the land of the Corieltavi, doesn't mean it was minted there. But it could be a clue.

Spilsby Stag silver unit (BMC 3203). Matthew Rich says it's a horse with a bar through the mane (Boar Horse, Chris Rudd 2014, fig. 12a). (Image courtesy of M. Rich/Chris Rudd.)

This mystery coin will be sold by auction in Aylsham, Norfolk, on May 14, 2017, by Elizabeth Cottam of Chris Rudd.

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Images courtesy of Chris Rudd unless otherwise stated.