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Signs of the Celts

Why Celtic symbols that occur on British iron age coins can also be seen on British iron age artefacts

BETWEEN 2001 and 2004 COIN NEWS published six articles by William Stevens on the symbolism of Ancient British coins. I was recently reminded of Bill's insights when I was sorting through my collection of British antiquities which will be sold by TimeLine Auctions on September 5. I noticed that some of the symbols that are frequently featured on British Celtic coins were also to be found on British Celtic artefacts and later brooches of the Roman period. Let me give you a few examples of this synergistic symbolism.

One of the most popular emblems of late iron age Britain was a motif of two opposed crescent moons. Back-to-back moons occur on early gold coins of the Catuvellauni of Hertfordshire and on later gold and silver coins of the Iceni of northern East Anglia; the Iceni probably adopted the motif from the Catuvellauni who may have developed quite a close political and commercial relationship with this Norfolk-based confederacy of tribes. Back-to-back moons are also displayed on a Catuvellauni strap junction from Buckinghamshire and on an Iceni strap junction found at Litcham, Norfolk.

The trefoil (three-leaf) is another Celtic icon that often crops up on Ancient British coins, especially those of the Iceni and the Corieltavi of Lincolnshire. It can also be seen on an enamelled harness mount from Lincolnshire (now in the British Museum), on a finger ring from Hampshire and on a stone head from Heidelberg, Germany.

The trefoil is one of several ways in which the Celts manifested the magic of threeness. Professor Miranda Aldhouse-Green says: "Number played an important role in Celtic symbolism. Most sacred or magical of all was the number three...Triplism is extremely prominent in the pagan Celtic religious iconography of western Europe". (*Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, Thames & Hudson, 1992, p. 214). In his book *The Land of Boudica: Prehistoric and Roman Norfolk* (Heritage, 2009) Dr John Davies shows everyday items, such as clothes fasteners and linch pins, which carry Iceni symbols of threeness—the same triadic symbols carried by Iceni coins.

In my collection of antiquities, which I began assembling in the 1970s, are several ancient swastika brooches. The great antiquity of the swastika symbol—it has been spinning around for about 4,000 years—has always intrigued me. First recorded in the pre-Aryan civilisation of Mohenjo-Daro on the Indus river, c. 2,000 BC, the swastika was widely regarded as a sun-sign in many ancient cultures including Celtic Europe, similar in meaning to the Celtic spoked chariot wheel but emphasising the rotary movement of the sun; moreover, as a solar symbol, it was consequently held to be symbolic of sunny good fortune. The word swastika comes from the Sanskrit *svasti* "well being" (from *su* "good" and *asti* "he is") and, because the symbol has four arms, it also stands for the four winds, the four seasons, the four elements (earth, water, fire, air), the four cardinal directions and the four corners of the world. The swastika can be seen on the Greek coins of Knossos, on Gaulish coins and on

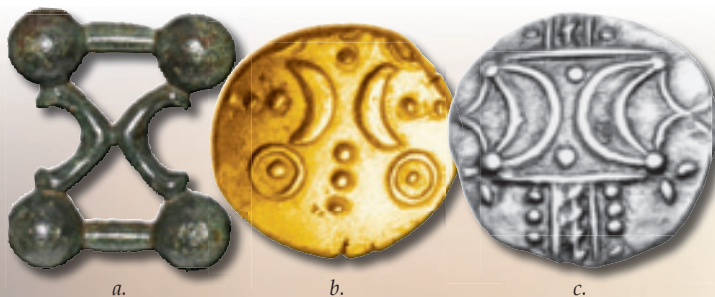


Fig. 1. Opposed crescent moons on (a) Iceni strap junction from Litcham, Norfolk; (b) Iceni gold stater, ABC 1441; and (c) Iceni silver unit of Ecen, ABC 1657.



Fig. 3. Swastika on (a) horse-head brooch; (b) horse-head silver unit from north of Thames, ABC 2258; and (c) labyrinth silver stater of Knossos.



Fig. 2. Trefoil on (a) Corieltavi mount from N. Lincs; (b) Corieltavi gold stater from N. Lincs, ABC 1755; and (c) stone head from Heidelberg, Germany.



Fig. 4. S-shaped dragon on (a) Brigantes dragonesque brooches; (b) Iceni silver coin, ABC 1495; and (c) dragonesque brooch in the British Museum.



a.



b.



c.

Fig. 5. Horned head on (a) oak beam corbel; (b) Petersfield Cernunnos silver unit of Regini, ABC 686; and (c) Selsey Cernunnos silver unit of Regini, ABC 680.

Ancient British coins. One of the best numismatic reviews of the swastika is in Agnes Baldwin's *Symbolism on Greek Coins*, first published over a century ago in the *American Journal of Numismatics*, 1915.

My favourite brooches are Romano-British dragonsque brooches and I have quite a few in my collection, almost all of which were found in north Yorkshire, which suggests to me that they were particularly well liked by the Brigantes. Though made in the late 1st and early 2nd century AD, "these distinctive S-shaped native British brooches" (as Richard Hattatt calls them) were clearly developed from much earlier Celtic concepts of the double-headed S-form dragon. An S-shaped dragon (or snake) with two heads—one at the top, another at the tail—can be seen on two Ancient British coins of the mid 1st century BC: on a gold quarter stater of the Regini of West Sussex (ABC 551) and on the first known silver coins of the Iceni (ABC 1495). The female heads on both coins are similar to some on Gallic silver coins of the Ambiani. Dr John Talbot thinks that "the two British heads are probably the work of the same die-cutter, implying that either dies or die-cutters travelled between regions in the early years of silver coinage production. The stylistic links to the continental unit are also strong, probably indicating that the earliest die-cutters of Icenian coinage were of Gallic origin." (doctoral thesis, *What is Icenian coinage?*, 2015, vol.1, p. 174).

Some 50 years ago I used to collect Elizabethan and Jacobean carved oak furniture. I relinquished it all when I remarried in 1977—"it's far too dark for me, I can't possibly live with it," declared my new bride, Carol—all except for one piece, which I couldn't bring myself to sell, at least not until now. This is a 16th century oak carving of a bearded head with bull's horns which, from the moment I first spied it in a London antique shop. I've always thought it to be Cernunnos, the Celtic horned god. I was especially captivated by this human horned head for three reasons: firstly, because it was so like the Romano-Celtic stone relief of Cernunnos found under the choir of the Notre Dame, Paris, in 1711 (many Christian churches were built on earlier Celtic sacred sites); secondly, because it reminded me of the Dorset Ooser, a fearsome wooden mask worn by Dorset mummers at Christmas; and thirdly, because horned human heads (or druidic face-masks) can also be seen on several Ancient British coins, notably of the Regini and Iceni.



a.

b.

c.

Fig. 6. Owl eyes on (a) Dobunni mount from S Cerney, Glos; (b) Owl Eyes gold stater of Corieltavi, cf. ABC 1752; and (c) Esuprasu Owlface silver unit, ABC 1920.



a.



b.

Fig. 7. Hawk eyes on (a) Vepo Hawkeyes silver minim of Corieltavi, ABC 1914; and (b) Carvetii belt slider from Cumbria.

Animal and bird symbols also occur on both artefacts and coins of iron age Britain, sometimes from the same tribal region. For example, I once had a spectacular enamelled harness mount in my collection that showed two owls facing each other with outstretched wings. It was found only six miles from Bagendon, the pre-Roman regal *oppidum* of the Dobunni tribe, and was so beautiful that it may have belonged to a Celtic horseman of high status, perhaps even to a Dobunnic king. The owl is displayed not only on ancient Greek coins of Athens, but also on several coins of the Corieltavi in a highly stylized form which focuses on the owl's eyes. The piercing eyes of a hawk can be seen staring out from a silver coin of the Corieltavi (ABC 1914) and the same hawkish eyes are displayed on a belt slider of the Carvetii of Cumbria.

So, why is it that we find the same or similar symbols on British Celtic artefacts that we find on British Celtic coins? Why is it that certain popular icons cross over from iron age coins to iron age brooches or Roman brooches, or from iron age coins to iron age harness mounts or clothes fasteners? In some cases I think these "multi-media" emblems were used by tribal rulers and metalworkers to consolidate a tribal or dynastic identity. In other cases I suspect these "multi-media" emblems were used as a means of reinforcing shared religious or ritual concepts. If we remember that most of the folk who used these coins and artefacts 2,000 years ago were illiterate—only the well-educated nobility and maybe chief priests could read or write Latin—then we realise that "sign language", the visual vocabulary of symbols, was all-important in those days. Or, as William Stevens said, "every picture tells a story" (COIN NEWS, June 2002, pp. 25–27, and July 2002, pp. 26–28).

Readers of COIN NEWS who may wish to examine a catalogue of my personal collection of British antiquities should contact TimeLine Auctions Limited, email: enquiries@timelineauctions.com For their help I thank Elizabeth Cottam, Michael Healy, Vincent Megaw and Damir Radic.

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