Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

At every turn in the four or five hundred years before 1066 historical questions arise which are illustrated and sometimes, perhaps, are happily brought nearer solution when they are brought into connection with the numismatic evidence.¹

Such was the opinion of Sir Frank Stenton on the evening of 23 April 1958, when he addressed the British Numismatic Society and brought the best of pre-Conquest historical research into contact with the numismatic community. Since then coinage has remained close to the forefront of historical assessments of Anglo-Saxon England, and the special relationship between numismatists and historians continues to flourish.² It is as a result of this relationship that this book came to be written: it presents not a numismatic study as such, but an exercise in the use of numismatic and monetary material in order to draw conclusions of wider historical significance. This approach has few precedents, in that although coinage is widely recognized for its significance as a historical source, rarely has it been the primary focus of historical research. More commonly coins have been drawn on by historians and archaeologists as a supplement to other material, with less focus on the potential advantages or insights that coinage has to offer on its own terms. These studies have tended to approach the coinage from one of two perspectives: that of trade, exchange and the activity of the economy; or that of government and administration. Only occasionally have the two themes been broached side by side.

To a large extent such a break is justifiable, and is grounded in the different aims, agendas and experiences of those involved in the patronage of minting, the production of coinage and in its subsequent use as currency. Yet separating the functions of coinage in this way, and divorcing

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them from the specifics of numismatic detail, can conceal some of the
coinage’s most interesting contributions. The central aim of this book
is to bring these traditions together and combine them with conclu-
sions drawn from exhaustive and up-to-date study of the raw numismatic
material — above all a complete catalogue of all 4,000 surviving speci-
mens of gold and silver English coinage produced outside Northumbria
in the period 757–865. More than half of this total has come to light
only within the last four decades, making a renewed investigation of
the coinage long overdue. This large corpus can be used to home in
on important aspects of the coinage, such as how many sets of minting
stamps (dies) were used and hence (after some statistical acrobatics) the
probable productivity of different mints at different times, as well as the
contributions of individual moneyers and the distribution of single-finds
and hoards. Results drawn from this corpus lie, implicitly or explicitly,
behind all of the conclusions presented here.

From this blend of numismatic and historical analysis emerges a more
well-rounded understanding of one segment of Anglo-Saxon coinage in
its proper context — a context that begins to provide answers to a host
of questions on how money’s symbolic, administrative and economic
roles converged. What, for example, do the volume of production and
networks of circulation indicate about kings’ wealth and control over the
monetary economy? How much power did the makers of coinage wield,
and in what ways did they relate to other authorities? In what ways
could (or would) kings manipulate or profit from minting within their
kingdoms? Can coinage, in short, be examined in the same critical way as
charters, law-codes and other written and archaeological sources?

Of necessity the several separate traditions which this study brings
under consideration must often be approached in different ways. It thus
makes most sense to impose chapter divisions according to aspects of
governmental and cultural background (Chapters 2–5), production
(Chapters 6 and 7) and circulation (Chapters 8 and 9). This structure
takes as its starting point the conceptual and organizational framework
within which coinage operated. It grew to become an important trap-
ning of kingship, but there were major limitations on the nature of kings’
involvement, and considerable power lay with the die-cutters, who made
the dies used for minting within each town, and the moneyers, who
oversaw day-to-day aspects of minting and exchange from individual
workshops. The subsequent treatment of production and circulation

3 Published as Chick; and Naismith.
4 Cf. the challenge recently laid down by Matthew Innes (‘Framing the Carolingian Economy’,
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begins from this more nuanced view of ‘control’ over minting. These chapters demonstrate how much there was to play for, and how the power structure behind coin production affected its monetary role (and vice versa). Economy, society and government found one of their most revealing intersections in the making and use of coinage.

The separation of the numismatic, administrative and economic aspects of coinage is of course a simplification – arguably an oversimplification. These divisions are themselves vague agglomerations dictated by long-established disciplinary norms: the users, makers and patrons of early medieval coins saw the world through different eyes. Pennies did not, in the first place, constitute all money in circulation or play a part in every exchange. Other forms of money existed, of both high and low value, only some of which can now be traced. Many exchanges did not need money at all, but were negotiated through barter or systems of gift, trust and favour. Study of the coinage is simply not synonymous with study of the entire economy, or even all media of exchange. Nevertheless, the silver currency of southern England played an important role: it was purpose-made for exchanges and versatile in its uses and users. A silver penny might have passed from a moneyer to a merchant, to a nobleman, to a peasant, to a clergyman and then to a king before finally coming, by chance, to rest in the ground for 1,200 years. To some users a coin might have represented a store of considerable wealth to be treasured, and to others a potential medium of exchange for large or small purchases. Some might have dealt with coinage very rarely, others on a daily basis. Just as with modern money, the details of these events are largely lost, save as a daydream with which to conjure. But its comparatively wide social and geographical remit and capacity for survival, retrieval and recording makes coinage a very apt vantage point from which to survey the numerous strands that have come together to create modern perceptions of early medieval history. Ambitious and politically aware rulers, educated and idealistic churchmen and a bustling and dynamic economy could all be found in Europe in the first millennium. Although it may be a cliché often repeated in recent decades, only latter-day barbarians still harbour views of this period as the ‘Dark Ages’. A wealth of high-calibre scholarship on the early Middle Ages has done away with images of too benighted and poverty-stricken a society.

One crucially important aspect of this ongoing research is a broadened geographical perspective. Southern England in the eighth and ninth centuries was far from being as isolated as its island setting might suggest, and it was an important cultural, political and economic player in

5 Below, pp. 289–90.
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Christian Europe as a whole. Wilhelm Levison’s classic study of England and the Continent in the Eighth Century explained how much was gained by cross-Channel contacts in the early Middle Ages, above all from a religious and intellectual point of view, and his attempt to downplay the insularity of England has been followed up successfully many times since. Glances, and extended forays, across the Channel (or the North Sea or the Irish Sea) are now accepted as integral to a full understanding of Anglo-Saxon history. Here, frequent comparisons will be made between what can be said about the coinage of southern England and about that of other parts of contemporary Europe, highlighting similarities as well as contrasts. Francia in particular but also Northumbria, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Scandinavia and other areas offer important alternative backgrounds and historiographical traditions; these add pieces to the puzzle in southern England, underscore its special features and can (when used judiciously) plug some of the holes in its often scarce sources.

Comparisons of this sort must be used with care, as must methodologies and conclusions borrowed from multiple disciplines. To some extent a multi-faceted approach is inherent in coinage as a source: it is a category of artefact of great importance to archaeologists and historians as well as numismatists, which combines an economic function with a physical manifestation of political, cultural, artistic and administrative activity. Numismatics as such provides one of several possible points of departure from which to approach the surviving remnants of the currency, but this ultimately remains a historical study based on the central theme of the coinage. Numismatic data and analysis are vital to its foundations, but will not be discussed in detail save when they are necessary for understanding more general conclusions.

Coinage in southern England and its neighbours 757–865

The period from the appearance of the broad penny to the height of the ‘first Viking Age’ in the 860s is an attractive one in terms of the connections between coinage and other historical developments, both in the short and the long term. Its opening is clear from a numismatic point of view, and lies with the emergence of the broad silver penny in the middle of the eighth century. However, this did not spring ex nihilo. There

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Coinage in southern England and its neighbours 757–865

was already a tradition, over a century old, of minting in Anglo-Saxon England, going back to an early seventh-century currency of high-value gold *scillingas* modelled on Merovingian Frankish *tremisses*, which in turn grew out of late Roman currency. Close connections between England and the Frankish kingdoms were to be a hallmark of the coinage down to the eighth century and beyond, and at this early stage England generally seems to have followed the monetary developments of its most powerful continental neighbour very closely. The designs of Anglo-Saxon *scillingas* imitated those of Frankish and older Roman coins, but while the Frankish prototypes normally bore the name of the moneyer and mint responsible for production (and only rarely that of the king), English coins were for the most part uninscribed.

In the early 670s these Frankish *tremisses*, which had become very debased, gave way to a new coinage of small silver *denarii*, a process repeated almost simultaneously in England. There, the new silver coins – which, like their gold predecessors, were largely uninscribed – apparently came to be known as *pæningas* or pennies, although it is still common for them to be referred to as *sceattas*. The age of the early pennies or *sceattas* lasted until approximately the middle of the eighth century, and increased use of metal-detectors and reportage of finds since the 1970s has revealed that at their height the early pennies were probably the most plentiful currency England had between the fourth and late twelfth centuries. Over 2,800 single-finds were recorded as of October 2010.

The seventy-five or so years of the early pennies’ currency can be divided into a ‘primary’ phase lasting until c. 710/15, which was dominated by a smaller number of types concentrated in the southeast of the country, and a subsequent ‘secondary’ phase in which the number of minting-places and types expanded substantially. Coinages produced in Frisia and Jutland also circulated freely in England, and are powerful witnesses to the vibrancy of North Sea exchange at this time. Over 200 different types of early pennies can be traced in all, some very common, others known from only a handful of specimens. Again, English moneyers only occasionally used the Frankish custom of placing their name or the name of their mint on the coins, making the early pennies difficult to date or localize precisely, or attribute to any specific authority. Yet the avoidance of inscriptions seems to have fostered an

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12 Cf. S. Lebecq, Mancheurs et navigateurs frisons du haut moyen âge, 2 vols. (Lille, 1983) and ‘The Northern Seas (Fifth to Eighth Centuries)’, in NCMH I, pp. 639–59.
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unusually subtle and diverse use of iconography among the patrons and makers of early pennies, and this phase was noteworthy for the artistic and intellectual sophistication of coin design, which reveals much about the religious and cultural background of English society in the age of Bede.\(^\text{13}\)

But, repeating the cycle of the gold coinage in the seventh century, the early pennies fell into decline in the 730s and 740s. Issues became scarcer, lighter and more debased, presumably signalling a shortage of silver, though the reasons for the shortage – and indeed for the profusion of bullion earlier in the eighth century – are obscure.\(^\text{14}\) As a result of this decline new coinages of different organization and format were eventually adopted in several kingdoms of northwest Europe, on all of which the king’s name was inscribed as standard for the first time.\(^\text{15}\) The tight chronology of these reforms reveals the integration of the kingdoms around the North Sea, and also that the initiative originated in a perhaps unexpected locale: Northumbria, which was probably the first kingdom to make the change, in the reign of Eadberht (737–58). Eadberht’s new coinage stuck with the small, thick format of the early pennies, establishing a precedent that would be followed in Northumbria until the 860s, despite serious debasement in its later stages.\(^\text{16}\) As a result, the Northumbrian coinage remained quite distinct from that of southern England: only a very limited number of southern coins have been found north of the Humber, while debased Northumbrian coins found a niche in the mid ninth century as small change in parts of Southumbrian England. Apart from occasional comparisons, Northumbria’s complex and intriguing monetary history will largely be left to one side in this volume.

New coinages from south of the Humber began with that of Beonna, king of the East Angles (c. 749–c. 760),\(^\text{17}\) and were followed soon afterwards by a related reform in the Frankish kingdom under Pippin III (751–68).\(^\text{18}\) This and the earlier English reforms influenced the new coinages of the southeast, which appeared in the 760s in the names of Offa

\(^{13}\) A. Gannon, The Iconography of Early Anglo-Saxon Coinage: Sixth to Eighth Centuries (Oxford, 2003).

\(^{14}\) Below, pp. 96–7 and 161–8.


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of Mercia (757–96) and (probably) Heaberht (fl. c. 765), an obscure local ruler of Kent.\textsuperscript{19}

By approximately 770 five kingdoms bordering on the North Sea had adopted new royal coinages: Northumbria, East Anglia, Francia, Kent and Mercia. In England this change had been accompanied by a significant contraction in the number of mints. While up to twenty or so locations had produced early pennies,\textsuperscript{20} just six can be identified with confidence in the period 757–865: York, Ipswich, London, Canterbury, Rochester and Southampton or Winchester (Map 1.1). The first four were all active at the outset of this period, while the last two only opened (or, quite probably, reopened) c. 797/8 and c. 810 respectively. The identification of these and the attribution of coins to them is complicated by the general lack of mint signatures, although their number, location and organization can be gleaned with more or less confidence by other means. All six locations were important settlements in their own right, and their concentration in the eastern part of England was a reflection of the importance to Anglo-Saxon minting of incoming foreign bullion. Patterns of political control over these mints were complex. At various times, however, one or more mints lay under the control of Mercian, Northumbrian, West Saxon, Kentish and East Anglian kings. There was also a small quantity of ecclesiastical coinage – again probably the outgrowth of an earlier tradition – produced simultaneously.\textsuperscript{21} Archbishops of Canterbury were named on coins until the early tenth century (and the archbishops of York until the mid ninth); one bishop of London was named on pennies under Offa; and at Rochester there are some coins which, although not naming the local bishop, should probably be assigned to ecclesiastical patronage.

Within the southern mints it was almost universal for coins to carry the names of the man responsible for production, and of the king whose authority and patronage underwrote the moneyer’s activity. Very little is known about these moneyers, although their importance is undeniable.\textsuperscript{22} In many ways it is a misnomer to speak of mints as specific institutions in England at this time: moneyers shared the services of a small number of die-making craftsmen – die-cutters – within each town, but physically and administratively each moneyer’s operation was a separate entity. For the sake of convenience, however, ‘mint’ will be used as shorthand for each location at which one or more moneyers were active.

\textsuperscript{19} Below, pp. 97–100.

\textsuperscript{20} T&S III, 300.


\textsuperscript{22} Below, pp. 132–49.

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The long-term importance of these eighth-century reforms can hardly be overestimated. Silver coins of approximately the same format as these broad, thin reformed pennies were to be the mainstay of western European currency until the thirteenth century, and in England and the Carolingian empire they established a tradition of explicit royal patronage that survives to this day. In the 760s, however, there could be no guarantee that these new coinages would achieve such an impact. One might have thought that gold would enjoy more of a resurgence in the west, as significant quantities of it were apparently available in the form of Arabic dinars and Roman-inspired *solidi*. In Northumbria the small debased coins of the ninth century, which eventually came to contain no silver at all, arguably presented a coinage of greater economic versatility, more akin to the base-metal coinages of the ancient or modern worlds. Elsewhere, in Jutland, the early pennies characteristic of the earlier eighth
The historical setting: Wessex, Mercia and the vikings

century in England seem to have persisted in use and production until about the early ninth century, while in southern Italy debased gold coinage remained current. Much of Europe beyond the Rhine and England was not using or minting coin to any substantial degree in the mid eighth century. The origins of the success of northwest Europe’s new silver currency lie in its contemporary circumstances; in its links to government, administration and economic developments.

The historical setting: Wessex, Mercia and the vikings

The important changes in the currency which occurred in the middle of the eighth century did not, in England, accompany any major political watershed, as was the case in Francia. Rather, in southern England the reforms of the coinage coincide with the high point of the ‘Mercian supremacy’ under Æthelbald (716–57), king of the Mercians, who did not apparently take any action with the coinage of his kingdom, and his successors Offa and Coenwulf (796–821). This was the era in which the midlands–based kingdom of Mercia exercised dominance over England south of the Humber.23 The decline of its hegemony was marked most vividly by a series of battles and conquests in 825–30 in which Ecgberht, king of the West Saxons (802–39), established his kingdom’s premier position and laid the foundations for his dynasty’s future. Wessex’s survival and prosperity were secured by Ecgberht’s heirs, most notably Alfred the Great (871–99). Knowledge of the eventual fates of Mercia and Wessex naturally endows these events with special significance, but such a bare-bones narrative of Mercian decline and fall, followed by West Saxon rise and rise over the course of the ninth century, neglects important details that flesh out these developments.24

Most of historians’ knowledge of this period is derived from the material recorded in the West Saxon Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and associated sources such as Asser’s Life of King Alfred, leading unavoidably to an emphasis on the subjects of most interest to chroniclers in Wessex in the late ninth century, especially in the reign of Alfred the Great. Coinage is an important alternative category of evidence that can help redress this imbalance, shedding light on political developments in so far as they impinged on the mints of southern and eastern England, and also on one
dimension of how kings’ power was exerted. Nevertheless, important developments are forced to the sidelines by the agendas of several crucial sources. Mercia’s heyday down to the 820s must be reconstructed largely on the basis of non-narrative sources such as charters and letters from the circle of Alcuin of York (d. 804). The calamities of the 820s did not signal the total eclipse of Mercia: it remained a major power, and relationships with Wessex even recovered to the point where the two kingdoms could ally with one another against the Welsh and the vikings in 854 and 868 respectively. The rise of Wessex was by no means a foregone conclusion in 825.

Although they were undoubtedly the leading powers of the ninth century, Mercia and Wessex were not the only Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. The period down to the late eighth century had seen the number of independent kingdoms in England whittled down, eventually to just four by the 860s. Kent, Essex and Sussex – the other members of the traditional ‘heptarchy’ of English kingdoms25 – had maintained sporadic and often precarious independence down to the late eighth or early ninth century. Of the other survivors besides Wessex and Mercia, Northumbria is left almost completely in the dark by southern sources and must be approached through (often problematic) local sources. East Anglia fares even worse than Northumbria, in that it is not only neglected by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and other southern texts, but did not preserve any native historiographical or documentary tradition.

To contemporary observers, therefore, England in the eighth and ninth centuries may have looked very different from what is presented in the dominant written accounts, and it is crucial to bear such alternative perspectives in mind. The Mercian supremacy and the rise of Wessex are not to be discarded as frameworks on which to build an understanding of the period, but they certainly do not tell the whole story. They also risk downplaying the administrative and economic backgrounds that made the successive hegemonies of Mercia and Wessex possible, the features which allowed these kingdoms to become so successful, and which contributed to the latter’s ultimate success.

The other key development usually emphasized in this period is the one which eventually led to the extinction of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms with the exception of Wessex: the viking invasions. These grew out of small raids which can be traced back to the late eighth century, and in the ninth graduated into extended sojourns that culminated in