

CHRISTOPHER BLUNT

POST-WAR YEARS AND HIS CONTRIBUTION TO ANGLO-SAXON NUMISMATICS

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For the generation born in the opening years of the twentieth century, the Second World War was the pivotal point of their lives and many people changed direction after it. In Christopher Blunt's case, while his business and family life resumed the happy course set in the twenties and thirties, the focus of his numismatic effort changed radically. Before, as we have heard, it had been directed almost exclusively towards the later English medieval coinage following on chronologically from, and essentially in the same mode as, the work of his mentors and friends, the Fox brothers and L.A. Lawrence. From just before the end of the war until his final days, Christopher's research was concerned almost as exclusively with the Anglo-Saxon coinage in which he set his own agenda and developed an approach and methodology which, in essence, are followed to this day.

Why this change of direction came about is not entirely clear but appears to have been influenced by a number of factors. A family connection with the Asshetons had already established a life-long interest in the Viking treasure, containing many Anglo-Saxon coins, found in 1840 on their Lancashire property at Cuerdale. Christopher's attention as a collector and curiosity as a scholar had recently been engaged by the sales, beginning in 1943, of Lord Grantley's collection from which he had acquired a chipped eighth-century coin - one of those pieces which, when she wanted to tease him, his wife Elizabeth referred to as 'Christopher's little miseries'. His subsequent publication, however, showed conclusively that this particular 'misery' was the only surviving penny of Heaberht of Kent, providing a vital clue to the chronology of Offa's coinage. In the same year the first edition of Stenton's seminal *Anglo-Saxon England* had been published stimulating renewed interest in the period and highlighting the potential of numismatic evidence. There was also the practical consideration of finding a field of research which was not already heavily subscribed, and where the lapse of time since it was last intensively studied had left the most pressing need for further work. The chronological successors of the issues in which he had hitherto specialised were already being actively researched by other students, but the Anglo-Saxon series had been rather neglected and was overdue for academic reappraisal. The revival of interest in the Anglo-Saxon coinage was thus set in motion by Christopher Blunt on his own.

His series of notes in the immediately post-war years already demonstrated that he would concentrate on the coinages of the eighth, ninth and earlier tenth centuries, rather than on the later issues from then until the Conquest. His interest in the Anglo-Saxon series was reinforced by the discovery of the first major Anglo-Saxon hoard for some time, the large tenth-century cache

excavated at Chester in 1950, a time when the Coin Room in the British Museum had no medievalist on its staff. This was rectified in 1952 with the appointment of Michael Dolley, with whom Christopher published the hoard in the 1953, marking the start of a productive partnership from which flowed a long series of ground-breaking joint papers which benefited from their complementary talents, and not least from Christopher's diplomacy and skill in persuading his more outspoken co-author to modify some of his comments and conclusions. Christopher had a supreme talent for cooperating with others and bringing out the best in them. Over the years he worked with, inspired and unobtrusively influenced a succession of other researchers from his own generation and each new one as it came along, including Elmore Jones, Stewart Lyon, Ian Stewart, Hugh Pagan and Mark Blackburn, with myself somewhere in the middle.

The impressive tally of his books and papers written alone or with collaborators has been surveyed in his bibliographies and evaluated in obituaries but only a few can be highlighted here to illustrate how far the current view of the coinages of the eight to tenth centuries is essentially his work, and to demonstrate the range of methodologies he developed which have since become standard practice. A note in 1957 drew attention to a crucial die-link between the issues of Offa and Archbishop Jaenberht of Canterbury which paved the way for his great 1961 paper on Offa. That securely established, for the first time, the main geographical and chronological framework of the coinage and, despite the welcome addition of new evidence brought to light by more recent finds, it remains the standard work over forty years later. This paper was typical of Christopher's approach which was not to make *ex cathedra* assertions but to set out the numismatic and historical evidence on which he had based his conclusions fully and clearly so that other students could form their own judgement. This element of checkability placed Christopher's numismatic work in the realm of science as well as art and contributed greatly to its being taken seriously by scholars in related disciplines, opening up the fruitful cooperation which Christopher fostered with Anglo-Saxon historians such as Sir Frank Stenton and Professor Dorothy Whitelock (of which we shall hear more later) as well as archaeologists like David Wilson, philologists like Olaf von Feilizen, and their younger successors. The ground-work of his research was contained in his invaluable card index kept up to date by his ability to win the cooperation of other collectors, museum curators and members of the general public. He welcomed other students to use his cards for their own research and, still useful even in these days of electronic information retrieval, it is happily accessible at Baldwin's.

Again the work of Christopher Blunt, sometimes with the cooperation of Michael Dolley, put the classification of Alfred's coinage onto a secure footing. Among other advances was the recognition that a large number of the coins bearing the name of the king from the Cuerdale hoard were not West Saxon but issues of the Midland Vikings. In order to expand the limited hoard evidence available for this and other periods, Christopher pioneered the reconstruction of inadequately published early finds such as the early tenth century hoard from Bossall and the late eighteenth century one from

Hougham, his sole excursion into the sceatta series. Exercising judgement and patience he traced and identified their contents from fragmented descriptions in early collections and sale catalogues of which he had a comprehensive run to hand in his extensive library. In his pursuit of these lost finds Christopher deployed every means at his disposal including his family and social contacts with his usual mixture of perseverance, tact and charm. His brother's connections in Rome were tapped to facilitate enquiries into the tenth-century hoards found there and, on hearing that Lord Grantley had died, he waited for a decent interval and then wrote to the succeeding peer to remind him to be on the look out for missing items from the Crondall hoard.

Many are familiar with Christopher's bookplate, which shows a seventeenth-century engraving of a gold coin which recalls the greatest coup of his career. Good luck, they say, favours the prepared mind and where Anglo-Saxon numismatics is concerned none was better stocked than Christopher's. This enabled him to recognise an ill-catalogued coin offered in a 1961 sale as a piece which had belonged to the Elizabethan and Jacobean antiquary Sir Robert Cotton, first published but wrongly identified in the 1695 edition of Camden's *Britannia* (to be found, of course, on his own shelves) but long since lost to scholarship. He quietly bought it through the good offices of Messrs Baldwin and, with enormous but characteristic generosity, at once presented it to the nation whom Cotton had intended to be the ultimate recipient of his collections. The following year he and Michael Dolley wrote the coin up in the *Numismatic Chronicle* identifying it correctly for the first time as a gold mancus by Offa's moneyer Pendraed.

Later in Christopher's life, it was the coinages of the tenth century that were his principal concern. Despite their interest and importance this series had been largely neglected partly because of their less superficially-attractive non-pictorial types, but also the sheer difficulty of making sense of a plentiful coinage on which few mints were named. Christopher recognised that the way forward was to begin in the middle, with the issues of Athelstan which included the greatest number of mint-signed coins, and to work both forwards and backwards on the basis of moneymen's names and stylistic associations as well as other indicators such as provenance. This resulted in his classic paper on the reign, a *book* really since it formed the major part of the volume of the *BNJ* published in honour of the 70th anniversary of his birth in 1974. This study exemplified not only his meticulous research and clarity of thought and exposition but also his ability, born perhaps in his business expertise in financial matters, to analyse a mass of diverse information and reduce it to a coherent scheme, in this case showing how the coinage at this period was organized. Christopher always started with the coins from which he allowed the overall pattern to emerge and not with a theoretical model which the coins should be constrained to fit. He never pushed the evidence beyond what it could sustain and rarely expressed any certainty about his deductions such as bolder colleagues would have claimed. This instinctive caution has meant that his measured conclusions have rarely been overturned and his opinions have gained added conviction and respect.

The crowning achievement of Christopher's research on the tenth century

was the definitive volume, written with Stewart Lyon and Ian Stewart, entitled *Coinage in Tenth-century England*, whose final proofs he corrected only weeks before his death. This study displays all the qualities of Christopher's earlier work developed to an even higher standard with his younger collaborators. Complimentary to this general survey and a necessary part of its preparation was the volume in the *Sylloge* series devoted to the British Museum's incomparable collection of tenth-century coins which Christopher and I undertook together. I enormously benefited from Christopher's generous sharing of his great expertise and experience, and acknowledge how much the volume owes to his participation.

Christopher's role in the *Sylloge* project generally will be dealt with by another speaker but a survey of his contribution to Anglo-Saxon numismatics must give a prominent place to the three other volumes of which he was a joint author and to his selfless guidance and painstaking editing of the work of others. He also amazingly found the time to produce thoughtful surveys of research in the Anglo-Saxon field for the sexennial reviews of the International Commission and to stimulate interest in the subject by lecturing to many local numismatic societies. He fostered numismatic work by curators outside the main cabinets, like Hugh Short in Salisbury and Paul Robinson in Devizes, and inspired and helped many collectors to take the next step into serious research. Appreciating the importance of the proper evaluation of excavation coins, he contributed notable reports on archaeological finds including those from Southampton, Repton and Winchester. He also published papers exposing counterfeits, and his opinion was widely sought and regarded as conclusive on the authenticity or otherwise of Anglo-Saxon coins.

Christopher had a particular affinity with the young, treating even beginners without the slightest condescension, and giving their opinions sympathetic but honest consideration. It was therefore appropriate, when it was decided to commemorate Christopher's 80th birthday in 1984 by presenting him with a portrait medal that the designer should have been chosen from a short list of young artists. (Slide shown here.) The resulting medal by Annabel Eley with its excellent and perceptive likeness set against the appropriate background of an Offa penny pleased him greatly not least for the opportunity its production had given to young people.

When he died, sadly just three years later, Christopher Blunt's contribution to Anglo-Saxon numismatic studies in a sense had not come to an end for, generous as ever, he had arranged for his coins to go into the care of public institutions. Three starred pieces including the Heaberht he willed to join the Pendraed and other life-time gifts in the British Museum, and the remainder of his scholar's collection including some notable rarities he asked to be transferred to the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge in lieu of Inheritance Tax, ensuring that his coins would continue to be as accessible to students as they had always been during his lifetime.

That concludes my formal remarks, but I should like to add a personal word, brief because time is short, to say how much I respected Christopher Blunt and owe to his academic advice and encouragement, and to express my

gratitude for the generous hospitality he and Elizabeth extended to me at Ramsbury. After many a hard week at the museum and a nightmare Friday-evening drive down the M4, it was a pleasure to find a warm welcome waiting at Ramsbury Hill with the prospect of a productive weekend's work in the peace of Christopher's library.