

SOME REFLECTIONS ON CHRISTOPHER BLUNT'S RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND HIS ROLE IN THE BRITISH AND ROYAL NUMISMATIC SOCIETIES

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I first met Christopher Blunt in the autumn of 1962, when I was an eighteen-year-old schoolboy and he was already fifty-eight. Despite this age difference, he treated me from the start as a grown-up adult whose views on numismatic matters deserved consideration, even when in reality some of them were wide of the mark, and over the twenty-five years that followed, our exchange of information and ideas on coinages of mutual interest was continuous. What helped in this was that we were both interested in more or less the same numismatic territory – the period of coinage commencing in the 760s and ending with Eadgar's reform in the early 970s – and although by 1962 Blunt, Dolley, Lyon and Stewart had already put in place some of the important building blocks for the study of the coinage of this period, much remained to be done and there were still coinages which had not been investigated in detail by any modern scholar.

I was made aware of this by Christopher at a very early stage, for his objective from the 1950s onwards had been to get the whole of the coinage of this period into order, and the study of it had become a collective effort on the part of Christopher and those numismatic scholars with whom he was most closely in touch. Frequently this took the form of collaboration on joint papers, but Christopher also very much saw it as his role to encourage younger scholars to undertake independent research that would fill obvious gaps in our knowledge of the coinages of the ninth and tenth centuries, and it was suggested to me almost at once that I should investigate the coinage of King Burgred of Mercia. I do not greatly recommend my resulting paper in our *Journal*, but I know that Christopher was pleased several years later with my rather better paper on the coinages of the ninth century kings of East Anglia, filling a gap in knowledge that he had long ago identified, and I am sure that Christopher would also have been pleased with James Booth's excellent subsequent gap-filling paper on the coinage of King Berhtwulf of Mercia, Burgred's predecessor.

I want now to explain, as best I can, Christopher's methodology as an Anglo-Saxon numismatist. It is necessary to bear in mind that when he first turned his mind seriously to this particular period of the Anglo-Saxon coinage, in the years immediately following the Second World War, there were no relevant published catalogues of any museum collections at all other than the catalogue of the British Museum collection, which had been compiled by Keary and Grueber in the later nineteenth century and of which the final volume had been published while Gladstone was still Prime Minister. Additionally, the British Museum collection had grown in an unplanned way, and its holdings of coins of such rulers as Offa in the late eighth century, other Mercian kings in the early ninth century, and Æthelstan, Eadmund, Eadred,

Eadwig and Eadgar in the tenth century, although extensive, were not fully representative of the coinages of these kings as a whole.

There were thus two essential tasks to be undertaken before any definitive conclusions could be reached about the coinages of individual Anglo-Saxon rulers from Offa to Eadgar. One was to ascertain what was held in museum collections other than that of the British Museum, and this was gradually achieved as the years passed, initial enquiries by Christopher or by Michael Dolley being followed by the successive publication in the *Sylloge* series of the Anglo-Saxon coins in the collections at Cambridge, Glasgow, Oxford, Edinburgh and many English provincial museums. It is worth noting in this context that the photographic record made by Christopher in the 1950s of the Anglo-Saxon coins in one quite minor museum, that at St. Ives in Huntingdonshire, proved of notable value when stolen coins from this source were offered in a London auction room some forty years later.

Yet it was clear to Christopher from the outset that just as many coins of interest for the scholar never saw the inside of a museum, passing instead through the London sale rooms and resting either in the cabinets of private collectors such as himself or in the stock of the great London coin dealers, and his second, parallel task was to build up an illustrated record of these. It is clear from his Presidential Address to this Society in 1946, in which he refers to the fact that in the Anglo-Saxon series "hardly a specimen" of the rarer types "passes through the sale-room without being illustrated" that he had already grasped the value of auction sale catalogues as the foundation for such a record, and it looks as if it was within a short time of this that he started the illustrated card index of Anglo-Saxon coins which was to become an indispensable working tool both for his own research and for that of fellow scholars working on the same area of coinage. As far as I am aware, none of us now living know the exact date when the card index was begun, but it includes pencil rubbings of coins from the W.C. Wells collection, which was in the Baldwin firm's hands by late in 1949 or early in 1950, and I am in no doubt that the card index was already some years old by the time Michael Dolley appeared on the numismatic scene in the spring of 1951.

Those who have used Christopher's card index will be familiar with it in its latter comprehensive incarnation, in which cards carrying photographs of all relevant coins published in the SCBI series or held in major museum collections rub shoulders with older cards either carrying pencil rubbings, or carrying illustrations painstakingly cut out by Christopher from the plates of every major coin auction catalogue between Montagu and Lockett. What however is important to bear in mind that it only achieved its final form as a result of Christopher's sustained dedication over a great number of years, and it remained a growing organism in Christopher's study through all the time that I knew him.

Picture then Christopher sitting in his study at his Wiltshire country home, conversing with some fellow numismatist about some particularly rare coin type of the ninth or tenth century, and plucking from the relevant drawer of the card index the individual cards for the type in question; he would then inspect them and say, as it might be, that there was one specimen of the type in the

Ashmolean ; that Carlyon-Britton had had one, of which the present whereabouts are unknown ; that Lockett “of course” had had one ; and that then there was the Drabble specimen, which Christopher now owned himself. Christopher thus knew, for any uncommon type or for any uncommon mint or moneyer within a type, not merely that the type existed and where one specimen of any given mint or moneyer was to be found, but exactly how many specimens were likely to exist and where they were or had last been seen. To a numismatist of today, engaged in the preparation of a complete corpus of coins of a particular type, this may seem an obvious way of proceeding, but Christopher’s card index covered not just a type or types but a period of over two hundred years of coinage, and he was the very first person to put together such a card index for the Anglo-Saxon series. Indeed, his example still puts us all to shame, for, as far as I am aware, no subsequent scholar working on the period from Offa to Eadgar has had the energy and determination to put together any comparable research archive.

Christopher’s knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon coinage was thus built up by him on what one might call a brick-by-brick basis, and the fruits of it emerged into the pages of our *Journal* and other publications in short notes on individual coins or types, in longer articles on the reigns of particular kings, and in hoard reports written jointly with Michael Dolley or others. In all these Christopher displayed his naturally sound judgment, brought into play not simply in coming to decisions on important issues of numismatic controversy but in his instinctive feeling for the correct amount of emphasis to be put on any individual fact or hypothesis. If in his later years he tended to be more cautious about new ideas, this was not so much due to the conservatism of age but to what Lord Stewartby has described as “the sheer scale of the revolution in thinking that his own work had precipitated”. As Lord Stewartby has said, “it was as if, when so much had changed, he was reluctant to see the last features of the old landscape disappear”.

It was indeed one of the reasons why Christopher carried such unique authority was that he knew and valued every inch of the older cultural and intellectual landscape in which he had grown up, but that at the same time he possessed both the will and the ability to act as an agent for change when change was necessary. In my recent survey of the history of our Society I have drawn attention to the essential role that he played in our Society’s life over a period of more than half a century, and in particular to his role as its Director just before the Second World War, as its President just after it, and as editor of our *Journal* over a long period of years. In all these capacities he approached his responsibilities as a reformer, and we owe to him such now accepted features of our Society’s affairs as the fact that our *Journal* is, or should be, published annually; the fact that we allow members under the age of twenty-one to pay a reduced subscription (the first such junior member, elected on 30 November 1936, was John Richard Assheton, one of Christopher’s cousins) ; and the fact that since Christopher’s time every President has felt obliged to follow the precedent set by him in 1946 and deliver a Presidential Address at the Anniversary Meeting.

Nor was his role as an innovator confined to our own internal affairs. As I have pointed out in my history of our Society, the initial proposal for a *Sylloge* of Coins of the British Isles was made by Christopher at one of our Council meetings on 3 July 1946, and the subsequent decision by the British Academy to take the *Sylloge* under its wing as an Academy project would never have happened without Christopher's vigorous lobbying. Equally, the success of the *Sylloge* Committee's publication programme over a period of thirty years depended almost wholly on Christopher's energy and commitment.

Christopher also played a major part in the affairs of our sister Society, the Royal Numismatic Society. It is easy to overlook this, for the *Numismatic Chronicle* is not essentially a journal of record, and tributes in it to the Society's past Presidents are meagre, but he was a Fellow of the Royal Numismatic Society for sixty-four years, and served on its Council from 1931 to 1934, 1937 to 1940 and then continuously from 1946 to his death. His term as the Society's President spanned the period from June 1956 to June 1961, which was essentially one of stability and called for no dramatic initiative on Christopher's part, but it should not be forgotten that in 1959 the Society had to increase its subscription for the first time since 1921, and it was particularly helpful at that moment that Christopher as its President had relevant business and financial expertise. Additionally, he used his Presidential Addresses in 1960 and 1961 to give what remains a valuable comprehensive review of the evidence for ecclesiastical coinage in England, both before and after the Norman Conquest.

More controversially – and I want to put this on record before human memory fades – it was I believe his intervention that contributed to one significant event in the Royal Numismatic Society's post-war history. In his 1978 Presidential Address to the RNS Robert Carson referred to the fact that when in 1948 Harold Mattingly senior reached the end of his term as President of the Society, "a somewhat ingrate Council" (the words are Carson's) rejected Mattingly's suggestion that his successor should be John Allan, who was Mattingly's departmental chief as Keeper of the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum, and who had served as one of the RNS's secretaries for thirty-nine years and as one of the *Chronicle*'s editors for twenty-seven years. I remarked to Christopher on some subsequent occasion that it did rather seem that the RNS's Council had behaved ungratefully, but to my surprise Christopher's reply, expressed in modest but definite terms, was that he was afraid that he, Christopher, had had something to do with it. I do not recall the exact wording of what Christopher then went on to say to me, but the general drift of his remarks was that by that stage in his career Allan lacked drive and initiative, and that Christopher felt that the proper successor to Mattingly should be Humphrey Sutherland, and acted accordingly. Christopher thought very well of Humphrey Sutherland in the immediate post-war period, for Sutherland, who had then recently taken effective charge of the Heberden Coin Room at the Ashmolean Museum, had a string of significant publications to his credit during the 1940s, and was as keenly interested as Christopher in bringing numismatics to the attention of the wider public and in fostering co-operation between numismatists and scholars in

other disciplines. Sutherland was indeed duly chosen as the Society's President, and I have no doubt that the choice was the correct one, for Sutherland, a natural diplomat who carried authority in international numismatic circles as well as within Britain, gave the RNS effective leadership at a key period in its history.

If we think of Christopher as an agent for change, as he certainly was, it is not at all as odd as people sometimes imagine that the scholarly partnership that transformed the study of the Anglo-Saxon coinage in the 1950s and early 1960s was between Christopher, a supporter of church and state, and Michael Dolley, an opponent of most establishments, for they had a common purpose, the unravelling of the history of the coinage of Anglo-Saxon England, and Christopher and Michael were as one in wishing to push the study of the subject forward. What also helped was that they were both by temperament sharers, rather than hoarders, of knowledge, and in that respect theirs is an example that we all ought to follow.