

A SHIP-TYPE OF ATHELSTAN I OF EAST ANGLIA

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A penny of Athelstan I of East Anglia with a ship-type obverse unprecedented in the Anglo-Saxon broad-flan coinage was found with a metal detector by Mr A.R.Langwith at West Harling, Norfolk about eight miles north-east of Thetford, in 1977. When first shown at the Castle Museum, Norwich, the coin was already in two pieces and had been superficially cleaned. The bent-over edges of the fracture confirm that the coin had been folded when found and had been broken in an attempt to flatten it. I am grateful to the Keeper of Archaeology, Miss Barbara Green, for inviting me to study the coin and for generously allowing me to publish a detailed discussion of it here, as well as for providing, in conjunction with her colleague, Mr. Tony Gregory, much helpful information about the background to the find and its location.¹ I am equally indebted to Mr K.A.Howes, Senior Conservation Officer working in the Department of Coins and Medals for his expert cleaning and mending of the coin and to Dr M.S.Tite and other colleagues in the British Museum Research Laboratory for the analysis of its metal-content quoted below.

Illustrated natural size and x 2 on the plate, the coin is of very rough style and may be described as follows:

- Obverse: EDELSTAN RE+ within pelleted outer circle; no inner circle; in centre, a ship with rudder at the right-hand side having triple ropes extending from the cross-topped mast to the extremities of prow and stern
- Reverse: +EA+ / dgAR within pelleted outer circle; within pelleted inner circle, an uncertain design of irregular pellets (rosette or cross)
- Mint: uncertain. Moneyer : Eadgar. Metal : ninety-four per cent silver (see below)
- Weight: 1.27g (19.6gr). Diameter : 20mm. Die axis : c.0°
- Reference: J.J.North, *English Hammered Coinage*, second edition (London, 1980), I, No.449/1.
- Disposition: Acquired by the Castle Museum, Norwich

The moneyer Eadgar worked in East Anglia for three Mercian kings, Ceolwulf I, 821-23, Beornwulf, 823-25 and Ludica, 825-27, and also for Athelstan I but not for the latter's successor, Aethelweard. Athelstan is not mentioned by name in the documentary record but his long-accepted identification as a king of East Anglia was suggested by the REX ANG legend on one of his issues and confirmed by the presence of his moneyers in a chain which leads to those of the historical Edmund, 855-70. Numismatists have in recent years dated his reign to c.827-c.840 on the basis of

hoard evidence and the place of his coins in the moneyer- and type-sequence of the related series for the kings of Mercia, Wessex and Kent.² There can be no doubt that the ship penny is to be attributed to Athelstan I of East Anglia but it stands typologically apart from all his other coins whose conventional Anglo-Saxon types fall into a series of well-defined groups. Its inferior style also differentiates it from the rest of Athelstan's issues, some of which are from rather rough dies but none of them are quite so crude. This clear disassociation, even from coins of the same moneyer, suggests that the ship penny was struck at a different period³ from the other known coins of Athelstan and so it is necessary to examine the types and epigraphy in detail for any light which they may shed upon its chronological position.

The obverse legend is of normal circumscription type with the cross at the mast-head so positioned as to serve additionally as the initial cross. Although rough in style, it is set out entirely in Roman capitals engraved onto the die but adumbrating at times the effect of punched letters. There are none of the runic letters regularly found on Athelstan's dies. The second letter is left as a D without the cross-bar needed to convert it into the thorn required by the name, a feature also noted on other groups of coins in this reign. The obverse type of a ship is clearly derived from the similar vessels shown on the reverses of the rare Carolingian deniers of Charlemagne, 768-814, and Louis the Pious, 814-40, struck at Dorestadt (M&G 105 and 330) and Quentovic (M&G 121a and 351), the important trading posts at the mouths of the Rhine and Canche respectively.⁴ The issues of Charlemagne are less likely to have provided the model since the ships on the two known examples are consistent in being rudderless, with single ropes springing from fairly close to the base of the mast. The shape and fittings of the Athelstan ship are most closely paralleled on coins of Louis the Pious from Dorestadt (e.g. M&G pl.XI, 330) which are in fact the only Carolingian ship deniers to have survived, and, presumably, to have been struck, in any numbers. It may be noted that the oars shown on the ultimate Roman prototype⁵ and reproduced on the Carolingian dies as oars and/or waves are lacking on this English example. The ship type was introduced some time during the last years of Charlemagne and although the issues of Louis the Pious cannot be dated precisely, they are securely attributed to early in his reign. At what stage the English copy appeared is difficult to assess. The ship type itself demonstrates the long interval that can divide a coin-design from its prototype, but it is most probable that the English coin was produced while the Carolingian ship-type was still a significant presence in the circulating medium of the Frankish kingdom and its trading neighbours. This was during the earlier part of the reign of Louis the Pious before the ship type, with its predecessors and contemporaries, became heavily outnumbered in circulation by the large issues of two-line and temple types made during his middle and later years. Some examples did however survive long enough to be included in hoards buried into the early 840s.⁶ The date of the other group of imitations of the Carolingian ship-type, produced in Scandinavia, is equally difficult to resolve: while some scholars would prefer a later date, Professor Malmer, who has made the most detailed recent study of the question, places their issue c.825.⁷ Thus, although, as far as the evidence of its obverse type is concerned, the date of the ship-type must remain open, production earlier rather than later in Athelstan's reign seems more probable.

Turning to the reverse, it is of even rougher style than the obverse, with mixed Roman and miniscule engraved letters of unequal size. The two As of different type, the first, straight-barred and the second, chevron-barred, are both normal forms on dies of this period and are used together on the same die on other coins of Athelstan by the moneyer Eadgar (BMA

231-2). The use of miniscule letters, such as the d and g found on this die, are unusual at so late a date. They are used not infrequently in the coinage of Offa, 757-96, but become less common as the ninth century progresses. They are then characteristic of, but not confined to, the East Anglian series. Among the miniscule ds found on coins of several moneyers for Coenwulf, a letter exactly like those on the ship penny occurs on his late East Anglian coins by the moneyer Wodel (Cn.111-13, especially 112). The only instance of precisely this d on the coins of Ceolwulf is on a die of Wodel (Cl.31) so similar that it may be a die of Coenwulf's re-used.⁹ This is especially likely since this coin is the only known example of the voided long-cross-crosslet type, common for Coenwulf, appearing for his successor. A miniscule d of slightly different form with a hooked instead of a straight upper limb is used on both of the known dies of very rough style for Ceolwulf by Eadgar, the moneyer responsible for the ship penny (Cl.27). No miniscule d of any form is known for Beornwulf, Ludica or, otherwise, for Athelstan. The evidence for the miniscule g is less clear-cut, partly because there are simply fewer opportunities for it to occur since G is a much less common letter in the names of moneyers working at this time. In particular for Coenwulf, the chances of finding the g are reduced because Eadgar is not known to have struck any coins in his reign. The miniscule form of the g on the ship penny cannot be matched exactly but similar forms are used on the two-line dies of Eadgar for Ceolwulf (Cl.27) already mentioned and on his equally rough dies for Beornwulf (Be.5 and *BMC* pl.IX, 6, then wrongly attributed to Ceolwulf, *BMC* 104, the latter showing a hooked version cognate to the d on the same two-line type for Ceolwulf, Cl.27). On the two dies of Eadgar for Ludica (L.1a and 1b⁹) one G is perfectly Roman and the other is shaped like a B. The only g on a coin of Athelstan which is at all similar has a short, straight upper limb instead of a longer sloping one and appears on one of the rough-style coins with blundered legends by the moneyer Regenhere (*BMC* 15 reading retrograde, R E g N H R E). While other non-Roman forms of g are found on some of the more careful dies of the moneyer Eadgar for Athelstan and on those of Eacga for Beornwulf, they are of quite a different shape and not relevant to the present discussion. Otherwise the Gs on Athelstan's coins are Roman.

While the coins of Athelstan himself are relatively common with, in total, many dies for moneyers, including Eadgar, whose names contain D or G, it is accepted that the coins of both Beornwulf and Ludica are very rare but there are two dies for each of these kings by Eadgar as well as dies of other moneyers with D in their names or, less often, G (four dies of Eacga for Beornwulf only), where the abnormal letter forms would have had a chance to appear. To sum up the evidence of the epigraphy, the closest parallels for the distinctive letters on the reverse of the ship penny are to be found on the coins of late Coenwulf and Ceolwulf. Coins of Beornwulf and other types of Athelstan have some, usually less direct, points of contact and those of Ludica have none.

Although the reverse of the ship penny is essentially a circumscription type, the legend has been laid out almost like a two-line type so that it must be read, as shown on the plate, no.2, with the coin turned c.45° anti-clockwise from its true axis, in two arcs, first along the upper sector of the circumference, E A, and then along the lower sector, d g A R. This lay-out of a circumscription legend also occurs on the gold piece in the name of Ciolheard probably struck during the reign of Coenwulf¹⁰ and a similar compromise between a line-type and a circumscription-type is found on rough-style dies of basically three-line type for Ceolwulf by the moneyer Hereberht (Cl.25). The legend on the present coin is punctuated by a cross at each side, one between the last and the first letters which also acts as

the initial cross and another between the A and the d. The placing of an additional cross in the middle of the legend is found on the very rough style coins of Fotred for Coenwulf (Cn.100) and Ceolwulf (Cl.28).¹¹ The placing of one cross in the middle of the legend instead of at its start is known for Beornwulf on one cross-crosslet die by Eadga but this feature is not known for Ludica or, otherwise, for Athelstan. The adumbration of a two-line type on the ship penny brings to mind once again the rough-style two-line type coins by the moneyer Eadgar for Ceolwulf (Cl.27) and Beornwulf (Be.5) whose dies have various arrangements of crosses, stars and pellets between the two lines of the moneyer's name. For Ludica, Eadgar's dies are both of cross-crosslet type and in somewhat better style (L.1a and 1b); for Athelstan, his dies conform to those of other contemporary moneyers both in their better style and in their types where two line designs are not used and the central design is never constructed of pellets in the way found on the ship penny. In the latter respect, and in general style, the ship-type penny is particularly close to a late circumscription type penny of Coenwulf by the moneyer Hereberht (Cn.102) whose next issue in the name of Ceolwulf (Cl.28) has affinities with the present coin discussed above. Although such considerations of general style are always subjective, the ship type has more in common with coins of late Coenwulf or Ceolwulf than with even those of Beornwulf, and certainly than it has with those of Ludica and the rest of Athelstan's reign. Looking also at the whole sequence of the dies of the moneyer Eadgar, there is a progressive improvement in the style from the very rough dies for Ceolwulf and Beornwulf, through the better, but still fairly rough dies, for Ludica to the neater ones for Athelstan. The typological sequence follows a similar progress: two-line types never used by other moneyers for Ceolwulf and Beornwulf are replaced under Ludica and Athelstan by types which conform to the normal pattern of issues by other contemporary moneyers. The ship type which stands apart from this sequence would be most acceptably accommodated as the earliest extant of Eadgar's coins, supporting the other indications that it should be placed at the head of Athelstan's issues also.

Metrological evidence would have been helpful on the question of dating but unfortunately very few analyses of early ninth-century coins have been published. There is no data at all for Ceolwulf, Beornwulf or Ludica and only one coin of Athelstan has been analysed. The available information¹² is set out in the table below where 'trace' denotes less than 0.1 per cent.

	Coenwulf		Athelstan	
	Diola	Eanmund	ship type	Brooke type 4
	%	%	%	%
silver	98.0	96.0	94.0	87.5
copper	2.0	3.3	4.0	6.6
gold	0.1	0.4	0.2	0.6
lead	0.1	0.7	1.0	1.0
zinc	trace	trace	trace	-
iron	-	-	-	0.2

The finer metal of the ship penny appears to associate it with the coins of Coenwulf rather than with the baser coin of Athelstan. Diola and Eanmund are both London moneyers in Ceolwulf's early period before c.805 and so although the close concurrence of the silver content of their coins is suggestive of an over-all standard, there is no way of knowing from this data whether the East Anglian issues at the end of Coenwulf's reign, which alone are relevant here, conformed to this standard. Similarly there is no guarantee that all of Athelstan's other coins, or particular groups among

them, were of a consistently lower standard as suggested by this isolated analysis. It is however instructive to note that it was during the issue of the temple type, first struck in the latter part of the reign of Louis the Pious, that the Carolingian standard fell away from the very high level which it had more or less maintained since the Reform of Pepin in 755 to something more like the sterling standard of 92.5 per cent fine.¹³ When or how consistently this happened has not as yet been determined, the problem being made more difficult by the continuation of coins in Louis's name after his death. The figures above, inadequate although they are, suggest that a similar lowering of the metal standard may have taken place in the English coinage about the same time. The weight of the ship penny is not diagnostic but, despite its Carolingian type, it is on the lower English, rather than the higher Frankish, weight-standard.

To sum up, the balance of the numismatic evidence suggests that the ship penny is earlier than all of Athelstan's other known coins and that its most acceptable place in the sequence may be just after the death of Coenwulf in 821.

It is now necessary to consider how this hypothesis might be reconciled with the historical record. The model suggested by the numismatic evidence is that Athelstan might have made an earlier and only briefly successful bid for power in East Anglia following the death of Coenwulf in 821. This may be compared with the very similar pattern of events which followed the death of Offa in 796 when Eadwald took the opportunity of the departure of another long-lived and powerful Mercian overlord to re-establish for a short time an independent East Anglian kingdom. It may be recalled that the knowledge of this break in the otherwise apparently uninterrupted tenure of the Mercian kings in East Anglia rests solely on the existence of five coins. Another East Anglian attempt to take advantage of temporary Mercian weakness is recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* under 825 (corrected) when an unnamed king sought the help of Egbert of Wessex against the Mercians. He might, or might not, have been Athelstan but despite the fact that the East Anglians proceeded to kill the Mercian King Beornwulf, they could not exclude the Mercians as the latter's successor Ludica also struck coins in East Anglia. It was apparently only after the death of Ludica in 827 when the Mercians under Wiglaf became involved in a power struggle with the West Saxons under the powerful Egbert that Athelstan was able to secure his position and issue the rest of his prolific coinage. The evidence of a single coin cannot be conclusive but it is, perhaps, strong enough to prompt a historical reconsideration of whether the transmission of power in East Anglia from one Mercian early-ninth-century king to the next was quite as smooth as the silence in the documentary record and the sequence of coins known until the discovery of the ship penny might have suggested.

NOTES

1. Pottery and other artifacts from the Roman to the later medieval periods have also been found on the site.
2. The fundamental paper on the coinage of this period for the kings of Mercia, Kent and Wessex is C.E.Blunt, C.S.S.Lyon and B.H.I.H.Stewart, 'The Coinage of Southern England, 796-840', *BNJ* 32 (1963), 1-74, and it has been extensively used in the preparation of this note. Coins are quoted by their numbers in this corpus. The authors do not deal,

except in passing, with the issues of the independent kings of East Anglia. The coinage of Athelstan I is discussed by H.E.Pagan in this volume.

3. Theoretically, the difference could instead be one of function or of place of issue. The former is very unlikely and in the absence of any evidence may be dismissed. The question of whether there was more than one mint in East Anglia is more open. Provenances of site-finds have suggested that the mint was at Ipswich but the St Edmund Memorial penny reading NORDVICO points to a mint at Norwich at the end of the ninth century and the possibility of there having been more than a single mint earlier or of it not always having been in the same place. The other issues by Eadgar for Athelstan are so similar to those of contemporary moneyers that he seems then to have been working at the same mint. Whether this was true in the more unstable earlier period when it will be proposed this coin was produced, it is impossible to say. The fact that the person who cut the dies for Eadgar at that time was less competent than some of those available to the Mercian kings in East Anglia does not necessarily prove that he worked at a different mint although it does leave that as a possible explanation.
4. K.F.Morrison and H.Grunthal, *Carolingian Coinage* (1967). Coins are quoted by their number in this corpus.
5. The Carolingian ship deniers were copied from Roman radiates of the usurper Allectus who succeeded Carausius as emperor in Britain, A.D.293-96.
6. There were six ship deniers among the forty-eight coins recorded from the Dorestadt hoard of 1845/6 (M&G No.18) about whose exact contents there is some doubt but which certainly included coins of the late, temple type; one was among the 428 coins from the Achlum hoard of 1852 (M&G No.29) which included coins of Louis's successor, Charles the Bald.
7. B.Malmer, *Nordiska Mynt före år 1000* (1966), especially p.247.
8. For a discussion of the status of this die see Blunt, Lyon and Stewart, p.27.
9. For the re-attribution of this coin to Ludica see Blunt, Lyon and Stewart, p.28.
10. Ciolheard was a moneyer of Offa, Coenwulf and Ceolwulf I but this spelling of the name and the general style favour an attribution to Coenwulf, see H.E.Pagan, 'A third gold coin of Mercia', *BNJ* 34 (1965), 8-10. For an illustration see G.C.Brooke, *English Coins*, revised edition (1950), pl.lxv,3.
11. Two crosses in the reverse legend is also noted on an obol of two-line/circumscription type of Louis the Pious from Quentovic (M&G 350).
12. The analyses for the coins of Coenwulf are taken from H.McKerrell and R.B.K.Stevenson, 'Some analyses of Anglo-Saxon and associated Oriental silver coinage', in *Methods of Chemical and Metallurgical Investigation of Ancient Coinage*, edited by E.T.Hall and D.M.Metcalf (1972), p.205, and that of the Athelstan penny of Brooke type 4, from analyses by E.J.Harris reprinted in the same work, 433, from *SCMB* 1961, 6. The Athelstan ship penny was analysed in the British Museum Research Laboratory under the direction of Dr Tite who adds the following comments: 'The coin has been extensively cleaned and when viewed under the microscope some areas of corrosion product which seem to have been

reduced to silver are visible. Traces of "inverted" scratches are also visible indicating that the die was not polished smooth before the design was cut (or else that it was roughly abraded after the design was cut). These scratches are not visible on the design. Analysis of the surface by X-ray fluorescence (without any further cleaning of the surface) indicated the composition quoted above. This composition is consistent with the Anglo-Saxon date ascribed to this coin'.

13. See D.M.Metcalf, 'Analyses of the metal contents of medieval coins', in Hall and Metcalf, pp.404-5 and D.M.Metcalf, J.M.Merrick and L.K.Hamblin, *Studies in the Composition of Early Medieval Coins* (1968), pp.38-39 and 56-57.

