

## The 'Bird and Branch' Sceattas in the Light of a Find From Abingdon

By D. M. METCALF

*Abbreviations : B.M.C. : C. F. Keary, A Catalogue of English Coins in the British Museum, Anglo-Saxon Series, London, 1887; B.N.J. : The British Numismatic Journal; S.C.B.I. : Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles, London, 1958.*

SCEATTAS are the small silver coins which were used by the Anglo-Saxons and by the Frisians during the last quarter of the 7th and the first half of the 8th centuries—the forerunners of Offa's silver pennies. They exhibit a great variety of pictorial designs, but they never bear a king's name, and indeed hardly ever have any meaningful inscriptions. It is difficult, therefore, to deduce exactly when and where they were struck, within the 75-year period of their currency, and within the area of south-eastern England and the Low Countries in which they circulated. Several varieties were struck very probably at Canterbury, and used mainly in the Kentish kingdom, as is shown by numerous grave-finds from east Kent. Other varieties were struck at London, and one or two even read LVNDONIA. Others again are proved by Continental hoards to be Frisian. A few seem to be from East Anglia. Two out of a total of a hundred or more different varieties have been discovered almost exclusively at Southampton and nearby, and there need be no doubt that they were struck for the trading emporium of Hamwih. It is possible that there were one or two other secondary mints, the existence of which will in principle be deduced only from local finds of particular varieties. Lively interest was aroused, therefore, by a discovery recently reported from Abingdon, of a variety of sceat that has also been found only 6 miles away at Dorchester-on-Thames. The Abingdon coin—a tiny object no more than half an inch in diameter—was discovered accidentally in a hole in the ground, by a small boy playing on a building site north of the town, on the Wootton Road, some fifteen or more years ago. His father took the coin from him, on the grounds that he would only lose it, and gave it back to him recently, when the young man brought it to the Ashmolean Museum to be identified.<sup>1</sup> Later he generously agreed that it should find a permanent home in the University's collections.

On one side it shows a figure (possibly a bishop ?<sup>2</sup>) holding two crosses, and standing apparently in a boat, and on the other side a stylized bird pecking a berry from the branch of a vine (see FIG. 1). The standing figure with crosses is found on many of the London coins, while a related version of the 'bird and branch' design occurs at Southampton. The exact date at which the Abingdon/

<sup>1</sup> The coin was found on the west side on the Wootton Road, just by the Fitzharris Arms public house, that is, about half a mile north of the centre of Abingdon. At a later date Wootton is known to have been a royal manor.

<sup>2</sup> Archbishop Ecgberht of York is shown as a similar bare-headed figure on a signed sceat struck a few years later.

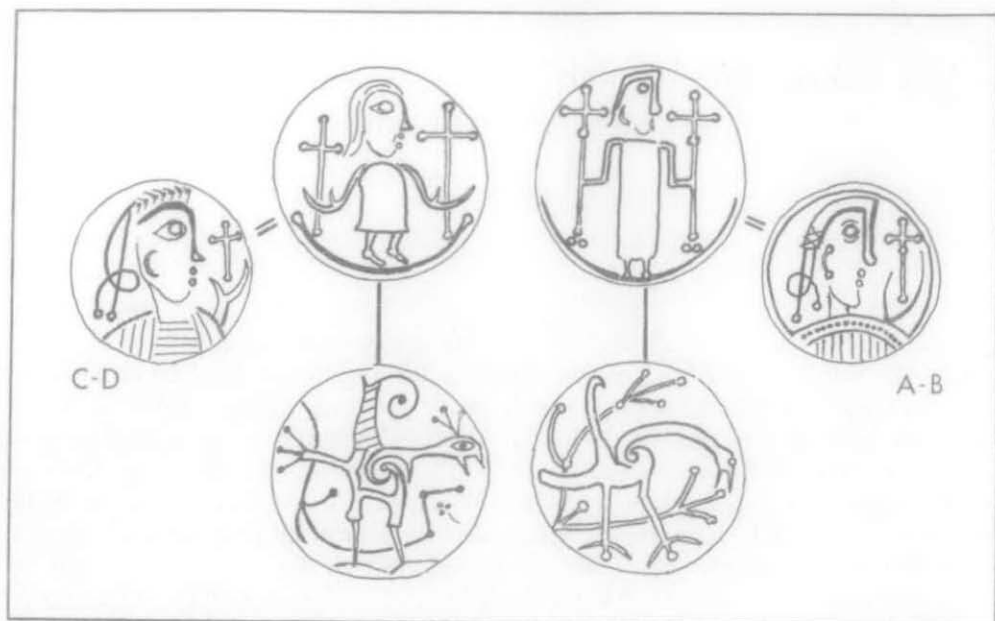


FIG. 1

Composite sketches to show the two substantive styles of *B.M.C.* Type 23 b/d, and the stylistic connexion of the portraits with the 'wolf' sceattas. On the left, the 'Abingdon/Dorchester' style; on the right, the 'London-connected' style.

Dorchester variety was struck will be discussed below. There would be general agreement that it was at some time within the period *c.* 725–45, which places it squarely in the reign of Offa's predecessor Æthelbald (716–57), the Mercian king whose rise to overlordship of the southern English kingdoms followed quickly upon the death of Wihtred of Kent and the abdication in 726 of Ine, king of the West Saxons. Two main varieties of sceattas have already been attributed to Æthelbald,<sup>3</sup> whose leading political role in the years from *c.* 730 onwards is not disputed.

Both Abingdon and Dorchester lie in the frontier zone between Mercia and Wessex, which was for a long time contested territory in the late 7th and 8th centuries. Evidence from charters and other documentary sources is fragmentary and very incomplete, but 'in 735, the traditional date of St. Frideswide's death, the land on each side of the Thames at Oxford seems to have been under the direct rule of Æthelbald . . . During the next 100 years every powerful West Saxon king asserted a claim to this territory, but the Mercian kings more than held their ground until their dynasty came to an end, and it was not until the middle of the 9th century that the debateable land was finally divided between them, Berkshire and northern Wiltshire becoming West Saxon, and the plain of central Oxford-

<sup>3</sup> D. M. Metcalf, 'A coinage for Mercia under Æthelbald', *Cunobelin*, xii (1966), 26–39.

shire remaining Mercian'.<sup>4</sup> By 735 the see of Dorchester had been suppressed and the area was ruled from Lichfield or (after 737) Leicester. There is reason to think that Abingdon, too, was under Mercian control or influence in the same period. Enough has been said, perhaps, to show that the Abingdon and Dorchester finds together are of far more than random interest, as regards both the period and the district to which they refer: Dorchester, Oxford, and (very probably) Abingdon lay just within the southern frontier of Mercia at the time when the coins were lost.

Could this eclectic variety of sceat, combining designs associated with London and Southampton respectively, be a local issue? Could one imagine, even, that it was struck in Dorchester? One swallow does not make a summer, and two provenances do not make a reliable distribution pattern; nevertheless, it is fair to point out, first, that this is a rare variety of which only a dozen specimens are known at the present day, and secondly that there are few 8th-century finds of any description from the Oxford region. Oxfordshire and Berkshire lie towards the western fringes of the circulation-area of sceattas, as may be judged from the map (FIG. 2). Their focus and economic background was the cross-Channel trade, especially with Frisia, without which the English currency in the 8th century would not have been viable. From this point of view, the Midlands were a distant hinterland, accessible only in times of expansion and unusual prosperity.<sup>5</sup> Gloucestershire and Somerset, for example, were settled and prosperous regions by the mid-8th century; but virtually no coinage was in use there, apparently because they were too remote from the currents of trade.

Enticing as the idea is that we might have a clue, in the two coin-finds from Abingdon and Dorchester, to local monetary affairs in the dark ages and to the economic patterns of regionalism in the Heptarchy, it would be an error to jump at the conclusion of local minting without first trying to set the 'bird and branch' coins in a wider numismatic context. Other varieties of sceattas, of which more specimens have survived, have been studied in detail and it has emerged that one 'variety' may include groups of coins that are different in style, even though the formal elements in their design are the same. The likely implication is that the different styles were minted at different places, and this is confirmed by other technical aspects of the coins' manufacture, such as their weight-range and alloy, as well as by their geographical distribution-patterns.<sup>6</sup> The early sceattas of Rigold's variety 'B', which are essentially Kentish, have been divided on

<sup>4</sup> See F. M. Stenton, 'St. Frideswide and her times', *Oxoniensia*, 1 (1936), 103-12, reprinted in *Preparatory to Anglo-Saxon England* (ed. D. M. Stenton) (1970), 224-33 at 229-31, and id., 'The supremacy of the Mercian kings', *ibid.*, 48-66 at 52-4. See also M. Biddle, G. Lambrick and J. N. L. Myres, 'The early history of Abingdon, Berkshire, and its Abbey', *Medieval Archaeology*, xii (1968), 26-69.

<sup>5</sup> A distribution-map of 8th-century finds appears in D. M. Metcalf, 'The prosperity of north-western Europe in the 8th and 9th centuries', *Economic History Review*, 2.xx (1967), 344-57. This combines sceattas and Offa's pence, and shows, in effect, the maximum extent of the circulation-area. In the 750s and 760s the use of coinage was restricted to a very much smaller area, principally east Kent. For the theory that severe fluctuations in the extent of the monetary economy can be interpreted in terms of economic boom and recession in the 8th century, see also D. M. Metcalf, 'An early Carolingian mint in the Low Countries: BONA = Tiel', *Revue Belge de Numismatique*, cxvi (1970), 141-52.

<sup>6</sup> The case is most fully argued in D. M. Metcalf, 'A stylistic analysis of the "porcupine" sceattas', *Numismatic Chronicle*, 7.vi (1966), 179-205.



FIG. 2

Map of finds of sceattas in England. Key : circles show stray finds, rectangles show hoards and grave-finds, open triangles show coins of the 'Midlands' varieties. The larger circles mark places from which a number of single finds have been reported (Norwich, Caister, Reculver, Richborough, Dunstable, Dorchester). The four major sites on which our knowledge of the sceatta currency in England rests, namely Southampton, London, Thanet and Whitby, are prominently marked.

grounds of style into sub-varieties BI, BII, and BIII, and the distribution of their provenances is as different as it could well be. BI is the main series, with an exceptionally compact distribution in east Kent. The coins classed as BII, on the other hand, are found in the Low Countries, and they are evidently Frisian 'copies' which were intended to pass as genuine BI coins. BIII, which seems to belong to the outer fringes of the English circulation-area, 'borrows' the Kentish design but interprets it in a different style, which would have been readily distinguished by 8th-century users. Thus with BIII, unlike BII, there can be no question of deception. The central stylistic block of BIII coins, subdivided again by Rigold and designated BIIIb, are the ones which have been attributed to Æthelbald.<sup>7</sup> As well as 'copying' and 'artistic borrowing' there was also in the first half of the 8th century a great deal of downright criminal forgery, by which people were deceived and robbed. For example, one of the two coins in the Winteringham find, from the south bank of the Humber, in Lincolnshire, is a base metal counterfeit of the BIIIb type—an imitation of an imitation.<sup>8</sup> The Banbury find, published in this journal,<sup>9</sup> was similarly a base metal counterfeit. Political control of the currency was no doubt difficult to exercise in the second quarter of the 8th century: there were too many districts where the monetary sector of the economy was marginal; and the divided rule of the Heptarchy together with the importance of cross-Channel trade meant that some of the main lines of communication cut across political frontiers. Problems arising from the circulation of counterfeits could always be blamed on the Frisians! Because of the confusion and opportunism which characterize the sceatta currency—and the confusion has appeared all the greater because of our imperfect understanding of the coins—students have drawn the contrast with Offa's tightly regulated national currency from which foreign issues were rigorously excluded, and have assumed that coinage was not fully established as a royal prerogative in the first half of the 8th century. The example of the Middle Angles, a people apparently without a king and without a coinage of their own, though with a plentiful currency, should make one pause (see FIG. 2, where there are a good many finds from the western flanks of the Chilterns, the territory of the Middle Anglian Cilternsæten).

Because one formal 'variety' of sceattas may conflate coins of quite different origins, the starting-point for a study of the 'bird and branch' sceattas (Types 23b, c and d in the *British Museum Catalogue*) is a stylistic analysis of all the available specimens, together with any others which may seem to be related to them in terms of style. The list of examples is, alas, short, and of provenances even shorter, but one can very quickly see that different styles are involved. The Abingdon and Dorchester finds<sup>10</sup> are by the same hand (see PL. VI, 1 and 2)—

<sup>7</sup> Metcalf, *op. cit.*, *Cunobelin* (1966).

<sup>8</sup> For the find-spot, which is where Ermine Street crossed the Humber, see *Cunobelin* (1966), 28. Analyses of the two coins from Winteringham are published in D. M. Metcalf, J. M. Merrick, and L. K. Hamblin, *Studies in the Composition of Early Medieval Coins* (1968), 21 and 41-2.

<sup>9</sup> D. M. Metcalf, 'An eighth-century find at Banbury', *Oxoniensia*, xxix/xxx (1964/5), 193-4.

<sup>10</sup> Abingdon: weight 16.5 gr. after cleaning. Dorchester: ex Lord Grantley collection, 692; wt. 17.7 gr.

the same craftsman, that is to say, cut the dies for them—and there are other specimens which clearly belong with them: one in the British Museum, one in the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow, and one in a private collection in America (PL. VI, 3, 4 and 5).<sup>11</sup> Of these, the Abingdon coin is the most important, as it is from a reverse die of unusually careful and artistic workmanship. The bird's wing, held vertically over its back, is cross hatched and terminates in an elegant scroll; and the head has a crest of three pellets on stalks (FIG. 1). A find from Reculver in east Kent is in a very different style from the foregoing five coins (PL. VI, 6), and the same 'London-connected' workmanship can be recognized in other varieties with an easterly distribution. There are three other unprovenanced specimens of London-connected 'bird and branch' sceattas in public collections (PL. VI, 7-9).<sup>12</sup> Another coin, listed in the *British Museum Catalogue* as a sub-variety (*B.M.C.* Type 23d) with 'bird almost changed into a whorl' seems to be a close, but presumably unofficial, imitation of the same style; note the long curl of hair at the nape of the neck, and the failure fully to understand the dynamic balance of the 'bird' design (PL. VI, 10).<sup>13</sup> Next, there is an unskilled copy on which the design has suffered a mirror-reversal. (The dies for coins have to be cut in intaglio, but in this case the die-cutter has simply copied what was in front of him, without making the necessary reversal.) The standing figure on the other side has a facing, instead of a profile, head with enormous curling moustaches (PL. VI, 11). The provenance is not known, but the style of this coin suggests that it may be Frisian.<sup>14</sup> Another specimen seems to be a rough, unofficial copy of the Abingdon/Dorchester style (PL. VI, 12); its weight is well below what it should be.<sup>15</sup> Finally, there is a very crude little imitation from the Boogaers collection. Its provenance can be assumed to be the Low Countries, and it is the only example of this variety of sceattas with such a provenance (PL. VI, 13).<sup>16</sup>

A derivative 'bird' design in coarse style (PL. VI, 14, 15) occurs with a dog- or dragon-like beast on the other side. It is rather variable in the formal elements in its composition, although not in its style, and has been classified as two separate varieties, *B.M.C./Hill* Types 64 and 65. They are no doubt part of a single sequence of mint-output. They do not really concern us here, as they are so obviously different in style and origin from either the Abingdon/Dorchester

<sup>11</sup> *B.M.C.* 113, wt. 18.7 gr.; *S.C.B.I. Hunterian* 119, 17.0 gr.; *S.C.B.I. Norweb* 59, 18.2 gr.

<sup>12</sup> Reculver: *S.C.B.I. Fitzwilliam* 262, 9.8 gr. (chipped); *B.M.C.* 114 (from dies very similar to the Reculver find), 16.5 gr.; *S.C.B.I. Hunterian* 120, 19.3 gr.; Ashmolean (unpublished), 16.8 gr. Another, from the same obverse die as the last, D. M. Metcalf, 14.6 gr.

<sup>13</sup> The interpretation of this coin (*B.M.C.* 116, 13.8 gr.) is a good example of the shift in emphasis away from typological devolution since Keary's day. See, most recently, M. Morehart, 'Some dangers of dating sceattas by typological sequences', *B.N.J.*, xxxix (1970), 1-5. Compare the obverse die of *B.M.C.* 116 with Plate VI, 12.

<sup>14</sup> *B.M.C.* 115, 12.3 gr. This coin is of particular interest for the 'boat', which was somehow understood, even by the copyist, to be an integral part of the design. Here it is almost a complete circle around the standing figure, turned in a little at the right-hand end.

<sup>15</sup> British Museum, Barnett bequest, 1935 (11-17-270), published in P. V. Hill, 'Uncatalogued sceattas in the national and other collections', *Numismatic Chronicle*, 6.xiii (1953), 92-114, at p. 98, a; wt., 12.6 gr.

<sup>16</sup> I am indebted to Miss Ada van der Poel of the Zeeuwisch Museum, Middelburg for information about the coin and for her skilful drawing of it, reproduced below.



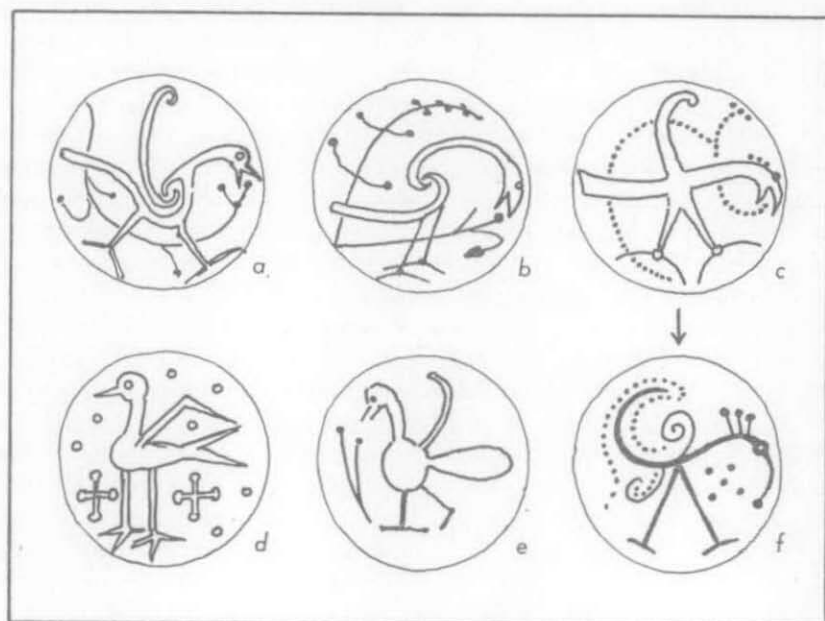


FIG. 3

Composite sketches to show the five substantive styles of the 'bird and branch' design: (a) 'Midlands' (b) 'London-connected', (c) Southampton, (d) East Anglian, (e) Uncertain location, (f) Southampton (late style).

or the London coins. They are known from the Cambridge hoard, and are very probably East Anglian (i.e. they are likely to have been minted in the region of Colchester or Ipswich). It is this version of the 'bird and branch' design, struck apparently in quantities at a regular mint, which entered cross-Channel trade and which has been found in small numbers in the Low Countries. It also occurred in the excavations at Whitby.<sup>17</sup> It was itself subject to imitation—witness the 18th-century find from the Isle of Thanet reproduced as PL. VI, 16, which combines the East Anglian bird with the London standing figure.<sup>18</sup>

There is also another regular series of bird/beast coins, but in a more modelled style, and without the bold dots scattered all over the field; another early Thanet find (PL. VI, 17) should probably be referred to this group.<sup>19</sup> It is entirely problematic to which region of Britain it might belong, although one imagines that it is from somewhere on the east coast—perhaps Lindsey or even Northumbria, as there are general similarities of style with the early signed coins of king Eadberht.

<sup>17</sup> C. A. Rethaan Macaré, *Tweede verhandeling over de bij Domburg gevondene . . . munten . . . 1854*, (1856), pl. II, 13 = M. de Man, *Catalogus*, 1907, 252; also pl. II, 12. I am again indebted to Miss van der Poel for help over these coins. For the Whitby find, see Hill, op. cit., 108 (Type 44 var).

<sup>18</sup> For a bibliographical note see D. M. Metcalf, 'Find-records of medieval coins from Gough's Camden's *Britannia*', *Numismatic Chronicle*, 6.xvii (1957), 181–207, at 204, and cf. S.C.B.I. Fitzwilliam, xii f. For another specimen, Hill (1952), pl. II, 30.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. S.C.B.I. *Hunterian* 128, wt. 14.5 gr.; 129, 13.7 gr.; Hill, op. cit., pl. VI, 9, 17.6 gr.

The Southampton version of the 'bird and branch' design (PL. VI, 18) brings us back to a style much nearer that of the Abingdon find. It is the work of an educated hand, and it interprets the balance of the design in a distinctive way, running the bird's tail and neck together into a single S-shaped curve. The pattern is well-conceived and well-modelled, with dotted 'chains' to represent the vine. Because of the astonishing series totalling about eighty sceattas found at Southampton at intervals between 1825 and 1968, we are particularly well informed about the composition of the local currency there.<sup>20</sup> Most of the finds are of the two 'Southampton' types, *B.M.C.* Types 39 and 49, which were apparently struck in large quantities, perhaps over a period of a decade or more around the 730s, and which were, like the other styles, subject to imitation. An interesting stylistic progression of the 'bird and branch' design can be traced through the two official types, but this is not the place to discuss it in detail, nor to consider whether the sharing of such a distinctive pictorial design with other mints elsewhere in the Heptarchy was by a deliberate choice intended to convey a political message. It would, indeed, be difficult to offer any hard evidence that the different styles were being struck concurrently, although it is reasonable to assume that most of them were. The diagram (FIG. 3) summarizes the principal forms of the 'bird and branch' design. One other style may be mentioned—the 'plumed bird' version of the 'porcupine' sceattas; this, however, is presumably earlier in date and not closely connected with our theme.<sup>21</sup>

There are, then, five substantive styles of the 'bird and branch' design, but only two of them are associated with the 'standing figure' obverse, namely the 'Abingdon/Dorchester' and the 'London-connected'. These two are apparently identical in the formal elements of their design, differing only in style. There are, in addition, various derivative specimens of inferior quality and (often) low weight, which are presumably the work of private individuals, imitating official coinage and making a profit out of deception. Thus, the central group of 'bird and branch' sceattas appears to offer an exact parallel to the 'wolf' sceattas, for which a comparable stylistic analysis has been made.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the two characteristic styles of portrait that have been identified among the better 'wolf' sceattas are reproduced exactly, on a smaller scale, as the heads of the standing figures on the 'bird and branch' coins (see FIG. 1). There were certainly two die-cutters, whose individual styles we can recognize, each of whom cut dies for both these varieties of sceattas. And the inference is that there were two mints, both of which first produced the one variety, and then the other. This hypothesis is borne out by other parallels between the stylistic groups—first, the pattern of their weights, and secondly, the rather complicated evidence of their provenances, and of other provenances from the districts to which they draw attention.

<sup>20</sup> For an inventory of the coins, see P. V. Addyman and D. H. Hill, 'Saxon Southampton: a review of the evidence', *Proceedings of the Hampshire Field Club*, xxv (1968), 61–93 and xxvi (1969), 61–96.

<sup>21</sup> The 'porcupines' are extraordinarily difficult to date, but the 'plumed bird' variety is of exceptionally pure silver (Metcalf, Merrick and Hamblin, *op. cit.*, p. 22) and presumably belongs to the primary phase of the sceatta currency.

<sup>22</sup> D. M. Metcalf and D. R. Walker, 'The "wolf" sceattas', *B.N.J.*, xxxvi (1967), 11–28.



The metrological evidence of the 'wolf' coins shows a clear distinction between the two styles, and that of the 'bird and branch' coins seems to show the same, although the number of specimens available is too small to be conclusive. The 'wolf' coins in style A-B (matching the London-connected 'bird and branch' coins) are rather variable in their weights, with an average of about 15 or 16 grains, whereas those in style C-D (the Abingdon/Dorchester style) are much more accurately controlled around an average of just over 17 grains.<sup>23</sup> The 'bird and branch' coins show the same contrast in accuracy, and in each style are marginally heavier. They are of a better alloy, too, and in the context of the progressive debasement of the later issues of sceattas they are therefore doubtless the earlier of the two varieties.

The evidence of provenance is not altogether clear-cut, but one would not expect it to be in so far as sceattas were carried to and fro between the midlands and the Channel coasts. A-B, like the London-connected 'bird and branch' style, is recorded only from Reculver, at the northern end of the Wantsum channel.<sup>24</sup> C-D coins, on the other hand, come from as far afield as a grave-find at Garton in the East Riding of Yorkshire, from Stourmouth (adjacent to Richborough, at the southern end of the Wantsum channel) and (probably) from the Isle of Thanet. To this short list, including Abingdon and Dorchester as the only truly 'Midlands' provenances, we should probably amalgamate the similar find-spots for the varieties BIII and *B.M.C.* Type 37, for there are stylistic affinities between them and the 'bird and branch' and 'wolf' sceattas, in particular the well-rounded yet not too precise modelling, the leaving of ample space as the background to the design, and the slightly convex fabric of the flans that is sometimes found in both groups. The most straightforward hypothesis, and the one which avoids multiplying mints unnecessarily, taking into account the similar distribution-patterns and the affinities of style, is that all four varieties were produced successively at the same mint, somewhere to the north or west of London. The silver-contents of the better specimens<sup>25</sup> suggest the sequence:

	% 'silver'	Other styles % 'silver'
BIIIb	96	95-97 (BI)
<i>B.M.C.</i> Type 37	c. 92½	(no coins)
'Bird and branch'	90/95	83/93 (Southampton, Type 39)
		63/68 (Southampton, Type 49)
		72/84 (London)
		38/40 (E. Anglia)
		34/37 (London, Type 23e)
'Wolf'	no information	54/65, 44, 44/46.

<sup>23</sup> See the table of weights, loc. cit., p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> For the provenances of the 'wolf' sceattas, see Metcalf and Walker, loc. cit. On the Wantsum channel in Saxon times, see S. C. Hawkes, 'Richborough—the physical geography', in *Fifth Report on the Excavations of the Roman Fort at Richborough, Kent* (Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London, xxiii) (1968), 224-31.

<sup>25</sup> Analyses summarized from Metcalf, Merrick and Hamblin, op. cit. Note that the figures for silver include traces of gold, i.e. 'silver' = Ag + Au.

The essentially 'Midlands' distribution of BIIIb, Type 37, and their counterfeits was first argued and documented in 1966.<sup>26</sup> Rigold, however, commenting on the proposed attribution to Æthelbald, flatly repudiated the idea that BIIIb was Mercian, or even Middle Anglian, and suggested that (if it was not indeed Kentish as he had first thought) the most plausible location would be Lindsey or perhaps East Anglia.<sup>27</sup> This suggestion lays heavy emphasis on the coastwise nature of communications and monetary circulation<sup>28</sup> and it minimizes the fact that sceattas were used in the Midlands, and were therefore necessarily carried about the countryside.<sup>29</sup> Further, the unquestioned predominance of east Kent in the primary phase of the sceattas and also in the earliest coinage of Offa seems to have obscured the view that conditions may have been very different in the intervening period. The doctrine of uniformitarianism is not applicable: the area over which the use of coinage extended in 8th-century England spread swiftly in the 720s or thereabouts, and was severely contracted again by about 750. There was what can only be described as a monetary boom, followed by a recession or even a collapse. Rigold's reading of the find-evidence, in 1966, was that 'the BIIIb "connexion" constitutes a large and compact issue . . . its coastwise distribution, with one or two Mercian outliers . . .'. This repeated what he had said about the 'wolf' sceattas in 1960: 'the same coastwise distribution Whitby-Thames-Southampton'. The proposition, one may in turn reply, is correct except that it needs to be reversed: BIIIb is Mercian in origin, and it is the coastal finds that are the outliers. If the Midlands finds were the strays, there would be no obvious reason why they should be concentrated in Mercia, and not found, for example, equally in the Chilterns area of Middle Anglia (see FIG. 2). If on the other hand the flow is outwards, the dual distribution, Mercia plus coastal sites, is explicable. In 1966 the known finds from Mercia proper were limited to that from Banbury. A welcome recent addition to the list of provenances is a specimen of BIIIc (an imitative variety which combines elements from the designs of BIIIb and the following Type 37) said to have been found at Brackley, Northants—just a few miles east of Banbury.<sup>30</sup> The Abingdon and Dorchester finds duplicate the pattern suggested by Banbury and Brackley, and again point to Mercia as the location of the 'Midlands' mint.

If, then, specimens of the BIIIb sequence have been found on the banks of the Humber, on the coasts of East Anglia, beside the Wantsum channel, and by the Solent, one may interpret this as evidence of Mercia's reaching out towards

<sup>26</sup> Metcalf, *op. cit.*, *Cunobelin*, xii (1966).

<sup>27</sup> S. E. Rigold, 'The two primary series of sceattas: addenda and corrigenda', *B.N.J.*, xxxv (1966), 1-6, at p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> It is generally true, of course, that the emphasis is on a coastal distribution of the sceatta currency as a whole. But there may have been much more traffic between, for example, Kent and the Low Countries, and again East Anglia and the Low Countries, than between Kent and East Anglia. From a slightly later date, note the Low Countries provenances for the East Anglian coins of king Beonna—H. E. Pagan, 'A new type for Beonna', *B.N.J.*, xxxvii (1968), 10-15.

<sup>29</sup> It is, perhaps, worth stressing that the map of provenances is the only source of information we have for the area over which the currency circulated.

<sup>30</sup> *S.C.B.J. Midlands*, 66.

the east and south coasts. The drive to achieve access to the sea was a strategic ambition for Mercia through most of the 8th century. Æthelbald gained control over London as his 'window on the world' in 731 or 732, and Offa pushed the same policy further when he achieved effective power in Canterbury. Although in the earlier part of Æthelbald's reign east Kent was probably still the busiest and richest trading-station in England, the near-monopoly of currency and commerce it seems to have enjoyed in the late 7th century was being eroded. Hamwih may briefly have become equally busy; the route from the Mercian frontier directly southwards was across easy country, as well as being only half as far as the journey to east Kent. In support of the idea of a briefly-flourishing Mercian coinage, the growing list of finds of sceattas of various kinds from the Midlands is thus in itself interesting as a measure of the use of coinage in the region. Sutherland's inventory of sceatta provenances, compiled in 1942, can now be considerably extended.<sup>31</sup> Recently published finds include those from Banbury, from the Shakenoak excavations near Witney,<sup>32</sup> from Brackley,<sup>33</sup> Coventry,<sup>34</sup> Worcester,<sup>35</sup> Temple Guiting near Cheltenham,<sup>36</sup> Badsey near Evesham,<sup>37</sup> Portishead near Bristol,<sup>38</sup> and the Aston Rowant hoard from the line of the Icknield Way near High Wycombe.<sup>39</sup> Finds such as these from the Midlands represent a gradual and continuing accumulation of evidence that is hard to ignore. Ten or fifteen years ago one could reasonably have said that the known finds of sceattas showed very much the same distribution as that for the first pennies, from c. 770 to c. 820. When a map of these was published in 1958, it was noted that 'the circulation of the "Mercian" penny was limited for all practical purposes to the area south and east of a line from the Solent, through the Northampton uplands, to the Wash'.<sup>40</sup> For the sceattas, it would now seem simpler and more accurate to speak of a line from the Bristol Channel to the Wash—but one should remember that this defines the maximum effective extent of the sceatta currency, and refers to a period of only about two decades.

There need be no doubt that in that short period the Oxford region lay within the circulation area of coinage. More specifically, the provenances of the 'Southampton' and 'Midlands' varieties also hint at overland travel between the Solent and the Oxford region. Thus, an imitative BIIIb coin has been

<sup>31</sup> C. H. V. Sutherland, 'Anglo-Saxon sceattas in England: their origin, chronology, and distribution', *Numismatic Chronicle*, 6.11 (1942), 42-70. See also the lists of provenances for each type in P. V. Hill, 'The "Standard" and "London" series of Anglo-Saxon sceattas', *B.N.J.*, xxvi (1951), 251-79; id., 'The animal, "Anglo-Merovingian", and miscellaneous series of Anglo-Saxon sceattas', *B.N.J.*, xxvii (1952-54), 1-38; and provenances in P. V. Hill, 'Uncatalogued sceattas in the national and other collections', *Numismatic Chronicle*, 6.xiii (1953), 92-114, and in S. E. Rigold, 'The two primary series of sceattas', *B.N.J.*, xxx (1960-61), 6-53.

<sup>32</sup> A. C. C. Brodribb, A. R. Hands and D. R. Walker, *Excavations at Shakenoak*, II, 49; III, 35; and a third (counterfeit) sceat in vol. IV (in preparation), Oxford, privately printed, 1971, 1972, in press.

<sup>33</sup> *S.C.B.I. Midlands* 66.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>36</sup> R. A. G. Carson, 'Two interesting site finds', *B.N.J.*, xxxiii (1964), 171.

<sup>37</sup> To be published: included on the map (Fig. 2).

<sup>38</sup> L. V. Grinsell, 'A sceatta from Portishead, Somerset', *B.N.J.*, xxxix (1970), 163 f.

<sup>39</sup> See the note by J. P. C. Kent, below, pp. 243-4.

<sup>40</sup> R. H. M. Dolley and D. M. Metcalf, 'Two stray finds from St. Albans of coins of Offa and of Charlemagne', *B.N.J.*, xxviii (1958), 459-66, at p. 462.

found at Southampton,<sup>41</sup> and an imitative 'wolf' sceat is also recorded there.<sup>42</sup> The other purely 'Midlands' type, *B.M.C.* Type 37, was imitated southwards again across the Channel at Rouen.<sup>43</sup> *B.M.C.* Type 42 ('hound and tree'), which is closely related by style to the 'wolf' sceattas, has been found both at Southampton and 'near Oxford'.<sup>44</sup> And conversely, the second of the Southampton types, *B.M.C.* Type 49, is reported from Clatford near Marlborough,<sup>45</sup> in an otherwise empty quarter of the map. This is the most northerly find-spot for Type 49, which occurs at Dorchester (Dorset) and in considerable quantities in the Southampton region. The best route between the middle Thames and Hamwih may have run south-west through Wantage and then, perhaps, along the Ridgeway to the vicinity of Marlborough.

Similarly, contacts between London and the south-west Midlands are indicated by the penetration of 'London-connected' varieties into the middle Thames valley and beyond. The finds include two from Witney, as well as those from Badsey, Temple Guiting, and Portishead. In the other direction, there are 'Midlands' coins from Reculver and Richborough.

To focus attention on the more immediate area around Oxford, one may note that there are other sceatta finds, which strengthen the impression that the use of coinage here in the second quarter of the 8th century was not altogether sporadic. A 'porcupine' sceat in the Ashmolean Museum is believed to have been found at Abingdon; and there is another 'porcupine' from Binsey, on the northern outskirts of Oxford.<sup>46</sup> A 'London-connected' coin, with the usual standing figure on one side, and on the other a dragon looking over its shoulder (*B.M.C.* Type 23a, var.) was discovered at Dorchester before 1823.<sup>47</sup> Exactly the same variety occurs in a hoard from London;<sup>48</sup> and the same dragon design occurs with a different obverse on a sceat found—again—near Marlborough.<sup>49</sup> A third find from Dorchester is of *B.M.C.* Type 35. Its obverse imitates *B.M.C.* Type 3a (about which more will be said below), while the 'bird' design reappears on the reverse.<sup>50</sup> Thus, seven sceattas are now known from within a few miles of Oxford, in addition to the three excavation-coins from Shakenoak, Witney.

In this fashion one can pull one thread after another out of the very tangled

<sup>41</sup> Rigold, *op. cit.*, BIIIb, 3. The style and provenances of this sub-variety are discussed in Metcalf *op. cit.*, *Cunobelin*, XII (1966), at p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> Metcalf and Walker, *op. cit.*, no. 32 or 38.

<sup>43</sup> P. O. van der Chijs, *De munten der frankische en duitse nederlandsche vorsten*, Haarlem, 1866, plate VI, 83. This remarkable coin, boldly marked RM (*Rotomagus*) on the reverse, was found at Domburg and entered the collections of the Zeeuwisch Museum, Middelburg, but was lost in the war.

<sup>44</sup> Metcalf and Walker, *op. cit.*, nos. 22 and 25.

<sup>45</sup> See Marlborough College Natural History Society Report, xxxix (1891), 114 and plate II, 5.

<sup>46</sup> Metcalf, *op. cit.*, *Numismatic Chronicle* (1966), at p. 194, and plate XVI, 42, 43.

<sup>47</sup> Two different drawings of this coin are published, in J. Skelton, *Engraved Illustrations of the Principal Antiquities of Oxfordshire* (1823), s.a. 'Dorchester Hundred' (separately paginated), p. 10, and see pp. 2-4; and in J. Y. Akerman, 'Rude coins discovered in England', *Numismatic Chronicle* (1841-42), at p. 32. The coin illustrated in Hill, *op. cit.*, *B.N.J.*, xxvi (1951), pl. IV, 16 is, *pace* Hill, not the same one.

<sup>48</sup> This is the coin illustrated by Hill (see the previous note), now in the Ashmolean Museum and ticketed as ex Thames (Franks) hoard. There are two Thames hoards, as noted by Rigold, *op. cit.* (1960), 6, note 2.

<sup>49</sup> Hill, *op. cit.* (1953), plate VII, 9.

<sup>50</sup> Information from Hill, *op. cit.* (1952-54), at p. 32.

skein of information that the sceattas offer, and make some kind of a fabric out of them. The interconnexions are seemingly endless, but their interpretation calls for careful judgement, because one has to decide in most cases on the evidence of style between artistic borrowing, imitation, and forgery, and because there are too few specimens available at the present day for a statistical assessment of their metrology and fineness to be clear-cut. Yet one has to form an opinion about the coins individually, and at least decide which represent substantive issues and which are free-lance, before one can begin to assess the political and economic significance of the shared use or copying of the many pictorial designs. The BIIIb—Type 37 sequence and the 'bird and branch'—'wolf' sequence in their two main styles both appear to be official issues rather than opportunist copies. They were themselves subject to copying. The growing list of provenances associates them in each case with the English Midlands, and, more specifically, Mercia rather than Middle Anglia, and the attempt to transfer any of them to the east coast is unconvincing. There seems to be a much closer link with Southampton. Although the stylistic and typological links between the two sequences (which Rigold noticed in 1960<sup>51</sup>) are slender, they follow the same pattern in so many respects that it is likely that they are in fact a single sequence, that is to say the work of one mint. If the primary sceattas are the coinage of Wihtried, *gloriosus rex Cantiae*,<sup>52</sup> correspondingly the only politically plausible interpretation of the 'Midlands' series is that they are the coinage of Æthelbald, 'king not only of Mercia but also of all the provinces that are commonly called *Suthengli*'—that is, England south of the Humber.<sup>53</sup>

Where then were Æthelbald's Mercian coins struck? We do not know, and we shall probably have to await many more stray finds before we can make an informed guess. But the recent Abingdon find, when it is set in its context (as has been attempted here), allows one to think of the Oxford region, and probably Dorchester, at least as a possibility—a frontier mint at the point of entry into Mercia.

Putting an exact date on the 'bird and branch' sceattas is just as much a matter of model-building as is the interpretation of provenances. Rigold has placed the relative chronology of the sceatta series as a whole beyond doubt: there was a primary phase, consisting of very few varieties, of good alloy; and a secondary phase, in which designs and interpretations were multiplied, and debasement was rapid. The transition was about 730. The main varieties of primary sceattas, A and B, are associated with the peaceful and prosperous reign of Wihtried, and probably come to an end very soon after his death. The varieties with which we are here concerned lie on the watershed between the primary and secondary phase, and the hoard evidence is very satisfactory as to which varieties belong to this watershed. We have:

<sup>51</sup> Rigold, *op. cit.*, at p. 23, adumbrating the stylistic division of the 'wolf' sceattas between more than one mint.

<sup>52</sup> *Loc. cit.*, pp. 27–9. The brilliance of Rigold's solution of the sceatta problem demands the highest praise.

<sup>53</sup> F. M. Stenton, 'The supremacy of the Mercian kings', in *Preparatory to Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 48–66.



(a) The Garton grave-find, containing BIIIb, Type 37, and a 'wolf' sceat, with two specimens of *B.M.C.* Type 3a, and one curious runic coin (which may in fact be from the same stable as BIIIc). There is no useful independent evidence for the date of deposit, which Rigold would set close to 730, but which may be a few years later.

(b) The equally compact English element in the Hallum find from the coast of Frisia: BIIIb, 3a (three specimens), a 'plumed bird' porcupine, a London-connected 'porcupine', and another imitative 'porcupine' which actually reads LVNDONIA. Rigold suggests a date of concealment of 734, when Frisia was attacked by sea.

(c) The English element in the Nice-Cimiez hoard (which reflects the currency of Marseilles): again, a compact representation of Types B, 37, 3a, and the 'plumed bird'. A specimen of Type 23e may be an intruder.<sup>54</sup> The traditional dating is 737, but Lafaurie would prefer to set the hoard a little after 741.<sup>55</sup>

(d) Taking the foregoing evidence into account, Rigold suggested that the signed LVNDONIA coins were struck shortly after Æthelbald secured control of the city, that is, in 731-2.

None of these dates is necessarily immovable, but if one is moved, all the rest may have to be adjusted consequentially. Rigold dated BIII to 725-30, on the view that it was later than BI and BII; but if BIIIb was struck concurrently, it could be earlier than 725. There were two specimens of BIIIA in the Aston Rowant hoard, the deposit of which Kent is inclined to date to c. 710-15.<sup>56</sup> This suggests that the BIIIA coins are early (Frisian?) copies of BI, with no close connexion with BIIIb. If, as we have assumed, the 'bird and branch' coins copy the standing figure of the London series, they are on the above model necessarily later than 731-2; and if they precede the 'wolf' sceattas (being of better silver) they will almost certainly belong to the 730s.

But this leaves us with the unpalatable corollary that substantive issues of sceattas were being struck concurrently with very different silver contents. Let us glance, therefore, at the rather radical suggestion that the borrowing was in the other direction, and that the 'bird and branch' coins precede the 'London' types with the figure with two crosses standing in a 'boat'. Such a rearrangement would accord better with what is known about the alloy of the coins, but it would have repercussions on all the other parts of our chronological 'model', and a proper discussion of them must be deferred. If the argument could be sustained, it would either push the date of the 'bird and branch' coins of the Abingdon/Dorchester variety back into the 720s, or else demand that the LVNDONIA issues be moved to the 740s.

<sup>54</sup> This is discussed more fully in Metcalf and Walker, *op. cit.*

<sup>55</sup> J. Lafaurie, 'Les routes commerciales indiquées par les trésors et trouvailles monétaires mérovingiennes', *Moneta e Scambi nell'alto medioevo* (Settimane di Studio, VIII), 1961, 231-78, at p. 266. The crucial coins say KAP on one side and PAS on the other, and this rather cryptic message has been interpreted as *Karolus Patricius Provinciae*.

<sup>56</sup> See Kent, *op. cit.*, below, p. 244.



## APPENDIX

## A COINAGE FOR WEST SUSSEX IN THE EARLY 8TH CENTURY?

The same combination of stylistic and topographical arguments that has been employed to suggest that the BIIIb sequence is Mercian points to a South Saxon origin for *B.M.C.* Type 3a. This variety was of good silver (e.g. 87/89%)<sup>57</sup> and high weight,<sup>58</sup> and obviously belongs to the 'watershed' between the primary and secondary phases, witness its occurrence at Garton, Hallum, and Cimiez. Rigold tentatively proposed an attribution to London, mainly on the grounds of the fabric and style of engraving. The distribution of finds is again apparently coastwise, including Southampton,<sup>59</sup> Wakering in Essex,<sup>60</sup> and Whitby (a crude copy),<sup>61</sup> with an 'outlier' at Dunstable.<sup>62</sup> Three further coins suggest a reinterpretation: two local finds, one from the beach at Selsey (seat of the South Saxon bishop),<sup>63</sup> and another from Pyecombe, an inland site a few miles north of Brighton;<sup>64</sup> and an imitation, of presumed continental provenance, with an extraordinary reverse reading R-X CIO in boustrophedon.<sup>65</sup>

We know very little about Sussex, but charters indicate that a number of kings reigned there simultaneously in the late 7th and early 8th centuries, that is to say, there were separate local dynasties of royal descent ruling over parts of the kingdom.<sup>66</sup> The meaning of *R-x Cic*, in these circumstances, may very probably be *Rex Cicestriae*, king of Chichester, or king at Chichester. (The only other sceattas with an inscription in boustrophedon are the *Æthilræd* runic porcupines, which were once erroneously attributed to Aethelred of Mercia.<sup>67</sup> Is it possible that we have a royal name on a sceat after all?)

If this suggested attribution to a mint at Chichester is correct, we have another regal sceatta coinage, flourishing briefly for a decade or couple of decades in the early 8th century. It was imitated on the Continent (finds from Étapes,<sup>68</sup> Hallum, Cimiez, Domburg,<sup>69</sup> and probably the *R-x Cic* coin) to a degree that calls for a southerly attribution. It was imitated also probably in England: *B.M.C.* Type 35 is a crude but recognizable copy of its obverse, muled with a 'bird' reverse,<sup>70</sup> or alternatively with a 'wolf' reverse.<sup>71</sup> A much closer copy has a 'boat' with wolf-head terminals.<sup>72</sup> These typological links, together with the provenances from Dunstable, Dorchester-on-Thames (Type 35), and the Garton grave-find, hint at another north-south route, from Chichester to the Midlands.

<sup>57</sup> D. M. Metcalf and L. K. Hamblin, 'The composition of some Frisian sceattas', *Jaarboek voor Munt- en Penningkunde*, LV (1968), 28-45 at pp. 34 f.

<sup>58</sup> Rigold, op. cit., *B.N.F.* (1960), at p. 23.

<sup>59</sup> Hill, op. cit., *Numismatic Chronicle* (1953), at p. 95.

<sup>60</sup> Rigold, op. cit., at p. 52.

<sup>61</sup> Hill, loc. cit.

<sup>62</sup> Rigold, loc. cit.

<sup>63</sup> Metcalf and Hamblin, loc. cit.

<sup>64</sup> Hill, loc. cit.

<sup>65</sup> A. de Belfort, *Description Générale des Monnaies Mérovingiennes*, vol. IV (1894), 214 f., no. 5756; 0.89 g., Paris, ex Morel-Fatio.

<sup>66</sup> F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edn. (1971), pp. 58, 69, 72-3, 138, 142.

<sup>67</sup> Metcalf, Merrick and Hamblin, op. cit., pp. 22, 29 and 42 f. There are other South Saxon kings alliteratively named Æthelwalh, Æthelstan (and Æthelthryth), and Æthelberht—see Stenton, op. cit., p. 58.

<sup>68</sup> An imitation: illustrated in C. Roach Smith, *Collectanea Antiqua*, Vol. II, plate XLIV, 5.

<sup>69</sup> Rethaan Macaré, op. cit., plate II, 48.

<sup>70</sup> Hill, op. cit. (1952-54), at p. 32.

<sup>71</sup> Metcalf and Walker, op. cit., no. 39.

<sup>72</sup> Metcalf and Hamblin, loc. cit.

PLATE VI



'Bird and branch' sceattas, enlarged  $\times 2$ .

*Ph. Ashmolean Museum*