

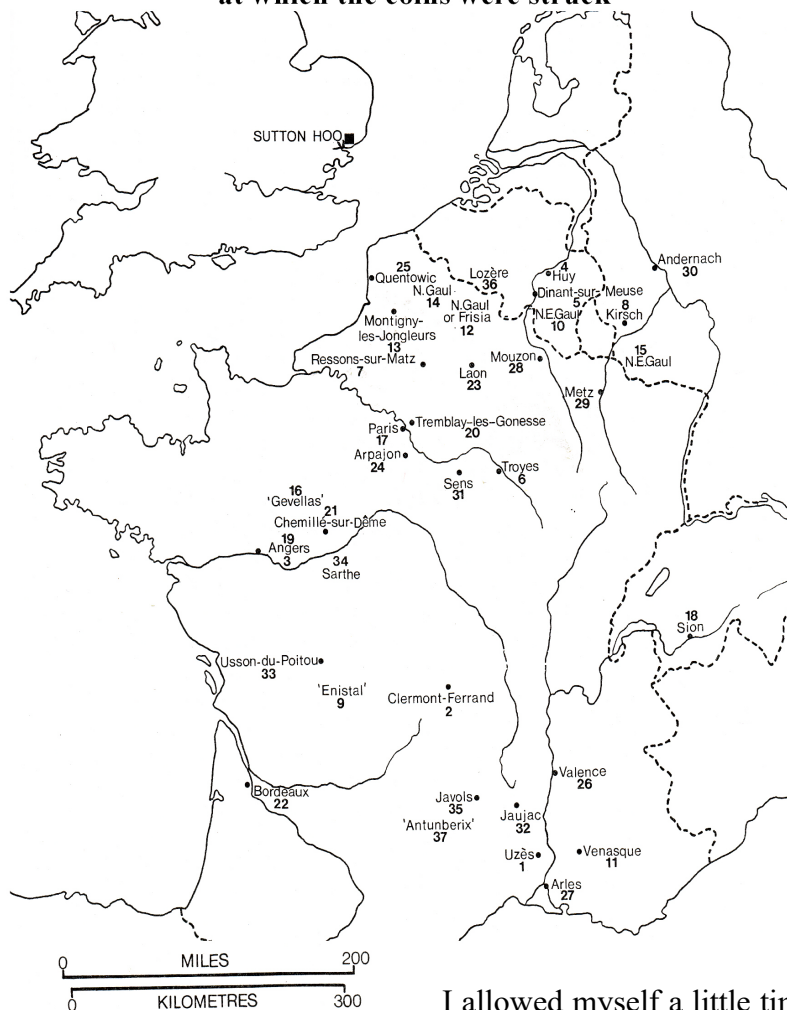
The First English Coin Collection?

By
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(Grunal Moneta)

A number of years ago I was presenting a living history demonstration at the Sutton Hoo Visitor Centre and prior to the visitor center opening to the public I took a leisurely stroll around the museum. Stopping by the display of the coin purse and contents I paused to think of the range and variety of the 37 coins three gold blanks and the pieces of gold bar that had been found inside the purse during the excavation.



**Locations of the Mints
at which the coins were struck**



It suddenly struck me of the similarity of the contents of the purse (their range and variety) to the sample case of Grunal Moneta coins I carry with me when visiting potential clients. I started to wonder as to how this selection of coins had come about, 37 different coins all from different mints! Hardly a chance accumulation of continental Thrymsas!. More like a deliberate selection of different mints and types a coin collection to be precise. How this came about in south east England in approximately 625 AD where, at the time, there was no coinage being made or readily circulated?

The official explanation given is this

The thirty-seven coins in the Sutton Hoo purse are all Frankish, and are the only large deposit of coins from the Anglo-Saxon period before the introduction of an English coinage. The lack of duplication in the group is not remarkable given the huge number of Merovingian mints and moneyers and the wide date range, c.572 - c.625, of the pieces represented. It does however suggest that they were not withdrawn from active circulation but were taken from a treasure store, apparently containing a limited number of coins as the total required to pay the forty oarsmen and helmsman of the burial ship had to be made up in blanks and bullion.'

Bibliography: Kent, J.P.C. 1975, Catalogue of the Sutton Hoo coins, blanks

Kent, J. P. C., 1975. "The date of the Sutton Hoo hoard" and "Catalogue of the Sutton Hoo coins, blanks and billets", *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial I*, ed. R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford (1975), 588-647.

I allowed myself a little time to daydream and ponder on the origin of the collection. The tale that follows is entirely of my own imagining and is merely speculation as to the events leading up to the inclusion of the coins and the purse in the burial at Sutton Hoo.

In the Year 625 A recently indentured moneyer from one of the many merovingian mints is looking for a job all the local mints have a full complement of moneyers and there are no readily available positions. He is left with the option to set up his own mint, but where? To avoid competition for the available resources of gold and silver he needs to find somewhere without a mint. The answer is to move across the channel to England where there is no competition, a market ripe for his services. He collects samples of the coins available different styles and designs to tempt his customers and along with his dies he takes examples of the gold bars used to create the blanks for striking and some blanks as well and sets off to get passage in a ship to England. He arrives at a major port possibly Ipswich and on making subtle inquiries discovers that the local King, Raedweld, is holding his court at his palace at Rendlesham. He travels eastward to the Kings palace and eventually gains an audience with the king.

He shows the range of coinage available from his sample case, explaining how he can create designs to the Kings own specification with whatever designs the Monarch requires such as crosses, monograms vases etc (at this time the moneyers made their own dies) and how the King would be the envy of neighbouring monarchs as being the only one with his own coinage. He explains how the blanks for the coins are made from the gold bars and probably even demonstrates how the coins are struck.

The King being very impressed by the demonstration and realising the increase in his kingdom's status and trading capabilities, coinage being far easier than barter, can only lead to greater status and wealth. However he is canny and well advised by his councillors so he offers the moneyer a position as Moneyer to the king for the signiorage of 8 gold coins a year, say 37, for 5 years and sale of one of the old derelict forges at Coddendam, another of his palaces and centre for his metalworkers, for 3 pieces of gold (the 3 un struck blank discs). An adviser then reminds the king that at Rendlesham there is a great deal of surplus charcoal from the forest unsold so the king offers the moneyer 5 years supply of fuel for say 3 gold bars. The moneyer is reasonably happy to pay this amount for he knows that with the gold coming to the mint to be made into coin he can recoup his outlay in a matter of weeks. Thus sets off to Coddendam to begin striking one of the earliest Anglo-Saxon coins in England. These coins show the King on one side holding his sceptre and a design on the reverse that has been suggested to be a roman standard or even a Lyre on the reverse.



The King Meanwhile is feeling happy he has got one over the monarchs of neighbouring kingdoms in having his own coinage struck and being paid for the privilege, he has sold a derelict forge at Coddendam and a large quantity of old charcoal at far more than they were worth. Proud of his achievements he has a special purse made to keep his new treasure in so he can show off his negotiating prowess to his fellow kings at every available occasion. So proud of his collection he is even buried with them along with his other cherished possessions namely his sceptre and favourite musical instrument his Lyre in his grave at Sutton Hoo.

So is it possible that the coins found in the Sutton Hoo ship burial in 1939 were a collection of gold coins (tremissis) belonging to a Journeyman Moneyer and subsequently acquired by the king? We shall never know.

Illustration of the coins taken from the web and the mint diagram taken from 'The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial Handbook' by R Bruce-Mitford 1947.