

Fifty volumes of the *Sylloge* of British coins

A celebration was held in March 1999 at 10 Carlton House Terrace to mark the publication of the fiftieth volume of the *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles*: Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, Part I: Anglo-Saxon Coins to 1016, by Dr VM. Potin. **Dr Mark Blackburn**, General Editor, reviews the achievements of the Academy's SCBI project.

The series has its origins in the early 1950s when Christopher Blunt and Michael Dolley, inspired by the success of the *Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum*,¹ had a vision that research into medieval coinage in particular would blossom with the benefit of a parallel series for British coins. An informal committee was formed under the chairmanship of Sir Frank Stenton, and with the strong support of Sir Mortimer Wheeler it was admitted as a Research Committee of the British Academy in 1956. The first volume, on coins in the Fitzwilliam Museum by Philip Grierson, appeared in 1958.

Anglo-Saxon period

From the outset, the aim of the series was to publish the coins as objective primary evidence for the numismatist, historian, philologist and others. Detailed descriptions and photographic illustrations of a large body of British coinage would facilitate its close study, especially using die and stylistic analyses. Many of the earlier volumes concentrated on Anglo-Saxon coinage where this new approach was proving particularly rewarding. With the publication of some 53,000 coins held in one hundred and fifty museums in the UK, and others in Scandinavia, Germany, Poland, Latvia, Russia and the United States, the student now has at his



Silver penny of Offa, king of Mercia (757–96), published in SCBI vol. 1 (enlarged x 1½). The only contemporary images of 8th-century kings are on coins.

¹ A catalogue of Greek coins, established by the British Academy in 1931 and contributed to by many other national academies. More information about the Academy's *Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum* project can be found at <http://www.britac.ac.uk/arp/sng>

fingertips an astonishing amount of material on which to base his studies.

Later medieval and early modern coins

Latterly, a number of volumes have focused on the later medieval and early modern periods, and important specialist collections have been selected for publication with an extended introduction discussing the classification, chronology and other features of the coinage. Thus Edwardian sterlings, medieval and Tudor gold and the coinages of Henry VII, Charles I and Scotland have all been treated in this way. The eight volumes on seventeenth-century tokens in the Norweb collection, when complete, will be the standard reference work for this series, superseding Williamson's catalogue which has held that position for a hundred years.



Gold sovereign of Elizabeth I (1558–1603) showing the queen enthroned in majesty. Vol. 47, which published the Schneider collection of medieval and Tudor gold coins, is now the standard reference for this series.

Minting and hoarding

Since the nineteenth century British scholars have led the way among medieval numismatists in developing and applying new techniques of analysis, and the publication of the *Sylloge* series has been a fundamental element in this success. To give some idea of the potential of this material, in just the last century before the Norman Conquest there were 24 successive coin types struck at some 60 mints in England by more than 1,000 moneyers in all. The dies were often supplied by various regional workshops, and the number of dies used by each moneyer can be estimated. The coins circulated extensively within England and vast quantities were also taken to Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, where they have been found in tens of

thousands. With all this fodder for analysis, our understanding of the mint administration, the monetary economy, the pattern of trade and the velocity of circulation in the late Anglo-Saxon period has improved dramatically.

Coins in the Hermitage Museum

Even though the series is mature, Volume 50 succeeds in breaking new ground as the first of four that will publish the Anglo-Saxon and later British coins in the Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. The book was commissioned in 1987, and much of Dr V.M. Potin's work was carried out before the break-up of the Soviet Union. The Hermitage is an extraordinary treasure house, and its coin collection, one of the finest in the world, was begun in 1764 by Catherine the Great. The majority of the 3,000 Anglo-Saxon coins in the collection derives from Russian hoards of the late 10th or 11th century, money that was taken from England to Scandinavia, in trade or tribute, and thence traded on to the Slavs in Russia. Some 250 of the earlier coins in the collection had been bought in London either for the Hermitage directly or for prominent St Petersburg collectors, and they include a number of important specimens that were last known to British scholars in the mid-nineteenth century. Communications

were efficient enough then for an auction catalogue to reach St Petersburg and for bids to be submitted in time for the sale, as annotated catalogues in the Hermitage's library show. It was particularly pleasing to have present at the Sylloge's party the authors of Volumes 1 and 50, Professor Grierson and Dr Potin, who are near contemporaries at 88 and 81 respectively.

Publishing the *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles* (SCBI) volumes has been the project's primary objective – and there are some 20 more in active preparation – but the Sylloge Committee is also eager to encourage scholars in allied disciplines to make use of numismatic evidence and interpretation in their work. The project's database at St Andrews provides a powerful index to the 50 volumes, as well as being an independent resource for philologists (accessible from the SCBI web page at www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/coins/scbi). Plans are afoot to add images and further details of all coins, allowing efficient and universal access to the material over the Internet. The Sylloge Committee is also planning a colloquium on Anglo-Saxon coinage as a source of primary evidence for historians and archaeologists to be held at the British Academy. That the vision of the 1950s has been amply fulfilled is due in no small measure to the patronage of the British Academy.

The colloquium entitled 'Interpreting Anglo-Saxon Coinage' will be held on 3 March 2000 at the British Academy. Intended for historians, archaeologists and others working in Anglo-Saxon, the colloquium will explore ways in which the evidence of coinage and coin finds can contribute to allied disciplines. Further details from Rosemary Lambeth at the British Academy, Email: rosemarl@britac.ac.uk.



Lord Stewartby (left), Chairman of the British Academy's Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles Committee, introduces Vsevolod Potin, Director of the Numismatic Department of the Hermitage Museum, at a reception held at the Academy on Tuesday 30 March 1999.