

VIKING AGE YORK

THE JORVIK VIKING CENTRE



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TRADE

2. Coins and coin-making

Elizabeth Pirie

In early Anglo-Saxon times, small gold coins were made in England, certainly in the south and probably also for a short time at York. Other gold coins reached England from the Continent as a result of trade.

Later on, in the early 8thC, the use of gold gave way to silver, and many different groups of silver coins were made. They are called **sceattas** (pronounced 'shatters'). In Northumbria, one of the several kingdoms into which England was then divided, sceattas of the late 8thC are among the very few which have names on them; not only of kings (like Eadberht) but also of Archbishops of York. Coins of Eadberht have been found in excavations at York.

When, instead of small thick sceattas, large silver pennies began to be made by the other early English kingdoms, there was more space on them to show the names of kings, but the Northumbrians went on using their tiny inscribed coins, first of silver and then of copper (called **stycas**), until about AD 855.

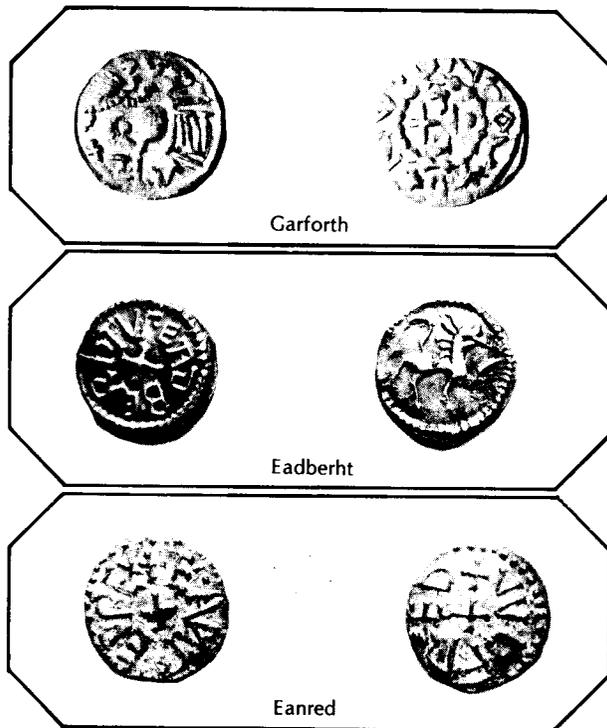
The copper stycas have the name of the king or archbishop on one side (called the **obverse**) and the name of the man who made the coins (the moneyer) on the other side (the **reverse**). Stycas were made at York and possibly at other places in Northumbria. Some were imitations of the official coins.

Late in the 9thC, when the Vikings controlled York, they began to make large numbers of silver pennies. Some, like the continental coins, had short religious inscriptions on them; others gave the name of the mint where they were made: **EBRACE** for **Eboracum**, the Latin name for York.



Penny for Vikings of Northumbria c. 895-905, with religious inscription: MIRABILIA FECIT.

Alfred the Great, King of Wessex (871-99), managed to stop the advance of the Vikings, and later Saxon kings (Eadward and Athelstan) won control of those parts of the country where the Vikings had settled. This new and growing kingdom of England had a penny coinage made in silver at a number of different mints. Athelstan gained control of York for a short while after 927, and pennies were made for him there, mainly by one moneyer Regnald. The title



on these York coins (REX TO BRIT) claimed that Athelstan had become king of all Britain.

In 973 a later king, Eadgar, arranged that all coins should have the same design (known as **the type**), wherever they were made. The most important mints were at London, Winchester, Lincoln, Chester and York; all were to strike the same type, and this would be changed at regular intervals. The obverse of each penny was to bear the king's head surrounded by his name and title; the reverse was to have the names of the moneyer and mint around the central design. This basic arrangement continued in use until well into the Middle Ages. The penny remained the only value of coin made. If smaller values were needed, the coin was cut in two for **halfpennies** and into four for **farthings**!



Penny for Aethelstan c. 927-39.



Cut halfpenny from penny for Anlaf, Norse King of York 939-41.

By comparison with the large number of other objects, not many coins were found in the Coppergate excavations, but they did provide important dating evidence and valuable information about Viking and English moneyers. Two coins from abroad were among those found, a fragment of a coin from the mint at Hedeby in Denmark, and a forgery (imitation) of an Arabic coin! Both of these show the contact between York and places abroad in the tenth century.

In order to make coins, **dies** were needed which stamped the design of obverse and reverse on to plain discs of metal. To do this, the design had to be cut back-to-front on the die, so that it came out the right way round on the coins. The cutting was done with tiny punches, none of which has been recovered. However, two iron dies were found at Coppergate, one complete and the other broken. The intact die was intended to make a special issue of St. Peter coins, about the year 920, but there is no proof that it was ever used, since no coin is known which was made from it. The broken die was used to stamp coins by the moneyer Regnald of York for King Athelstan about 930-9. Two pennies, struck from this die before it broke, have been traced in the museums at Liverpool and Copenhagen.

The obverse die had a tang (point) underneath so that it could be driven into a work-bench and held firm. The blank silver disc was laid on the die, and the other die held on top to sandwich it: the upper die was then struck with a heavy hammer, perhaps two or three times, to make sure that the design had bitten into the silver.

It is not certain just how many coins could be struck using such dies — some dies may have broken fairly soon, while others may have produced very large numbers of coins.



Outhgrim, York moneyer for Aethelraed II: first record of him as early as 979-85.
(Coin found at Coppergate, York, 1977).

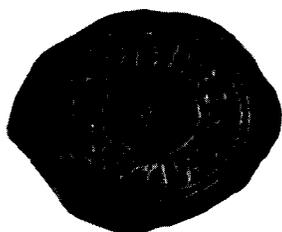


Die for St. Peter coins.



Fragment of a lead trial-piece.

Lead trial piece for Regnald of York.



Before a new die was used, it was tested on a piece of lead to make sure that the detail was accurate. Two lead 'trial-pieces' have been recovered from Coppergate which show images of other coins of this period, so obviously there had been a workshop there for making and testing coin dies in the tenth century. However, the mint where the coins were actually made may have been somewhere else in York — this is still uncertain.