

Royal Coin for Sven and Siobhan, 42nd Monarchs of Æthelmearc, AS LII

Historical Period: Norse, 10th century

“Notable features of 10th-century coins are [their] poor design and execution.”⁴

“The literacy of their inscriptions... is at best erratic and at times appalling.”³

In the 6th-9th centuries, the Norse had little interest in making their own coins. They were content to use plundered and traded coins from other cultures as currency (and as decoration). There are some indications of Scandinavian mints creating poor copies of European coins as early as 825 AD. By 1000 AD, the Scandinavian kings had their own mints and moneyers. But in the intervening centuries, there was no substantial coinage being created in Scandinavia.

However, in the 10th century, the Vikings conquered most of Britain. The Danes in southeast England formed a kingdom called by modern scholars the “Danelaw”, while the Norwegians in northwest England and Ireland are now referred to as “Hiberno-Norse”. The Norse conquerors suddenly had access to a well-developed coin-making infrastructure descended from Roman and Anglo-Saxon moneyers. This enabled the Norse to begin striking their own coins, although some of the coin-making skills of previous generations had been lost. The new Norse coins were of lower artistic quality than their Anglo-Saxon predecessors, and they frequently included typographical errors.

Another major change was simultaneously occurring throughout Norse culture in the 10th century: the conversion from paganism to Christianity. Norse coins from this time period feature both pagan and Christian symbols, often combined on a single coin. The best-known example of this is the famed “Raven Penny” of Anlaf (Olaf II), made of silver and struck in Dublin and York around 940 AD. It features a raven (representing Odin) on the obverse, but it has a Christian cross on the reverse.



Hiberno-Norse and Danelaw coins are remarkably uniform in size and material: silver pennies of about 3/4". Halfpence would be slightly smaller and thinner at about 5/8" diameter. There was a well-defined exchange rate, in which 1 mork (mark) = 8 aurar = 24 ørtogar = 240 pennies. Unfortunately, these exchanges were theoretical because essentially only pennies were minted.

Our understanding of Hiberno-Norse coins comes predominantly from coin hoards that were buried for protection in period but discovered and unearthed in modern times. Hoards of particular interest to numismatists include the Watlington, Harrogate, Silverdale, and Furness Hoards.

Once Scandinavian mints became commonplace, from the 12th century onward, they produced some of the most interesting medieval coins, including bracteates (thin coins with one side imprinted, showing through to the other side), ecclesiastical coins, and coins with holes. But in the 10th century, the Anglo-Norse coins were plain and predictable.

Common obverse and reverse motifs

Early Anglo-Norse coins inherited the Anglo-Saxon habit of devoting the obverse to the King and the reverse to the Moneyer.

The decoration on the obverse was usually a Norse symbol, such as a Raven, Triquetra (as on the Trimaris badge), Banner, horizontal Sword, or Thor's Hammer (sometimes indistinguishable from the letter T). When the king's face is depicted, it is representational (as opposed to a true likeness). The most common depiction is a line drawing with hair on end (known colloquially as a "porcupine").



In later artwork, the king's hand may be depicted beside his head. Also, the bust may be crowned. The Norse word "Cununc" or the Latin word "Rex" may be used to identify the King.

The reverse of the coin would be in one of several styles. Two horizontal lines of text may be the only content. A long cross that quarters the inscription is also common. A less common way to quarter the reverse inscription is a "cross and lozenge", in which four smaller crosses come together but leave a space in the center.



The inscription on the reverse was often reserved for the moneyer. The word Moneyer is most often depicted as "Minetr". The Latin name of the city in which the coin was minted also may appear on the reverse (and was often misspelled). Unlike the obverse, in which Norse symbols are prevalent, the reverse most often shows Christian symbols. This sometimes extends to the inscription, with Latin liturgical phrases such as "Mirabilia Fecit" ("He has created wonderful things") or the abbreviation "DNS DS/O REX", which expands as "Dominus Deus Omnipotens Rex".

A dotted border is almost universal on Anglo-Norse coins.

Why are Anglo-Norse coins disparaged?

Some of the Anglo-Norse coins were made by Anglo-Saxon moneyers who were employed by the conquering Vikings. But there were also new moneyers who lacked the skills of their predecessors when they attempted to copy the coins that they found in circulation. Letters (or entire words) might be flipped left-to-right or top-to-bottom. Inadequate spacing of letters might lead to small, crushed letters at the end of words. Spelling errors were rampant, especially when Latin words were copied. Even the name of the king was frequently misspelled. Sometimes, a series of coins would be made, with each a copy of the last, and errors would build up until the last coin was covered with blunders (as in a game of “telephone”.) Many Anglo-Norse coins have inscriptions that are seemingly nonsense, such that the grammatical errors that produced them cannot even be deciphered. Some coins had large expanses of open space, or overly simplistic decoration. Some dies were carved with so little depth that the image was almost imperceptible.



Sven Forkbeard, late 10th c.
Blundered letters in king's name



Sihtric One-Eye, 925 AD
Crowded letters
when moneyer ran out of room

The Royal Coin of King Sven and Queen Siobhan

The “porcupine” face is emblematic of Norse coinage and is appropriate to the late-10th century. We based the obverse decoration on a coin of Sihtric from 1000 AD.



The obverse inscription is based on that of Sven Forkbeard, late 10th c. The blundered inscription was faithfully copied. The reverse of Olaf's raven penny has inscribed the name of the Moneyer, Æthelferth. This provides the font and lettering for our Kingdom name.



The reverse of the coin, in period, would have been used to indicate the moneyer who designed the coin. For SCA purposes, we decided to instead honor Queen Siobhan. We used the flower motif from the coin of King Olaf (940 AD), replacing the center inscription with the Queen's name, but retaining the other decorations.



Materials & Methods

Instead of the ubiquitous silver used in Anglo-Norse pennies, we chose to mint our coins from pewter. Pewter is more affordable than silver, but still has the same color. Pewter is also softer – thus, it is possible for members of the populace to strike coins for the treasury without needing the arm strength of a professional moneyer. The coin blanks were punched from sheet metal rather than weighed and trimmed, as they would have been if they were based on a precious metal.

We used a steel sleeve to align the dies when striking, instead of holding the dies by hand, as would have been done in period. This protects our hands and allows the striker to swing with full strength, unworried about injuring the moneyer. The sleeve also redirects the force any blow that strikes off-center, to allow better imprints. The sleeve obviates the need to flare the dies at the top (to protect the moneyer's hands), so we can use stock steel bars as die blanks.

Instead of anvils, we chose to mint on a wooden stump. This allowed us to bring the equipment to Pennsic and invite the populace to participate in the creation of the coins.

Bibliography

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