



Coinage was invented by the Greeks of Asia Minor in the late 7th century BC. From there, the idea spread through the Mediterranean world and eventually after 300 BC north of the Alps. The earliest coins found in Britain were all imported from Belgic Gaul (modern northern France), but during the 2nd century BC, some of the peoples of south-east England started to mint bronze and then gold coinages of their own. In the course of the following century, coinage was adopted throughout lowland England from Somerset to East Yorkshire (Fig. 1). Silver, too, came into common use, and different regional coinages were inscribed with their issuers' names. The innovation does not however seem to have found any favour among the peoples of northern and western Britain, presumably it did not fit with existing cultural values or beliefs.

Imported gold coins dating to the 3rd century BC are rare in Britain and virtually confined to Kent. Many of them come from Picardy, hinting at cultural or political links with that region. In the 2nd century BC, these links intensified. Large numbers of Gallo-Belgic gold coins struck on broad flans with a head on one side and a horse on the other (Fig. 2) – a design borrowed from gold coins of the Greek king Phillip II of Macedon – were imported into south-east England, where they circulated widely. In a seemingly unrelated development, the inhabitants of east Kent began to cast bronze coins with a high tin content, known as potins (the continental term for these cast bronze coins. They were the only British Iron Age coins cast in moulds; the rest were struck between pairs of dies), this time using designs ultimately inspired by coins of the Greek city of Massalia in southern France. Why so much gold crossed the Channel is uncertain, but payments to procure alliances or military aid are a more likely explanation than commerce or mass-migration. Most of these early gold coins are found away from archaeological sites, whereas potin coins are common on settlements, suggesting a different use.

From the late 2nd century BC groups in Britain began to mint gold coins of their own. Further

imports of gold climaxing in the mid-1st century BC provided the inspiration and metal for these insular coinages. These were initially confined to southern and south-eastern England, but it was not long before the peoples of the East Midlands, East Anglia and the Severn-Cotswolds started minting their own coinages. Most of these regional series retain the original Gallo-Belgic head-horse designs in a degraded form, but sometimes distinctive new regional elements were introduced, as in East Anglia where the horse was replaced by a wolf (Fig. 3). Many later regional gold issues had more naturalistic horses and were struck in copper-rich alloy echoing a shift apparent in Gaul at the time of Julius Caesar's conquest. In south-west England, the Durotriges switched to minting debased silver coins, perhaps under cultural influence from Armorica (Modern Brittany and western Normandy), a region with whom they had close links.

Although the exact chronology is uncertain, some groups in southern England probably began to mint silver coins before mid-1st century BC. Very rarely they also struck bronze, although the Kentish potins – now with very abstract versions of their original head-bull design – remained the only significant base metal coinage in Britain until the later 1st century BC. There was a noticeable increase in hoarding at this period, some of it ritually-motivated, but also reflecting the unstable conditions and refugee movements set in motion by the Roman conquest of Gaul. Much of this early silver coinage comes from later temple deposits.

Names appear on British coinage around the mid-1st century BC, initially often in the form of monograms. Eventually, the practice of inscribing coins was adopted by all the main regional groups except the Durotriges. Among the first rulers named was *Commios*, possibly the Belgic leader installed by Caesar as king of the Gaulish Atrebates, who later founded a dynasty in central southern England. Around the same time, the peoples around the Thames estuary began striking tri-metallic coinages in gold, silver and bronze, the latter replacing potin coins.

Initially, the designs of these coinages followed existing models, but during the reign of the Atrebatian ruler Tincomaros (Fig. 4) and his contemporary, Tasciovanus, in eastern England, a radical change occurred. Both rulers began to mint coins with Roman-style imagery and their names neatly inscribed in Latin letters, a move that probably followed their recognition as client kings by the Emperor Augustus. Possibly inspired by the Augustan reform of Roman coinage, Tasciovanus also introduced base metal denominations in brass, copper and bronze, in contrast to the Atrebates who had rejected bronze altogether.

By the early 1st century AD, the whole of south-east England was under the control of rulers from one of two leading dynasties. Some of these rulers proclaim themselves *rex*, implying that they too were Roman client kings, and several use the term *filius* (son of) to proclaim their lineage (Fig. 5). Die studies indicate that vast amounts of coins were minted, whilst site finds show that they were now being used in a much wider range of transactions. Some rulers had more than one mint: Cunobelin issued coins

Further Reading

Creighton, J. 2000. *Coins and power in late Iron Age Britain*. Cambridge: CUP

de Jersey, P. 1996. *Celtic coinage in Britain*. Princes Risborough: Shire Archaeology

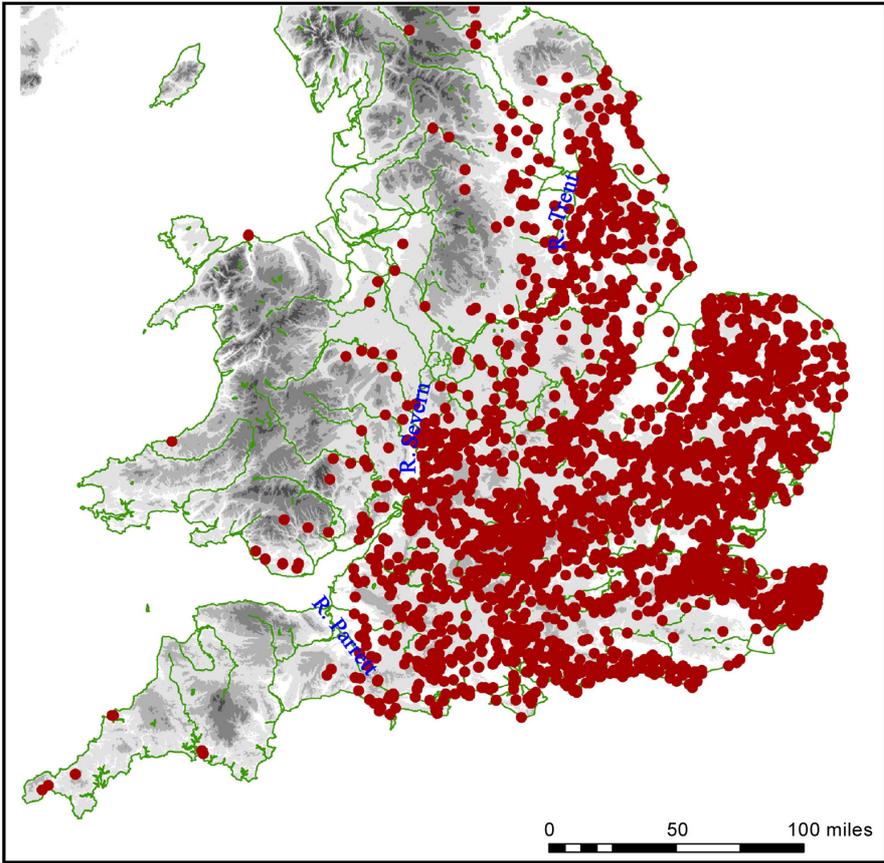
at *Camulodunon* (Colchester) and *Verlamion* (St Albans), whilst Verica used *Calleva* (Silchester) and a still unlocated mint, perhaps near Chichester. The moneyers continued to draw extensively on Roman themes and imagery, albeit modified for a local audience, whereas the peoples of the surrounding regions (the Corieltaui, Dobunni and Icenii), retained their traditional designs up to AD 43.

After the Claudian invasion, minting seems to have ceased everywhere almost immediately, although some scholars maintain that the ruler named on Icenian coins as Eboracostus may be the person known in the classical texts as Prasutagus, the husband of Boudicca. For some decades, however, Iron Age coins continued to be used extensively at larger settlements, no doubt serving the needs of both the Roman army and merchants whilst Roman issues were still quite scarce, but by the Flavian period (69–96 AD), the Roman political and monetary system had taken a firm hold. By the end of the 1st century AD, indigenous coins had virtually disappeared from circulation.

More detailed information

Cottam, E., de Jersey, P., Rudd, C. and Sills, J. 2010 *Ancient British Coins*. Aylsham: Chris Rudd

Talbot, J. 2017. *Made for trade. A new view of Icenian coinage*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.



Findspots of Iron Age coins in Britain (courtesy Dr Ian Leins)

Gallo-Belgic A gold stater (© Portable Antiquities Scheme)



Composite image of reverse of British JB Norfolk Wolf stater (courtesy Dr John Talbot)



Gold stater of Tincomaros. Inscribed TINC on the obverse (left). The horseman design on the reverse (right) is copied from a Roman coin (© Portable Antiquities Scheme)



Bronze coin of Cunobelin wearing a Roman-style helmet. Obverse legend (left) reads CVNOBELINVS, the reverse legend (right) reads TASCIOVANII F, indicating that it was minted at St Albans (© Portable Antiquities Scheme)

This factsheet was prepared for the Prehistoric Society by Colin Haselgrove (University of Leicester)

The Prehistoric Society is a registered charity (no. 1000567) and company limited by guarantee (no. 2532446). Registered Office: University College London, Institute of Archaeology, 31–34 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PY. Date published: 10/2019.