

THE NORMANS. THREE CENTURIES OF ACHIEVEMENT, AD 911-1204

Mark Blackburn introduces a new exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

For the last two and a half years the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge has been partially closed during the construction of its £12 million Courtyard Extension. During that time there have been no temporary exhibitions in the museum, and many of the post-Classical galleries have been closed to visitors. The museum was reopened on 1 July, and among the first exhibitions is 'The Normans. Three Centuries of Achievement, 911-1204'.

This exhibition marks the 800th anniversary of the loss of Normandy to the French crown, as Philip Augustus wrested the duchy from the Angevins. It also celebrates the Fitzwilliam's acquisition of the outstanding William Conte Collection of coins of Norman England, purchased with generous support from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the National Art Collections Fund. Yet the exhibition ranges more widely than Norman England, surveying the extent of Norman rule in Europe and the eastern Mediterranean. The story is told through coinage.

The Normans (Northmen) were Scandinavians who, after decades of foreign campaigns in France and the British Isles, settled in 911 with their leader, Rollo, in north-west France. They were just one of several groups of Vikings who went out in search of not only adventure, but also a new life overseas. They established themselves not just in Normandy but also in north-west Scotland and around the Irish Sea, in the English Danelaw, and over the North Atlantic in the Faroes, Iceland, Greenland, and briefly even at Vinland in North America.

So what experience of money would the Normans have had before coming to Normandy? For most of the Viking Age very little coinage was struck in Scandinavia, and the people largely used silver as bullion, to be chopped up and weighed out when making payments. Only in western Denmark were small coinages produced to satisfy very local needs. Elsewhere in Scandinavia, silver *dirhams* imported from Arabic countries were a common source of bullion in the 9th and 10th centuries (Fig 5). In most of the



Fig 1. Silver denier of Richard I (AD 942-97), count of Normandy, struck at Rouen, c.980. Diam. 18 mm.



Fig 3. Copper trifollaro of Roger I (AD 1072-1101) struck at the mainland mint of Mileto. Although of Byzantine fabric, the Knight on Horseback design is entirely Western and prompts comparison with the images in the Bayeux Tapestry. Diam. 27 mm.

Fig 5 (below). A typical hoard of 9th-10th century Arab dirhams, a common form of bullion in Viking Scandinavian.



Fig 2 (right). Gold tari of Robert Gusicard (AD 1059-85) struck at Palermo, Sicily, in 1072, the year of its conquest by the Normans. The Arabic reads 'by the order of Robert the duke, the very glorious lord of Sicily'. Diam. 13 mm.



Fig 4 (right). Gold tari of Robert II, king of Sicily (AD 1130-54) struck at Palermo. This coin has Arabic in the margin, but in the centre Christian iconography with a Greek inscription 'May Jesus Christ conquer'. Diam. 12 mm.



Fig 6. Silver penny of William the Conqueror (AD 1066-87) struck at London, c. 1066-68, with a portrait very similar to that used on Harold II's coinage. Diam. 18 mm.



Norman Coins in Cambridge

Viking settlements overseas a bullion or money-weight economy can also be seen in the archaeological evidence, but this is not so in Normandy. Admittedly there are very few hoards or single-finds from the earliest phase of Norman settlement, but the Vikings there seem to have adapted quickly to a coin economy.

The Norman counts (later dukes) were among the first of the feudal lords in France to openly put their names on the coinage, starting with William Longsword (933-42). After Richard I (942-96), the coins rapidly became illiterate, debased and poorly struck, but that does not mean that they were not an effective currency in the context of 11th-century France.

Having secured Normandy's position in France during the 10th century, there followed a phase of Norman expansion southwards to southern Italy, Sicily, Syria, and briefly North Africa, and westwards to England, Wales, and Ireland. The two initiatives were very different, for while the conquest of England was a planned invasion of one powerful state by another, the activities in the Mediterranean were opportunistic ventures by lesser members of the Norman dynasty. In consequence, while the dukes of Normandy became kings of England, they played no personal role in the southern Norman states.

Norman knights began to arrive in southern Italy around 1025. This was then a frontier region marked by cultural diversity, with Byzantine Greek, Lombard, Frankish, and Muslim influences. Sicily had been controlled by the Muslims for almost two centuries, and the population was largely Arabic speaking (Fig 2). The most significant of the Norman adventurers in southern Italy was Tancred of Hauteville, whose descendants came to rule most parts of the region, which was eventually unified into a single kingdom (the 'Kingdom of Sicily') by Roger II (1105-54) in 1130. The success and wealth of this kingdom made it an attractive target for the ruthless German Emperor Henry VI, who seized the opportunity provided by a succession dispute to invade and dispose of the last Norman king in 1194.

The Normans adapted the currency systems they found - on Sicily and the neighbouring cities of Salerno and Amalfi this was based on the Muslim quarter *dinar* or *tari* (Figs 2, 4), but otherwise at mainland mints on the Byzantine copper *folles* (Fig 3). Arabic inscriptions remained an important element in the coinage throughout the Norman period, although Christian and

Western influences on the designs increased significantly (Fig 4).

As a side-show to the Norman venture in Italy, Bohemund of Tatanto, eldest son of Robert Guiscard (Fig 2), led one of the contingents in the First Crusade of 1097. He successfully besieged Antioch in Syria, but rather than handing it over to the Byzantine emperor, as he had undertaken, he set himself up as its ruler. The Norman principality of Antioch lasted until its capture by the Mamluks in 1268, and it issued a prolific coinage.

The conquest of England in 1066 initially brought little change to the English coinage (Fig 6). The same mints and moneyers continued to operate, and the system of periodic recoinages was maintained. In the 1070s William I changed the way in which the moneyers accounted for their profits, increasing the revenue that flowed to the king's coffers. Other changes came with the extension of Norman rule, in the north of England to Durham, Richmond, Carlisle, and Newcastle, in south Wales to Cardiff, Pembroke, and perhaps St David's and Abergavenny, and during the 12th century to Ireland.

After Henry I's death in 1135, in the absence of a male heir England was plunged into a civil war. This ghastly period of political uncertainty and strife led to one of the most varied and interesting series of coins in British history. The country was divided between an area in the south-east that remained loyal to Stephen (Fig 8), an area in the west that supported Matilda and her son Henry, and the rest of the country that was ruled by barons who nominally paid homage to Stephen but were largely their own men (Figs 9-10).

The dispute spilled over to Normandy as well, for Matilda's husband, Geoffrey of Anjou, took control of it from Stephen. The duchy was reunited with the English crown on Henry II's succession in 1154, only to be lost again by King John in 1204. □

Dr Mark Blackburn is Keeper of Coins and Medals at the Fitzwilliam Museum and a co-curator of this exhibition.

'The Normans. Three Centuries of Achievement, 911-1204', is in The Octagon Gallery, The Fitzwilliam Museum until 12 September 2004. Entrance free. See www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk.



Fig 7. A unique round halfpenny of Henry I (AD 1100-35) struck at Sandwich from a reverse die for a penny of Type IX. Diam. 15 mm.



Fig 8. Silver penny of Stephen (AD 1135-54), struck at Cambridge, early 1140s. Cambridge was held by Earl Simon of Senis, and the use of local dies with an added sun in front of the bust and crescent behind are an indication of his independence. Diam. 19 mm.



Fig 9. Silver penny of Eustace FitzJohn, showing him as a knight in armour holding a sword. It was minted at York, c. AD 1150, by the moneyer Thomas Fitz Ulf, who was an alderman of the city in the 1140s. Diam. 18 mm.



Fig 10. Silver penny of Patrick, Earl of Wiltshire (AD 1141-7), struck at Salisbury. Only four coins of Patrick are known, of which three are in the Conte collection. Diam. 18 mm.