The Coins of the Irish Free State, 1928: *are animals good to think with*?

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Abstract
We have no surviving information regarding the people or the considerations behind the process of choosing the iconography of ancient coinage. We can only speculate regarding the political and commercial drivers at stake in the case of the Anglo-Saxons, designing their own coinage ex novo in the 7th century, so that it would successfully fit amongst those of continental partners. In contrast, the genesis of the 1928 Irish Free State coins was minutely documented in all its stages, from the aspirations behind this first new and independent coinage, to the managing and directing of the stages in the process, to the officials and artists involved. The designs on the eight Irish denominations were to be completely fresh and coherently tied by a unified theme: what was chosen was a series of animals illustrating the «natural products of Ireland, its sports and industries». In addition, we can follow their reception thanks to the debates and various controversies around their political, historical and cultural background as reported in the press at the time. Although the Irish case-study is far removed from the Anglo-Saxon scene, the jostling of ideas, aspirations and egos in decision-making may not have been too dissimilar, and is cause for reflection. It is an interesting coincidence that the true independent coinage of the fully 'modern' and mercantile Anglo-Saxon England, the so-called sceattas of the early 8th century, should also have adopted animals for their rich iconography. As Lévi-Strauss argued, animals can embody an endless variety of messages and ideas, as can be seen from the new official coins of King Charles III, featuring endangered flora and fauna of the British Isles, which testify to his interest in conservation.

As an early medieval art historian and Anglo-Saxon numismatist, some of the most intriguing, yet unanswerable, questions on the making of the first coins struck *ab ovo* in Anglo-Saxon England (from *c.* 600 AD) are to do with the politics and forces that were at play behind their genesis and design. Who took the initiative, and why? Who was involved in the decision-making? Were the coins struck purely as lucrative ways of facilitating international commerce, or do they in fact mirror emerging political ambitions? Who chose their iconography[1]?

For such early times, because of the lack of any additional contemporary evidence documenting the processes behind deliberations over possible options, numismatists are on secure ground only when concentrating their research work on hard data that elucidate their commercial viability – that is to say, how the

1 For up-to-date work on early Anglo-Saxon coinage, see Theuws 2019 and Naismith 2023: 253-258.

coins fitted in their contemporary monetary world. For a new coinage to be successful, some very practical considerations had to take priority. Commercially, the need to understand and conform into a common established international pattern for look, size, weight and metal content, would have been paramount, and would have heavily informed the challenge of how to balance the new coins credibility versus the pursuit of a proper distinctive character.

This 'look over the fence', or – in this case – over the Channel, to other current coinages is clearly evident for the earliest Anglo-Saxon gold and silver coin in connection with how their metrology conformed to contemporary Merovingian issues, but it is also clearly in their iconographical choices, and ultimately 'classical' traditional forms, that we might catch a glimpse of what seems to have ultimately driven their ambitions. I have argued elsewhere that, far from being simply utilitarian copies to match an established tradition, the choices of images and the adoption of (pseudo)-inscriptions were aspirational to becoming 'heirs of Rome' and forging a link to a prestigious colonial past[2], and to fitting in with evolving contemporary ambitions and networks[3].

Of special interest to me is the question of how such momentous decisions about the coinage were taken, in particular regarding the choice of their iconography. We know of the existence in this period of 'moneyers', and of the important role of goldsmiths in the actual making of the coins – though the responsibilities and precise roles of these officials and artists in early Anglo-Saxon times are rather obscure[4]: indeed, we may question whether such complex matters could have been driven by single, visionary individuals, no matter how expert and well-informed. It is very likely that these issues would have been debated over by what we might anachronistically call a 'committee'[5]. In his *Historia Ecclesiastica,* the Venerable Bede presents us with a telling vignette, relating how, before accepting Christianity, King Edwin of Northumbria had decreed that he would seek the opinion of each of his loyal chief men and councillors («*cum amicis principibus et consiliariis suis*»), and that the issue was to be discussed at a meeting of his 'council' («*cum sapientibus consilio*»)[6].

In the complex context of launching a new coinage, the gathering of a panel of 'wise men' to formulate a working plan might appear highly probable; however, there is no contemporary record to support the case, so it must remain sheer abstract speculation. In contrast, thirteen centuries later, in the case of

2 Howe 2008: 73-124 on the post-colonial complexities of the relationship between Anglo-Saxon England and its Roman legacy.

3 Gannon 2003: 88 and especially Gannon 2006: 193-199. See also Gannon 2018.

4 Naismith 2023: 239-40 on moneyers, and 255 on smiths.

5 I do not intend to resurrect the fraught question of the assembly called 'witan'; however, recent scholarship has recognised that «certain kinds of business could only be transacted with a substantial number of the king's wise men, in other words, in the company of his 'witan'» (Leyser 2017: 117).

6 Bede HE: II: 13 (Colgrave, Mynors 1969: 182).

the creation in Ireland of the first Free State coinage in 1928, there are plenty of detailed accounts of the aspirations behind it, of how the whole process was initiated, managed and directed, and of the officials and artists who were involved in the creation of what is widely acclaimed to be a most successful set of outstanding coins[7]. The reception of the coinage and its novel iconography, and the various political and religious objections and counter-arguments that were raised at the time are equally richly documented, and we benefit from recent scholarship looking at the coinage from a more detached and wide-ranging historical and cultural perspective[8].

In my contribution, I intend to consider the politics and mechanisms behind the inception of the Free State coins, and the importance of their design choice. This Irish case-study of course differs greatly from the background to early Anglo-Saxon aspirations and preoccupations: as mentioned above[9], it was necessary for the early Anglo-Saxon coins to conform to an already established iconography, ultimately derived from Imperial Rome, whereas the Irish coins strived to be resolutely distinct from those of Britain[10]: indeed, as Quin puts it, «the minting of the first Irish coins since 1822 afforded the Free State government an expedient means to symbolically dethrone British rule in Ireland»[11]. Yet, consideration of the complexities of the decision-making, and the pull of various agendas of stakeholders and politicians will hopefully offer the chance of a reflection on circumstances in earlier times, which undoubtedly would have required an equally delicate balancing act amongst disparate interests and factions.

The self-governing Free Irish State was formally constituted on 6 December 1922 with the signing of a treaty which saw the coming to an end of one hundred and twenty years of legislative union with Britain[12], as well as eight centuries of colonial domination[13]. In addition to flying the Irish tricolour flag,

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7 The process is recorded in the Government of Ireland's official publication: *Coinage of Saorstát Éireann, 1928*. Some of the key texts (by various authors) are reprinted, with additions, in Cleeve 1972, a more widely accessible publication, to which I shall make reference.

8 For instance: E. Morris 2005; Mohr 2015; Mohr 2022; C. Morris 2020.

9 See notes 2 and 3.

10 Following the 1800 Act of Union which brought Ireland into full political union with Britain, and the Coinage Act of 1826, British coins, carrying no special iconographic reference to Ireland, became the official coinage in Ireland, hence the famous 1913 comment by the revolutionary Patrick Pearse: «a good Irishman should blush every time he sees a penny»; Pearse 1916: 151.

11 Quin 2020: 465.

12 In 1922 the only currency of full legal-tender status in Ireland were banknotes issued by the British Government, and British silver and bronze coins were legal tender for only limited amounts; Moynihan 1975: 20.

13 The complex history that led to the Treaty and its reception are examined in detail by Mohr 2022: I am very grateful to Thomas Mohr for allowing me access to this work. Amongst many publications on modern Irish history, see Lee 1989, especially chapter 2.

adopting a national anthem and painting dark green (British) red post-boxes[14], the need to de-anglicise Ireland, and demonstrate its culturally and visually independent identity and Gaelic distinctiveness was keenly felt and pursued in many areas, ranging from the encouraging of the use of the Gaelic language (and script), and of names, and placenames, to the issuing of a their own Great Seal, stamps, passports, paper currency and, of course, coinage[15]. The designs of the new State official symbols were to be all new: a decision was taken by the end of 1922 to avoid anything tainted by previous political association or deemed too tawdry and old-fashioned, including any religious symbols.

The symbol of the Harp was chosen for the State seals, stamps, official stationary, banknotes and coins[16]: the justifications for such choice were its distinctiveness, its dignity and its antiquity[17], as well as its being free of any sectarian connections. Having first been used from *c.*1530-38 (capped with a crown) on the reverse of the so-called 'harp coinage' of Henry VIII as *dominus Hiberniae,* and then King of Ireland[18], it was now to replace the British King's head, of course minus the crown. Ireland was the first to take this momentous step amongst other self-governing parts of the British Empire – a strong statement of independence and sovereignty (Fig. 1).

Ireland is also the only nation to have a musical instrument as its national emblem[19]. The model selected for the standard representation of the Harp was a 15th-century wire-strung instrument, traditionally known as the Brian Boru Harp, since 1782 housed in the Long Room, the Library of Trinity College, Dublin[20]. It is interesting to note that to this day the form of the heraldic Harp is based on the 1830s incorrect 'slim' reconstruction of the instrument, and

14 Ireland is the only country associated with and symbolised by a colour. The repainting green of post-boxes, telephone-boxes, buses and trams had a strong psychological impact which contributed to identity formation.; Caffrey 2011: 77-78.

15 Kennedy 1994 for a survey of visual records of the period.

16 E. Morris 2005: 12-15, 70-73.

17 E. Morris 2005: 74-75. A Harp, on a blue field, was depicted, together with the coats of arms of the vassals of Philip III of France, on a folio of the Armorial Wijnbergen dated *c.*1280. The Manuscripts is named after the family that owned it before it being acquired by the Royal Dutch Society for Genealogy and Heraldry in The Hague. See: http://www.conseil-francais-d-heraldique.com/bibliographie.php?ouvrageID=3 [accessed on 28/11/2023].

18 Dolley, Hackmann 1969.

19 The Harp is a protected official State emblem; see https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/what-we-do/innovation-research-development/intellectual-property/trade-marks/state-emblems/ [accessed on 28/11/2023]. As the harp device had been trademarked by the Guinness brewery in 1876, the Irish Free State Government of 1922 chose to show the official emblem turned the other way, with the straight edge (the sound board) on the right. The Ryanair logo also alludes to the national symbol of the Harp.

20 The Brian Boru Harp is the oldest Irish medieval harp: its link to the High King of Ireland, Brian Boru (*c.* 941-1014), is apocryphal.

not on the modern, scholarly, restoration of 1961[21], which made it wider and shorter.

Fig. 1. The Obverse of the new 1928 coins of the Irish Free State, with the emblem of the Irish Harp and the inscription: Saorstát Éireann (Irish Free State), designed by Percy Metcalfe. (Photo: by kind permission of The Coins & History Foundation from Justin Robinson's article 'Barnyard collection' (10 May 2021) https://coinsandhistory-foundation.org/tag/barnyard-collection/).

The Great Seal, which showed the harp set within a complex border of traditional patterns of interlace and spirals inspired by the eighth century Ardagh Chalice, an iconic masterpiece of Irish art[22], was introduced in 1923. There was little public reaction to its launch: only the weekly journal, *The Irish Statesman,* commented on the lack of any aesthetic merit to its design: it suggested that on such visual matters the government should seek competent advice «from a committee of artists who have real repute». This criticism was indeed tacitly followed when it came to choosing the official designs for banknotes, stamps and coins[23].

«Of all nation's monuments, the most enduring is its coinage»[24] – and indeed, the issuing of the new Free State coinage was an important process, taken most seriously[25]. It began in 1923, with an informal consultation, which considered the implications of a currency switch at a time of legal uncertainty, but underlined

21 The restoration and restringing were carried out under the guidance of the English musicologist Joan Rimmer.

22 https://www.museum.ie/en-IE/Collections-Research/Collection/The-Treasury/Artefact/The-Ardagh-Chalice/ac53e68e-76a4-4560-a624-c87647c57a00 [accessed on 29/11/2023].

23 E. Morris 2005: 73-75.

24 Cleeve 1972: 5.

25 Moynihan 1975: 20-31 on the various discussions concerning ties to sterling, possible decimalisation, metal and fineness of the coins and other technical issues. The issue of the

the symbolic importance of making tangible the independence of the new State for the ordinary citizen. By 1925 new legislation was underway, with the question of design being raised. The Coinage Bill of 1926, which became law on 30 April 1926, proposed the issuing of new coins – silver half-crowns, florins and shillings, sixpences and threepences, pennies, halfpennies and farthings, all corresponding to British denominations[26] – but to be «distinctively our own, bearing devices of this country»[27]. It also recommended instituting a committee of «people of the highest possible standing in the artistic world» to advise the Minister for Finance on the design of the coins, as well as on the processes of getting designs submitted and guiding the choice of the most suitable artist[28].

In May 1926 the Senator W.B. Yeats (1865-1939), Nobel Laureate poet, dramatist, prose writer, and one of the foremost figures of twentieth-century culture, was asked to chair the new advisory Committee on coinage design[29]. It was evident from his speech in the debate on the Coinage Bill, when he described stamps and coins as «the silent ambassadors of national taste»[30], that Yeats would be a formidable guiding force[31]. But already at the first meeting of the Committee, in June 1926, three non-binding recommendations from the Minister for Finance were issued: the symbol of the Harp should feature on one side of the coins, the inscriptions should be in Irish, with numerals showing denominations, and also there should be no effigy of modern persons. A call for suggestions from the public in July 1926 was met with little interest and poor, unimaginative responses: however, Yeats' artistic interests and deep engagement with Classics and classical archaeology[32], his recent travels to Sicily[33], the present of a book on classical Ancient coinage, and particularly the Irish

minting of the coins was delegated to the Minister for Finance. It was decided their manufacture would be carried out at the Royal Mint in London.

26 Their sizes also matched, apart from the threepenny and sixpenny pieces, which were to be larger, and in nickel. Moynihan 1975: 23.

27 Moynihan 1975: 23 (quoting Dáil Éireann Debates, Vol.14, 27 January 1926, col. 159).

28 Moynihan 1975: 28, 32.

29 Aside from writing, W.B. Yeats had a great interest in the visual arts and came from an artistic family: both his father, and his brother Jack were distinguished painters. W.B. Yeats also attended the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin for three years; Arkins 1990: 156.

30 See comments on this actually being Yeats' own taste, and Yeats' ideas of 'cultural nationalism' and aesthetics in McKenna 2015-16: 23-24 and 29-36.

31 Also on the Committee were Dermod O'Brien, President of the Royal Hibernian Academy, Lucius O' Callaghan, Director of the National Gallery of Ireland, Thomas Bodkin, one of the Governors of the National Gallery and subsequently its Director, Barry M. Egan, managing director of the family firm of silversmiths, William Egan & Sons, Cork, and Irish politician. Leo T. McCauley of the Department of Finance was appointed secretary. E. Morris 2005: 86.

32 Arkins 1990: 1-23; Finn 2004: 35-53.

33 Foster 2003: 279; Finn 2004: 67-77.

artist Sir William Orpen's idea that the different denominations of the coins should together be «telling one story»[34], all proved to be inspirational.

By August 1926, after some fruitful discussions, the Committee presented an interim report recommending the Harp as the obverse of a set of a unified series of designs for the eight denominations. They were to represent on their reverse a series of animals, as «natural products of Ireland, its sports and industries», ranging from «the more noble or dignified types» for the highest denominations, to «the more humble ones» to the lower, all worthy symbols, totally apolitical, and «at once beautiful, intelligible and appropriate»[35].

The Committee's recommendations were as follow[36]: Half-crown: a *Horse* (Irish hunter); Florin: a *Salmon*; Shilling: a *Bull*; Sixpence: an *Irish Wolf-hound*; Threepence: a *Hare*; Penny: a *Hen* (possibly with chicks); Half-penny: a *Pig*; Farthing: a *Woodcock*. Each of the suggestions was accompanied by notes on its rationale: the Horse and the Bull, with their long numismatic pedigree, as well as eminence and economic value in Ireland; the Salmon, also as valuable produce for fisheries and sport, and connected with wisdom in Irish legends; the Wolfhound, as a hunting breed special to Ireland; the Hare and the Woodcock, both also associated with hunting; the Hen and the Pig[37], staples valuable to farmers[38]. Additionally, it was proposed that the denominations for each coin must be written in rounded capitals (Gaelic typeface), and indicated by numerals[39]. The Committee also submitted a provisional list of artists to be contacted.

In early September 1926, once all proposals were considered and approved by the Minister, the committee run a limited competition with invitations sent to a restricted number of renowned national and international artists, and a deadline of four months. The seven that accepted were: Jerome Connor (Ireland), Paul Manship (U.S.A.), Percy Metcalfe (England), Carl Milles (Sweden), Publio Morbiducci (Italy), Albert Power (Ireland) and Oliver Sheppard (Ireland)[40]. They were supplied with photographs of three ancient harps, of the animals

34 E. Morris 2005: 87-88.

35 Moynihan 1975: 32; E. Morris 2005: 88-89.

36 Mohr 2015: 458-461 for a detailed account of the Committee's decisions.

37 In the case of the Pig, a ram was suggested as a possible alternative, because pigs had often been used in Britain as caricatures to represent Irish boorishness. E. Morris 2005: 90, 99. However, the Committee had rejected the objection as «unworthy of serious consideration»; Cleeve 1972 (L.T. McCauley, *Summary*): 33.

38 Cleeve 1972 (L.T. McCauley, *Summary*): 30-33. McKenna 2015-16: 25-28, 30-35 discusses the choice of animals in the light of Yeats' poetry and writings, with the bull and the salmon symbolising masculinity and femininity, the hen and the saw representing rural Ireland, and the horse and wolf-hound connoting Anglo-Irish culture. The hare and the woodcock stand for regeneration, with spiritual and ecological echoes.

39 Cleeve 1972 (L.T. McCauley, *Summary*): 34-35. Transcripts for the various inscriptions, based on manuscripts script and lettering, were supplied by the Society of Antiquaries.

40 *Ibidem*: 68-73 and Caffrey 2011: 82-87, with several illustrations of the entries. For Ivan Meštrović, who unfortunately missed the deadline, see below.

in question, and of the Gaelic inscriptions, together with the images of some classical coins, and they were asked, «as far as possible, to take them as models». The Committee seemed to have been unanimous in the preference for these coins to be from the Greek colonies of Southern Italy and Sicily, plus one from Carthage[41].

As Christine Morris points out[42], the preference for such classical models and the innovative featuring of animals for the set were choices totally unconventional and quite at odds with contemporary ideas and practice of coin iconography. They served to symbolically align the new Irish coinage with those of the ancient Greek city-states, and the freedom they symbolised. Just as the city-states had proudly marked their identity and independence with autonomous coins struck with images of animals which were locally important, that were tied to religious /mythological credences, and that signified their economic wealth, so the new Irish coins were intended to be a bold statement of sovereignty, whilst the choice of the animals selected as the «natural products of Ireland, its sports and industries», equally resonated strongly with ancient Irish mythology and folk traditions – as well as with Christianity, as was indeed argued in their defence[43].

Yeats felt the appeal of these beautiful Greek coins profoundly, and his twin interests in classical art and a renewed contemporary aesthetics, which had guided the Committee in its choices of designs, was also apparent when proposing and lobbying for the artists to be invited to the competition, hence the invitations to Carl Milles and Ivan Meštrović[44], as «the foremost sculptors of our days»[45]. He was keen to advance the artistic taste in Ireland through exposure to modern art through foreign designers and contemporary international trends, and also, arguably, «to use the capitalist marketplace as a foundation for cultural revival»[46].

In his lecture on the designers of the Irish coinage given in November 1928, Thomas Bodkin, Director of the National Gallery of Ireland (1927-1935), admitted that while the Committee had hoped to commission the Irish artists,

41 Coins of Larissa and Carthage, featuring horses, one with a bull from Thurii. *c.*400–350 BCE, and a 5th *c.* BCE from Messana, with a running hare; Cleeve 1972 (W.B. Yeats, *What we did or tried to do*): 9-10.

42 C. Morris 2020: 394 and 398-99.

43 Cleeve 1972 (T. Bodkin: *Postscript*): 57, and see below.

44 The invitation to Ivan Meštrović (from modern Croatia) was misaddressed, and his entry did not arrive in time, but he generously donated to the State a design for the obverse, with a harpist in profile behind the Harp (see: Cleeve 1972 (W.B. Yeats, *What we did or tried to do*): 12). In 2007, eighty years after the Competition, this design was finally used by the Central Bank of Ireland on a commemorative 15 euros coin. At the same time the Croatian Central Bank issued a 150 kuna coin with a similar design. https://www.bis.org/review/r070214a.pdf [accessed on 18/12/2023].

45 Cleeve 1972 (W.B. Yeats, *What we did or tried to do*): 16.

46 Doggett 2011: 91.

and had assumed that a mix of prototypes from different designers would be chosen, some members also had their favourites[47]. His was Publio Morbiducci, a Sicilian artist specialised in coin and medal design, whose powerful and naturalistic beasts so well suited the shape of the coins[48], whilst Yeats' most liked were Carl Milles' for their supernatural quality and evocation of myths[49]. It was particularly Milles' wild horses and the archaic-looking bull, as if «dug out of Sicilian earth» that had captivated Yeats: handsome forms – though, as Yeats freely conceded, most unsuitable as modern coins in their high relief, as they would «neither pitch nor pack»[50]. Whilst it is very likely that Yeats' well-known admiration for Sweden and its art-patronage (including the institution of Nobel prizes)[51], combined with his interest in modern Swedish art and design must have played a part in his support for Milles[52], it can be argued that it was to Yeats' visceral passion for classical art that the startlingly primitive style of Milles' coins most appealed.

In February 1927 all the sixty-six submissions (all plaster models, apart from Morbiducci's, which were in metal) were considered anonymously. Bodkin specifically mentioned measures taken «to guard against any unconscious bias on our part»[53], and how they were examined by denomination, and design-by-design. To their surprise, the entries of one single artist were consistently and unanimously preferred as «incomparably superior» and deemed «certain to provide a coinage of unusual interest and beauty»: those of Percy Metcalfe[54].

Percy Metcalfe (1895-1970), a Yorkshire man, and the youngest among the participants, was formed at the Leeds School of Art and at the Royal College of Arts in London as a sculptor. Amongst his best-known works was the monumental lion sculpture for the Palace of Industry at the British Empire Exhibition of 1924[55], and the Exhibition's commemorative medal[56], featuring a profile lion's head, in the same distinctive, pared-down style, utterly modern. Although not as renowned as some of the other artists invited, Metcalfe was recommended to the Committee by the Royal Mint on account of his technical

47 Cleeve 1972 (T. Bodkin, *The Irish coinage designers*): 52.

48 For Morbiducci's entries, see Cleeve 1972 (W.B. Yeats, *What we did or tried to do*): 15.

49 Cleeve 1972 (W.B. Yeats, *What we did or tried to do*): 16; Quin 2020: 473. For Milles' designs, see *ibidem*: 16, and Quin 2020: 473-478, figs. 2-4.

50 Cleeve 1972 (W.B. Yeats, *What we did or tried to do*): 16; Finn 2004: 70.

51 Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923 'for his always inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation.' See https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1923/summary/ [accessed on 18/12/2023].

52 Quin 2020: 475; Finn 2004: 71-72.

53 Cleeve 1972 (T. Bodkin, *The Irish coinage designers*): 53.

54 *Ibid.*, 53 and Cleeve 1972 (L.T. McCauley, *Summary*): 37.

55 See: https://ashteadpottery.com/percy-metcalfe/ [accessed on 10/12/ 2023] and C. Morris 2020: 403, fig. 20.6.

56 See https://www.royalmintmuseum.org.uk/journal/people/percy-metcalfe/ [accessed on 10/12/2023].

skills, and was extremely accommodating with the several alterations he was asked to make[57]. The success of his Irish coinage paved the way to a rewarding career with the Royal Mint, and he was also a much admired medallist[58].

Metcalfe's submissions to the competition beautifully fitted the brief, and showed clear originality and modern simplicity, so that his animals and inscriptions balanced within their circular spaces most elegantly. However, when presented for approval to the Government, various experts from the Department of Agriculture piled on criticism about the physical aspect of the livestock, and «gave Mr Metcalfe an immense amount of trouble», asking for several modifications to some of the original animals[59]. These interferences greatly annoyed Yeats, and much as they were intended to correct the anatomy and advertise Irish breeding standards, they certainly were artistic retrogressions: «The horse, as first drawn, was more alive than the later version,... [when] in obedience to technical opinion, it lost muscular tension; we passed from the open country to the show-ground»; the bull and the pig too were changed to conform to «the eugenics of the farm-yard»: they became «better merchandise, but less living»[60].

There was further meddling on the part of the Executive Council and the Minister for Agriculture, who by-passed the Committee and contacted Metcalfe directly, asking for further amendments and even changes of some of the design previously agreed on. In October 1927 the Committee offered their resignation. The crisis was swiftly resolved with the acceptance on the part of the Committee that their design recommendations were simply advisory, but insisting that in future any alterations were to be discussed with the Committee first[61]. Surprisingly, this major confrontation was not recorded in the official account of proceedings, *Coinage of Saorstát Éireann (1928)*, or in their re-editing by Cleave in 1972. This and other omissions have come to the surface thanks to recent archive research on hand-written minutes[62].

The Committee had began work in June 1926 and completed its task in April 1928: it launched a coinage with an iconography that was so startlingly new and influential that it came to be acknowledged as the starting point of modern coinage (Fig. 2).

Their release to the public began on 12 December 1928, and was preceded by an exhibition at which Ernest Blythe, the Minister for Finance, gave an official speech, and Thomas Bodkin as Director of the National Gallery of Ireland lectured on the genesis of the new coinage. Blythe praised the coins for

57 Metcalfe also charged far less that the other artists; see Mohr 2015: 461, no. 105.

58 Caffrey 2011: 86-87.

59 Cleeve 1972 (T. Bodkin, *The Irish coinage designers*): 53.

60 Cleeve 1972 (W.B. Yeats, *What we did or tried to do*): 19; McKenna 2015-16: 31.

61 Quin 2020: 471-472.

62 A number of such discrepancies were first noted by Foster 2003: 333; Mohr 2015: 459, no. 84. See also Quin 2020: 465, no. 6, 471, nos 35-36.

their beauty and underlined the political importance of a distinctive coinage to express the sovereignty of the new State, whilst Bodkin explained the rationale behind the choice of the animals, intended to showcase Ireland's wealth and the products of its soil[63], and also why neither religious or «hackneyed» symbols had been deemed appropriate[64].

Fig. 2. The eight Reverses of the new 1928 coins of the Irish Free State: Horse (half crown), Salmon (florin), Bull (shilling), Hare (threepence), Wolf-hound (sixpence), Hen and chicks (penny), Pig and piglets (halfpenny) and Woodcock (farthing), designed by Percy Metcalfe. (Photo: by kind permission of The Coins & History Foundation from Justin Robinson's article 'Barnyard collection' (10 May 2021) https://coinsandhistoryfoundation.org/tag/barnyard-collection/).

However, even before their official launch, the coins had come under much public scrutiny, and initially were the source of controversy and heated debates, particularly in the press[65]. The coin iconography was criticised because of what it showed, as well as what it did not show: it was censured for its typecasting of Ireland as a backward agricultural nation, for lacking «all that is noble and elevated in Ireland», for the absence of conventional national emblems or traditional Irish symbols, and especially of any Christian images. Moreover, the Committee members stood accused of being 'outsiders': the Republican revolutionary Maud Gonne MacBride, sarcastically pointed out how «entirely

63 «Coins are the tangible tokens of people's wealth. Wealth in the earliest times was always calculated in terms of cattle. Thence comes the word *pecunia*, money, derived from *pecus*»; Cleeve 1972 (T. Bodkin, *The Irish coinage designers*): 43 and 45; E. Morris 2004: 25.

64 The lecture was delivered on 30th November 1928; Cleeve 1972 (T. Bodkin, *The Irish coinage designers*): 40-54.

65 E. Morris 2005: 91-106.

suitable» the coins were – «designed by an Englishman, minted in England, representative of English values, paid for by the Irish people»[66].

This point was also made in the review of the Government of Ireland's official publication, *Coinage of Saorstát Éireann 1928*[67], which was published in the *The Numismatic Chronicle and Journal of the Royal Numismatic Society* in 1929. Aside from being patronisingly dismissive, and declaring «The book with its conscious and unconscious humour is an unusual contribution to numismatic literature», the review rather acidly commented that «There seems to have been no protest at these symbols of the *swadeshi* movement being designed by a Yorkshireman and struck in London»[68].

More positively, the reaction to the design of the coins in the British press was unequivocally enthusiastic, full of praise for their artistic merit, and Ireland's imagination and freedom in creating «the most beautiful set of coins in the world»[69].

The most controversial of the criticisms levelled at the coins was definitively to do with the absence of any religious symbolism on the coinage of the 'Land of the Saints', of a nation so anciently connected to Christianity[70]. In his lecture Bodkin had already explained that he personally believed that the featuring of religious symbols or effigies of saints «would give rise to an unavoidable and most reprehensible irreverence» in the coin usage, or that people would drill holes in the coins and use them as amulets[71]. In his *Postscript* to *Coinage of Saorstát Éireann 1928*, Bodkin expressed surprise that so much of the criticism should be directed to the Committee's failure «to identify God and Mammon»[72]. He presented some of the contrasting arguments raised by the public on the matter: how the decision was considered in some quarters to be part of a conspiracy promoting paganism[73], «the thin edge of Freemasonry», an ominous prefiguring of the total removal of religion from public life – «a turning down of God»[74].

Bodkin also reported how several other voices, amongst both secular and ordained people, had exposed the fallaciousness of these alarmist ideas. They pointed out that some of the critics of the animal designs seemed to have forgotten that the animals, far from being «pagan», were actually integral part of God's creations. Amongst the defenders of the new coinage designs, in a

66 E. Morris 2005: 101.
67 See note 7.
68 J.A. 1929: 340.
69 Cleeve 1972 (T. Bodkin, *Postscript*): 60.
70 E. Morris 2005, 93-97.
71 Cleeve 1972 (T. Bodkin, *The Irish coinage designers*): 43.
72 Cleeve 1972 (T. Bodkin, *Postscript*): 55-60.
73 'Paganism' was considered a more damming term than secularism or materialism; E. Morris 2004: 26.
74 Cleeve 1972 (T. Bodkin: *Postscript*): 56.

light-hearted letter to his friend Bodkin, an unidentified «learned continental priest» made the counter-claim that in reality «the whole set was saturated with religious symbolism, delicately hidden… a masterpiece of prudence, good taste and deep religious feeling». In his tongue-in-cheek reading of the iconography, the harp on the obverse was to be identified with that of David, on which we were to imagine the king accompanying himself while singing the Psalms, and lines such as «Praise the Lord from the earth…beasts wild and tame, reptiles and birds on the wing…»[75]. In the same vein, the priest proceeded to recall how the ancient symbolism of the Fish cryptically proclaimed the sonship and divinity of Jesus, a declaration of the fundamental dogma of Christianity, and to quote various Scriptural passages featuring the other animals[76]. The coins were therefore to be considered completely Christian, and a model of piety.

Such strident controversies detract from the fact that the reception of the new coinage was in fact predominantly positive, not only in praising the artistry and originality of the coins, but also the appropriateness of the animals and their value to the mainly agricultural Irish economy. Even the choice of the Pig, over which even the Committee had hesitated, on account of it being the butt of offensive anti-Irish satires[77], and of the Hen with her chicks («of immediate appeal to farmers, and especially to their wives and daughters»)[78] were welcomed, so much so that the coinage set came to be affectionately referred to as the Barnyard coins[79]. Moreover, whilst the coins became a model for those of countries emerging from colonial rule, and their uncluttered designs introduced new world-wide numismatic aesthetics, in Ireland they came to be recognised as the visual embodiment of nationhood[80].

The 1928 Free State coinage endured (with some additions and minor changes due to decimalisation in 1971)[81] until Ireland's entry into the Eurozone in 2002. Their demise was marked by an affectionate poem by Seamus Heaney, *A Keen*

75 *Psalm* 148: v. 7 and 10.

76 The Greek letters of 'Fish' (Ιχθυς) are the initials of 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour'. Scriptural quotations: Matthew, 17:24-27 (the coin found in the fish' mouth) and 23:37 (the hen and chicks); Job 39:19-25 (the horse); the bull of Bashan; Tobias' dog and the hare of Exodus. *Ibid.*, 58. Cleeve 1972 (T. Bodkin: *Postscript*): 57-58.

77 See note 37, and see Bodkin quoting from Acts c. xi. v, 6-9 in defence of the Pig; Cleeve 1972 (T. Bodkin: *Postscript*): 58.

78 Cleeve 1972 (L.T. McCauley, *Summary*): 32.

79 See Jack Quin 2022 opinion piece: https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2021/0602/1225498-ireland-irish-free-state-coins-percy-metcalfe-barnyard-animals/, also featuring an embedded short film '*Mr Yeats and the Beastly Coins*' by Ann Marie Hourihane and Laura McNicholas [accessed on 19/12/2023].

80 Caffrey 2011: 88, 76-7.

81 See https://www.centralbank.ie/consumer-hub/notes-and-coins/irish-coin [accessed on 27/12/2023].

for the Coins[82], and a bronze wall hanging by the sculptor Carolyn Mulholland, featuring a set of the coins and Heaney's poem[83]. The new Euro coins retained the Harp on their reverse (the national side) with the inscription 'Éire' in Gaelic lettering, and adopted the common Euro sides on their obverse[84]. However, this was not quite the end of the Barnyard coins story. In celebration of the 1928 iconic designs, over three consecutive years the Central Bank of Ireland issued three €15 silver proof coins, adding the animals' offspring: 'the second generation'. The first coin in 2010 showed the Horse with foal, then the Salmon and smolt in 2011, and the Irish Wolf-hound with pup in 2012.

The genesis of the 1928 Free State coinage, as we have seen, is very well-documented, and commentators have reflected on its political, historical, artistic and cultural implications, with contributions from widely spanning fields of enquiry. How are these considerations applicable to the understanding of early Anglo-Saxon coins? There are of course huge differences of time, scale, and scope, yet the jostling of ideas, aspirations and egos must be comparable. But there is also another point of contact. To invoke Levi-Strauss, «animals are good to think with»[85]: animals in iconography can embody an endless variety of messages and ideas.

While establishing their first gold coins (from *c.* 600), the Anglo-Saxons were eager to fit in a pre-existing and well-established monetary system and iconography. By the turn of the eighth century, the number of coin finds and the wide area of their circulation testify to the success of the enterprise, and with the switch to silver coinage, we are confronted with a new boldness, and innovations in their designs. On the cusp of this new development sits the coinage of King Aldfrith of Northumbria (685-704), known in Gaelic sources as Flann Fina[86]. The illegitimate son of King Oswiu and of an Irish princess of the Cenél nÉogain, he was brought up and educated in Ireland, and ascended to the throne after his brother Ecgfrith was killed at the Battle of Nechtansmere. He is renowned for his extraordinary learning and love of books, acknowledged in both Anglo-Saxon and Gaelic contemporary sources: Aldhelm of Malmesbury and Adomnán of Iona, knew him personally, as possibly also Bede of Wearmouth-Jarrow and Stephen of Ripon, his younger contemporaries[87]. His reign saw the beginning of the culturally important 'golden age

82 *A Keen for the Coins* was published in the Spring 2002 issue of *Irish Pages*: it laments Ireland's «lost ark», now only found «where the rainbow ends».

83 C. Morris 2020: 393-394. See https://www.facebook.com/HamiltonGallerySligo/posts/4913913725303955/ [accessed on 27/12/2023].

84 The shared common side of the Euro coins was designed by Luc Luycx of the Royal Belgium Mint.

85 Quoted in C. Morris 2020: 401: «in their complex and culturally constructed relationships with humans they can carry complex, contradictory, and highly varied values and messages».

86 Ireland 2015: 31.

87 Ireland 2015: 29-30.

of Northumbria', and the production of the first silver coinage[88]. His coins are totally innovative: on the obverse they are inscribed with the king's name, testimony to Aldfrith's literacy, and on the reverse there is an admittedly rather gawky lion (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Silver coin of King Aldfrith of Northumbria (685-704) (Gannon 2013, no. 757. Photo: The British Museum, London, by kind permission).

That iconography (the king's name teamed with a lion, an appropriate regal symbol)[89] will remain a feature unique to Northumbrian coins until the second half of the eighth century; whereas south of the border, from *c.* 710, most Anglo-Saxon silver coins will begin to couple the traditional obverse 'head' to a reverse featuring an animal: birds (including peacocks, and also a hen!), lions, snakes, wolves and even fantastic creatures[90] (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Anglo-Saxon silver *sceattas* (c. 720) featuring a peacock, a lion-headed snake; a lion's head, a bird and a griffin. a) no. 466, Series H; b) no. 491, Series K/32a; c) no. 500, Series K/33; d) no. 621, Series Q/QIV (Gannon 2013, nos. 466, 491, 500, 621). Photos: The British Museum, London, by kind permission).

These new silver coins, the so called *sceattas*, are the first truly independent coinage of a confident, fully 'modern' and mercantile Anglo-Saxon England[91].

88 Gannon 2003:125-126, fig. 4.25.

89 Importantly, the lion also had Biblical and religious resonances, which may also have been relevant to Aldfrith.

90 Gannon 2003: 107-154: the meaning of these animals is argued to be multivalent and syncretic.

91 Gannon 2013: 98-99.

The tradition of animals on coins endures still: the strikingly innovative, definitive coinage for King Charles III of England, designed by the Royal Mint in 2023 to reflect his passion for conservation and the natural world, features eight new design of endangered British animals and plants. The Atlantic salmon on the new 50p coin provides a striking comparison with the one featured on the Irish Florin[92].

It is a highly ironic coincidence that the first coins depicting animal iconography in England should have been introduced by the *sapiens*[93], half-Irish King Aldfrith – W.B. Yeats the Arch-poet[94], himself Anglo-Irish, would have understood and approved.

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