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SYMBOLS OF THE TRINITY? TRIPLE-FOLDED COINS FROM MEDIEVAL AND TUDOR ENGLAND

MURRAY ANDREWS

The repurposing of coins for devotional, apotropaic, and other 'ritualised' non-monetary functions is a distinctive phenomenon of the medieval period, and one particular form of adaptation – the deliberate folding of coins by their owners – has been the subject of extensive research by Ralph Merrifield, Mark Hall, and Richard Kelleher.[1] This work has drawn connections between finds of folded coins dated 1066–1544, nearly 400 examples of which are now known from England and Wales,[2] and a documented pre-Reformation 'English custom' in which Christians would fold coins in the hope of incurring saintly intercession at times of need. Through simultaneous acts of folding and invocation, this custom generated a spiritual contract between saints and their devotees: in return for help in healing the sick, rescuing the endangered, or resurrecting the dead, the supplicant would present the folded coin to a shrine as a sacred offering, or might otherwise wear or treasure it as a symbol of their devotion.

Fig. 1. Ritually-folded Edwardian sterling from Hanslope, Buckinghamshire (© Northamptonshire County Council, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Most ritually-folded medieval coins found in Britain were produced by means of a single fold across the centre of the coin, usually resulting in a semi-circular object with the obverse design on the exterior face and reverse design on the interior face (Figure 1).[3] In recent years, however, small numbers of coins with more complex patterns of folding have been unearthed

[1] Merrifield 1987, 109–11; Hall 2016, 147–50; Kelleher 2018.
[2] Kelleher 2018, 76.
[3] Kelleher 2018, 78, who reports a 59:41 ratio of external obverses to reverses in a sample of 200 folded coins. Analysis of this pattern using a chi-squared test (Shennan 1988, 65–70) suggests that it is unlikely to result from random chance, but instead represents a light but statistically significant preference for external obverses in Kelleher's sample. One-sample chi-squared test, H_0 = obverses and reverses are equally distributed across the external faces of medieval folded coins (n=200). $\chi^2_{calc} = 6.48$, $\chi^2_{0.05[1]} = 3.84$; therefore, reject H_0 at α=0.05.

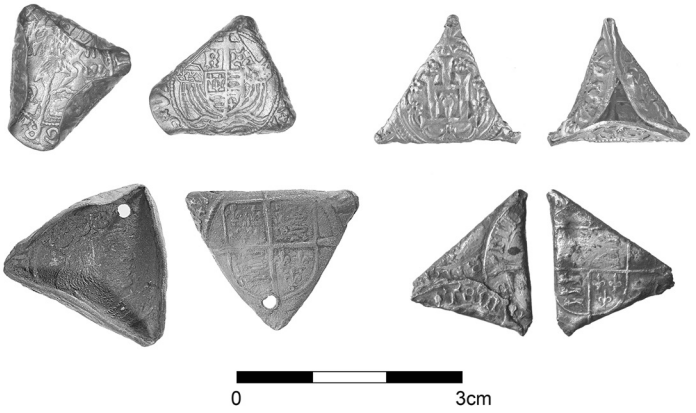

Fig. 2. Triangular folded coins found in England. Clockwise from top left: Monks Kirby, Warwickshire (© Noonans Mayfair, with permission); Admaston, Staffordshire (© Birmingham Museums Trust, CC BY 2.0); Near Chiswick Bridge, London (© Hampshire Cultural Trust, CC BY 2.0); Cumberworth, Lincolnshire (© The Portable Antiquities Scheme, CC BY 2.0).

by metal detector users. These include no fewer than eight finds of coins that have been reshaped into equilateral triangles by means of three short folds along their edges (Figure 2).

Though few in number, some general trends in the incidence of triple-folded coins are apparent from the finds dataset (Table 1). Like the more common single-folded coins, examples of triple-folded coins are known in a range of denominations, including silver groats and pence, and, more unusually, a gold half-angel, Genoese ducat, and a possible Hungarian silver coin. There is also considerable geographical overlap between the spatial distribution of single-folded and triple-folded coins, both of which have been found across a broad stretch of central to southern Britain from the Humber to Severn Estuaries.[4] However, the chronological distribution of triple-folded coins differs slightly from single-folded coins. While the latter are known across the period 1066–1544, but are most common in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the former span the reigns of Edward I (1272–1307) to Mary I (1553–58), and are apparently concentrated in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[5] The direction of the folds also seems to differ between single-folded and triple-folded coins: all but one of the latter have been folded in such a manner as to place the reverse design on the exterior of the folded object. The visual significance of the reverse design, almost always a cross, is made evident by the triangular-folded Henrician groat from Cumberworth, Lincolnshire (Figure 2), which has been pierced close to the arm terminal of the reverse cross to ensure its correct orientation when worn around the neck or affixed to an item of clothing (Table 1, no. 7). Similar indications are provided by a triangular-folded silver coin from Congham, Norfolk, which seems to have gilded and mounted on the bezel of a finger ring, emphasising the reverse image of the Blessed Virgin Mary holding the infant Christ (Table 1, no. 3).

[4] Kelleher 2018, 75.

[5] Two of the potentially thirteenth- to fourteenth-century triple-folded coins (Table 1, nos 2 and 6) are heavily worn, and might conceivably have been folded long after their date of production.

TABLE 1. Triangular folded coins from medieval and Tudor England, ordered by issue date

No.	*Findspot*	*Description*	*Reference*
1.	Evesham, Worcestershire	Two interlocking silver pennies of Edward I, 1279–1310, Durham and York mints, reverses external	Andrews 2019, EVS
2.	Wintringham, North Yorkshire	Silver penny of Edward III–Richard III, 1351–1485, York mint, reverse external	PAS YORYM-877364
3	Congham, Norfolk	Silver coin, possibly of Matthias Corvinus of Hungary, 1458–90(?), reverse external	Kelleher 2012, 225–6
4.	Monks Kirby, Warwickshire	Gold half-angel of Richard III, 1483–85, London mint, reverse external	Dix Noonan Webb 127, December 2017, lot 964; PAS LEIC-2889FA
5.	Admaston, Staffordshire	Gold ducat of Louis XII of France, 1499–1507, Genoa mint, obverse external	PAS WMID-01D66A
6.	Flinton, East Riding of Yorkshire	Silver penny of an uncertain issuer, ?1195–1539, uncertain external	PAS YORYM-4A0BD3
7.	Cumberworth, Lincolnshire	Silver groat of Henry VIII, 1526–44, London mint, reverse external, pierced	PAS LIN-76952E
8.	Near Chiswick Bridge, London	Silver groat of Mary, 1553–54, London mint, reverse external	PAS HAMP-ED350A

While none of the triple-folded coins known to date have been recovered from a stratified archaeological context, their broader site and landscape contexts can be partially reconstructed using documentary, archaeological, and topographic information. Two finds of triple-folded pence from Evesham and Wintringham (Table 1, nos 1–2) may be associated with monastic houses, the former having been found near to a Benedictine Abbey and the latter less than 450 m north-west of the reputed site of a monastic cell attached to the Cistercian Priory at Scarborough. The triple-folded Marian groat from near Chiswick Bridge (Table 1, no. 8), meanwhile, was found on the foreshore of the River Thames, and might represent either an accidental loss from a riverboat or a deliberate votive deposit in a liminal location, perhaps analogous to finds of medieval lead pilgrim badges from the Thames at London.[6] The five finds from Admaston, Congham, Cumberworth, Flinton, and Monks Kirby (Table 1, nos 3–7), however, all seem to have been deposited or lost in farmland on the outskirts of medieval villages. These diverse contexts suggest that the phenomenon of triple-folding was not restricted to monasteries or other ecclesiastical spaces, but extended into the villages and rural landscapes of late medieval and Tudor England.

The elaborate treatment afforded to triple-folded coins is clearly connected to beliefs concerning the cultural and symbolic meaning of triangles, a recurrent motif in medieval and early modern texts and visual culture. Triangles assumed a particular significance in medieval Christianity by merit of their three sides, which evoked the numerous divine triads present in the New Testament: Christ's three temptations, Peter's threefold denial, the three days separating the Crucifixion from the Resurrection, and Christ's three appearances to the disciples after his redemptive death.[7] Most importantly, however, the triangle functioned as a trinitarian symbol, representing the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a single Godhead, a fundamental doctrine of medieval Catholicism.[8] Trinitarian devotion was a central focus of lay piety in late medieval England, articulated through prayers in the name of the Holy Trinity as well as church and guild dedications, bequests in wills, and representations in church sculpture, manuscripts, portable objects, stained glass, and wall paintings.[9] In this context, finds of triple-folded coins might well represent a specifically trinitarian attempt to secure

[6] Spencer 1998. The Chiswick Bridge find is an unusual example of a post-Henrician folded coin, and presumably reflects the revival of the tradition during the Marian Counter-Reformation. This phenomenon is otherwise indicated by a passage from Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, whose account of the 1557 martyrdom of Alice Benden of Staplehurst, Kent, describes a 'shilling also of Philip and Mary ... which her father had bowed and sent her when she was first sent to prison', presumably in the hope of saving his daughter from execution: Cattley 1839, 328.

[7] Hopper 1938, 70.

[8] Molsdorf 1984, 5–6.

[9] Friedman 1995, 175; Stanbury 2008, 214.

intercession in times of need: rather than invoking a single saint through a single fold, the supplicant might call on the unified power of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit through three combined folds on a single coin.

The trinitarian symbolism of triple-folded coins is of special interest in light of the skewed chronology of the finds evidence, which is strongly concentrated in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This period coincides with the emergence of some distinctively anti-trinitarian strains of early European Protestantism, most notably in the theological writings of the Spaniard Michael Servetus (1509–53) and the Italian Faustus Soccini (1539–1604).[10] Seeds of anti-trinitarian belief in England can first be traced in late medieval Lollard communities, some of whom denied the divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit, but developed further during the course of the Reformation under the influence of dissident Protestant preachers in England's foreign churches and home-grown Arians and Anabaptists in towns like Colchester and London.[11] Despite heavy repression during the reigns of Edward VI (1547–53) and Mary, anti-trinitarianism remained influential in the early Elizabethan period, forcing the Bishop of Salisbury John Jewel to combat a 'large and inauspicious crop of Arians, Anabaptists, and other pests' when he assumed the see in 1559.[12] By the time of the Marian Counter-Reformation there is some evidence of a revival of traditional forms of trinitarian devotion in response to these heretical beliefs, reflected in Sir Thomas Pope's foundation of Trinity College Oxford in 1555 and Mary's own endowment of Trinity College Cambridge in 1554.[13] This tradition seems to have persisted among recusant Catholics into the reign of the Protestant Elizabeth, most famously in Sir Thomas Tresham's warrener's lodge at Rushton: a building lain out in 1593–97 on a triangular plan with three 33 ft long walls, each of which contained three windows and was topped by three gargoyles.[14] Seen in this light, the apparent peak of triple-folded coins in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is likely to be a reflection of broader trends in Catholic devotion during the late medieval and Tudor periods, which included a keen reaffirmation of trinitarian orthodoxy in the face of Protestant critique.

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[10] Lehner 2011 254–56.
[11] Hill 1977, 73; 1984, 96–7; Collinson 2006.
[12] Ayre 1850, 1241.
[13] Cross 2006.
[14] Isham 1970; Stocker and Stocker 1996; Fairey 2015.

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A HOARD OF ELIZABETHAN SILVER COINS FROM ST JOHN IN BEDWARDINE, WORCESTERSHIRE

MURRAY ANDREWS

Inside the front board of the first volume of the parish registers for St John in Bedwardine, Worcestershire, is an eighteenth-century handwritten note describing a group of Elizabethan silver coins found during grave-digging in 1722.[1] The text reads as follows:

> N.B. Upon Saturday March 31. 1722 John Bury Grave-Digger of the Parish of St John in Bedwardine, found at the Bottom of a Grave lying five yards north by west from the yew Tree two shillings and four sixpences of Queen Elizabeth's Coin. The Shillings have Cross's upon them and they are now in my possession witness my hand Abdias Taylor Vic.

The author of the note, Revd Abdias Taylor, was collated and installed as vicar of the church of St John in Bedwardine in July 1724, suggesting that the coins had been safely retained for at least two years after their discovery.[2] Their subsequent fate, however, is less clear. Taylor's will, dated 27 September 1745 and proved at Canterbury on 23 January 1746, makes no reference to coins of any kind, and no coins associated with this find are currently preserved in the church or in Worcester City Museum and Art Gallery.[3] In lieu of evidence to the contrary, it seems likely that the coins were sold to a jeweller, goldsmith, or collector, and have since been dispersed, lost, or destroyed.[4]

Despite its brevity, Revd Taylor's note contains important information relating to the contents and archaeological context of an otherwise unrecorded Tudor coin hoard. It is evident that the hoard consisted of six silver coins of Elizabeth I in two sizes, the larger of which were identified as 'two shillings' and the smaller as 'four sixpences'. The accuracy of these descriptions is difficult to judge, and it is possible that the references to 'shillings' and 'sixpences' are an anachronistic shorthand for Elizabethan coins of a similar size to eighteenth-century shillings (*c.*26 mm diameter) and sixpences (*c.*21 mm diameter), i.e. sixpences (*c.*25 mm diameter), groats (*c.*23 mm diameter), and/or threepences (*c.*19 mm diameter). This uncertainty has significant implications for the dating of the hoard. If the larger coins were indeed Elizabethan shillings, the *'Cross's upon them'* could be reasonably identified as Cross-Crosslet privy marks (1560–1), and the *terminus post quem* for the hoard would instead be set by the smaller Elizabethan sixpences, which were first introduced during Elizabeth's Third Coinage (1561–71). However, if the larger coins were actually Elizabethan sixpences, then the *'Cross's upon them'* might instead be Greek Cross (1578–80) or Latin Cross (1580–1) privy marks, setting the *terminus post quem* squarely within the period of Elizabeth's Fifth Coinage (1578–83).[5] This uncertainty also impacts the valuation of the hoard, which must have lain somewhere between 2*s.* 0*d.* and 4*s.* 0*d.* at the time of burial in the mid- to late

[1] Worcester, Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service, Mf. 299/1 BA 8287/1a(i) Ref. 985.
[2] Le Neve 1986, 26.
[3] The National Archives, PROB 11/744/266.
[4] Georgian Worcester was home to a small community of coin collectors, any of whom might have expressed an interest in Taylor's coins. Among their number was one Mr Sheriff of Worcester, whose 'very numerous' collection of locally-found coins was consulted by the city historian Valentine Green in the late eighteenth century; see Green 1796, 107.
[5] Brown, Comber, and Wilkinson 2019, 78.