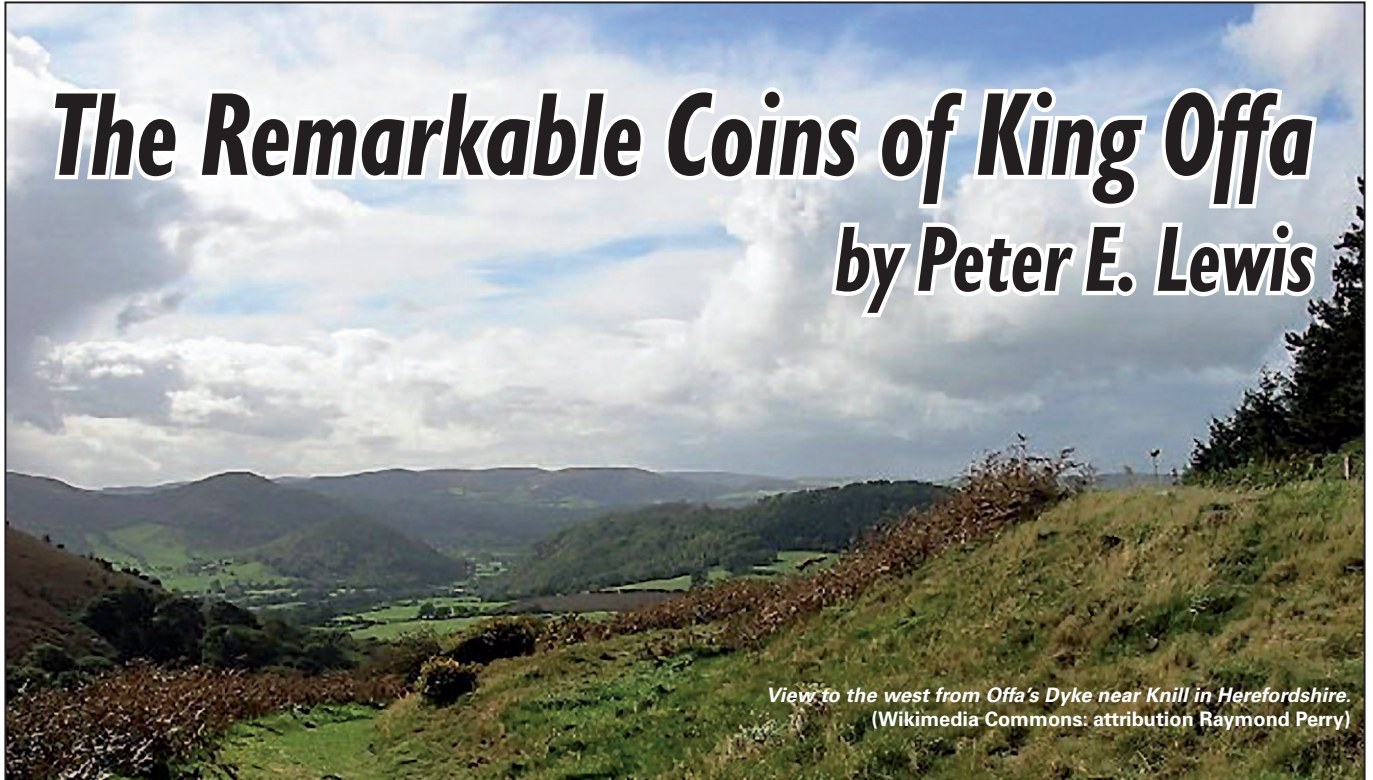


The Remarkable Coins of King Offa

by Peter E. Lewis



View to the west from Offa's Dyke near Knill in Herefordshire. (Wikimedia Commons: attribution Raymond Perry)

OFFA (Figure 1) was the king of Mercia (Figure 2) from 757 to 796 AD. His coins are remarkable for several reasons but most obviously for the imaginative designs that appear on the obverse and reverse of many of them. The designs are complicated but are based on the shape of a cross. We can assume that it was a Christian cross because by this time the Anglo-Saxons in England had been converted to Christianity. Through his coins Offa promoted the idea that he was a Christian king and that Mercia was a Christian kingdom. Of course we do not know if his Christian faith was genuine or just part of his political strategy. One way of determining this would be to assess what he actually did as ruler of Mercia because, after all, actions speak louder than words (or coins).

The coins of Alfred, who was king of Wessex from 871 to 899 AD, are rather plain in appearance and usually have only a tiny cross on them (Figure 3), but

we know from his actions that he lived his life according to his Christian faith. He worked to revive Christianity and learning. He translated several Christian books, including Pope Gregory's *Pastoral Care*, which was a handbook for bishops and contained the pope's advice about the need for education. But most of all he demonstrated his faith by forgiving his Viking enemy, Guthrum, after he defeated him at the Battle of Edington in 878 AD.

So what did Offa do when he was king of Mercia? Like all the Anglo-Saxon kings he was a warrior. He came to power after a period of civil war and went on to dominate Kent, Sussex and East Anglia. To protect his territory from the Celts in Wales he built the earthen barrier known today as Offa's Dyke. (Figure 4) It was a tremendous effort and it extended for many miles close to what is still the border between England and Wales. (Figure 5) He introduced a new

style of coinage: larger silver coins (pennies) with his name and title prominent on the obverse and the name of the moneyer on the reverse. Some of the coins have a portrait of his wife, Cynethryth, on them. (Figure 6) She was the only Anglo-Saxon queen ever depicted on a coin, which suggests that Offa had a respectful attitude to women. He wanted his kingdom of Mercia to have its own



Figure 1 – Silver penny of Offa by the moneyer Pendred minted at London or Canterbury. Diameter 17 mms. (Image courtesy of Heritage Auctions Inc., Jan. 2012 Auction, Lot 24272)



Figure 2 – Map of the kingdoms of Britain during Offa's reign. Anglo-Saxon in red, Celtic in grey, and the Picts in green. (Wikimedia Commons: author Sakurambo)

archbishop and he persuaded the pope to appoint an archbishop at Lichfield, which greatly reduced the power of the Archbishop of Canterbury in Kent.

When we consider Offa's actions there is nothing particularly Christian about them. Jesus, of course, respected women, as many of the stories in the Gospels testify, but respecting women was a moral quality that many pre-Christian and non-Christian men had. Offa's desire to have his own archbishop in Lichfield probably came from his wanting more power, not from a well-spring of Christian piety. Actually, when historians consider the life of Offa they do not see a pious Christian king like Alfred but a very worldly ruler who was at times quite ruthless. According to the English historian Simon Keynes, "Offa was driven by a lust for power, not a vision of English unity, and what he left was a reputation, not a legacy." So why all the crosses and

cross designs on the coins? Was Offa even a Christian?

Offa craved power, and this included spiritual power. With all the Christian symbolism on his coins he is saying that he has that power and you had better not mess with him. Being successful in war showed that the power was with him. Just as primitive people understood that spiritual power existed all around them, in trees, mountains, etc., Offa realized that this power could be harnessed for his own purposes. His Christian coins tap into this way of thinking.

To understand what being a Christian meant in the Middle Ages, and especially in the time of King Offa, one needs to know something of the prevailing worldview. The earth was flat, and there was a divine realm above (heaven) and a horrible place below (hell). On earth there was spiritual activity all around. To a

large extent the Church exerted its power over people by its ability to influence the spiritual realm and especially by fear of hell. Secular rulers co-opted this power to control the people.

With a few exceptions such as King Alfred, rulers and clergy had a very limited understanding of Christianity. The Bible was in Latin which only the well-educated could read. It would not be translated into English till the 14th century, and even if you could read Latin there were very few Bibles for you to read. You would find them only in monasteries and castles where the educated nobility dwelt. It was very expensive to



Figure 5 – Map showing Offa's Dyke and Wat's Dyke. Although little is known about Wat's Dyke it was probably built in about 820. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 3 – Silver penny of King Alfred by the moneyer Dudig. Diameter 20 mms. (Author's Collection)



Figure 4 – Offa's Dyke near Clun in south Shropshire. (Wikimedia Commons: photo by Chris Heaton)



Figure 6 – Silver penny of Offa by the moneyer Eoba. There is a bust of Cynethryth on the obverse and her name +C.FNEd.RFd.REGINA on the reverse. (Image: Triton V, Lot 2431)



Figure 7 – The coin in Figure 1 with colour added.



Figure 8 – The coin in Figure 6 with colour added.



Figure 9 – Silver penny of Offa by the moneyer Ealmund. Mint: London. Diameter 17 mms. (Image courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group, Auction 90, Lot 2370)



Figure 10 – The coin in Figure 9 with colour added.

produce a Bible: it took a scribe many months to carefully copy the letters in an existing Bible onto pages of parchment, and the parchment was made from calf skin through a long process.

The ordinary people learnt about Christianity from what they were told by the clergy and by seeing the pictures painted on the walls of churches. One suspects that there was little emphasis on Jesus's teaching about love and forgiveness. When Jesus spoke about love, which in Greek is *αγαπη* (agape), he meant a self-giving concern for others. It seems that for Offa his guiding principle was concern for self at the expense of others. Ultimately gaining power was his goal.

It could be argued that the cross on Offa's coins was all that anyone needed to know because it was a simple symbol that represented the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is the essential core of the Christian faith. Actually, having a simple faith in the essentials is all that matters. Otherwise Christianity would be only for the well-educated. With this in mind one should not judge the ordinary people of Offa's time or even Offa himself. But one needs to realize that Christianity was different in many ways from what it is today. One major difference is the idea of spiritual power. In the Middle Ages relics were greatly revered, and large numbers of pilgrims travelled great distances to visit



Figure 11 – Silver penny of Offa by the moneyer Egchun. Mint in East Anglia. 18 mms. (Image courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group, Auction 97, Lot 974)

the shrines of saints to see and preferably touch something belonging to them in order to get some of their spiritual power. Today it is generally recognized that most of the relics were fakes, but even as late as the 15th century there was an obsession with relics. Johann Gutenberg, before he invented printing with movable type in 1450, made little mirrors that pilgrims could hold up above the crowds when relics were displayed and thus capture the light from the relic and its spiritual power.

In the Middle Ages people were very superstitious and aware of spiritual

forces in their lives. Offa's coins with their crosses and sometimes weird designs might have been perceived as having spiritual power in themselves, much like relics. Let's see if we can increase the spiritual impact of Offa's coins by adding colour. If colour is added to the coin in Figure 1 the dragon above the king's head becomes more fierce, a frightening beast indeed. (Figure 7) On the reverse of the coin colour enhances the beauty of the angelic beings flying out from the dominant cross in the centre. If colour is added to the coin in Figure 6 the quality of Cynethryth's dress is emphasized

showing that she is truly a queen. (Figure 8) In the centre of the reverse there is the letter M for Merciorum (of the Mercians), but it looks like a face with large eyes peering out at the viewer. Could it be a spiritual being watching you?

Offa issued many non-portrait coins and on some of them colour brings out the designs strongly. On the obverse of a coin minted by the moneyer Ealmund there is a flower-like design at the ends of the arms of the cross, and the same design appears on the reverse. (Figures 9 and 10) On a coin of the moneyer Egchun there is a similar floriate cross with a Christian cross between OFFA and REX on the obverse, and a pretty crossed-triangles design on the reverse. (Figures 11 and 12). On a coin of the moneyer Wihtraed the arms of the cross look like axes (Figures 13 and 14) but it must be admitted that the original meaning of all these symbols is unknown today. Perhaps the most pious Christians of all were the men who actually designed these remarkable coins, because on some of them they do convey the idea of the power of the Cross in a visual way. They must have been inspired to create these designs. So it seems that despite all the ignorance the Christian faith was alive in England during the reign of King Offa.

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Figure 12 – The coin in Figure 11 with colour added.



Figure 13 – Silver penny of Offa by the moneyer Wihtraed. Mint in East Anglia. Diameter 19 mms. (Author's Collection)



Figure 14 – The coin in Figure 13 with colour added.

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