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Costen, MD and Costen, N  (2016) Trade and Exchange in Anglo-Saxon Wessex, C AD 600–780. *Medieval Archaeology*, 60 (1). pp. 1-26. ISSN 0076-6097

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00766097.2016.1147785>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

Version: Accepted Version

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Trade and Exchange in Anglo-Saxon Wessex, c ad 600–780

By MICHAEL D COSTEN¹ and NICHOLAS P COSTEN²

THIS PAPER ASSESSES the provenance and general distribution of coins of the period c ad 600–780 found in the west of Anglo-Saxon Wessex. It shows that the distribution of coin finds is not a function of the habits of metal detectorists, but a reflection of the real pattern of losses. In the second part of the paper, an analysis of the observed distributions is presented which reveals that the bulk of trade, of which the coins are a sign, was carried on through local ports and that foreign trade was not mediated through Hamwic, but came directly from the Continent. The distribution of coin finds also suggests an important export trade, probably in wool and woollen goods, controlled from major local centres. There are also hints of a potentially older trade system in which hillforts and other open sites were important.

INTRODUCTION

Discussion of trade and exchange in the middle Anglo-Saxon period has reached an advanced stage, and the progress in understanding the possible reach and consequences of recent discoveries has transformed our view of Anglo-Saxon society in the period ad 600–800. Most of the research has focused upon the eastern side of Britain, in particular upon discoveries in East Anglia, Lincolnshire and the south-east. The stage was really set in 1982 when Richard Hodges put forward his model of the growth of exchange and trade among the emerging 7th-century Anglo-Saxon kingdoms; he developed the thesis that the trade which took place was concentrated in particular localities which he labelled ‘emporia’.³ It seemed that there might be one of these central places for each of the newly forming Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, or at least the dominant ones. Their emergence in the late 7th century is closely linked to the appearance of the new silver penny coinage which became the dominant currency of northern Europe at this time.⁴ Thus Lundenwic served the Mercians, Ipswich the East Anglians and Hamwic the West Saxons. In the Hodges model, the ‘emporia’ represented control by the elite — especially kings — who monopolised international trade and for whom the distribution of elite goods among their warrior followers helped to cement relationships and enhance their power. Following the work of Chris Wickham, Tom Saunders saw the wics as part of the ‘tributary’ nature of early Anglo-Saxon polities — part of the ongoing transition from Late Antiquity to the medieval world and its ‘feudal mode’.⁵

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3 Hodges 1982.

4 Hodges 2007.

5 Wickham 1984; Saunders 2001, 13.

As recently as 1997, Christopher Scull characterised the economy of the 7th and 8th century as 'largely redistributive'.⁶ There is no doubt about the importance of many of these early places with planned streets and permanent occupation, but the discovery of so many coins at other sites, such as Tilbury on the Thames and Bawsey in Norfolk, has shown that the economy was much more monetised than has been recognised hitherto and that signs of coin and exchange were likely at many elite places which were not necessarily 'urban'.⁷ The later discovery of 'productive sites', which are open sites normally found by metal detectorists, has added a further layer of complexity, and shows that there was a very active network of trade and exchange covering at least the eastern side of Britain. Work on trading sites in Lincolnshire has shown the depth of insight possible with attention to the careful mapping of finds.⁸ Michael Metcalf's discussion of coin finds in the East Midlands has added to the pattern of 'productive sites', including Linton and Biddenham in Cambridgeshire, this last on the boundary with Bedfordshire, and Six Hills in Nottinghamshire, close to the Leicestershire border.⁹ The discoveries also show that the wics must be seen as part of a complex system which linked communities, and demonstrate the extent of travel and communications in 7th- and 8th-century Britain. The realisation that this coinage was used for commercial transactions, rather than simply as part of gift exchange, has also transformed our understanding of the nature of middle Anglo-Saxon society. This was certainly not a world in which economic relationships were expressed through 'markets', but neither was it a command economy. As this paper seeks to demonstrate, there was considerable flexibility in trading and exchange patterns. The flows of money do cast a light into some otherwise dark corners.

While these recent studies have revolutionised our view of middle Anglo-Saxon societies in the south-east, East Anglia and the East Midlands, less attention has been paid to the growth of trade and exchange within early Wessex, apart from the case of Hamwic.¹⁰ However, there is now an expanding corpus of coins which are now known to have been in circulation before being lost in England during the early medieval period and which are now available to study through the online Corpus of Early Medieval Coin Finds (EMC) maintained by the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, and the online database of the Portable Antiquities Scheme, run by the British Museum (PAS). Coins are durable items which can often be dated, though not always with great precision in this period, and are relatively commonly found. The quality of the evidence provided varies considerably, since each database is dependent upon information supplied by owners and finders of coins — these databases are not records of museum accessions, to which one can return when in doubt, but details of coins which often go to auction or into private collections, so that the information already on record is often all we can ever know about them. The coins used in this study are the remnants of the circulating coinage of western Wessex, the historic counties of Devon, Dorset, Wiltshire and Somerset, and cover the period c ad 600 to c ad 780, although material from the 9th century (c ad 782–870) will also be discussed briefly.

The coins have been identified, so that where possible their mint region, probable dating and their approximate location have been recorded. It is salutary to remember that the coins in the databases represent only a small proportion of those found and that a much greater number still lie undisturbed in the ground. It is reasonable to assume that the people of the middle Anglo-Saxon period who handled coin took as much care with a silver penny

6 Scull 1997, 274.

7 Pestell 2011.

8 Ulmschneider 2000.

9 Metcalf 2011.

10 Hodges 1982; Morton 1992; Hinton 1996; Hill and Cowie 2001; Hinton 1994, 33–5.

as a modern street-market trader might with a ten-pound note. A relatively small proportion of the currency circulating was irretrievably lost. The coin recovered thus represents a tiny part of that once in circulation, and even a very sparse distribution of finds, as for instance in Somerset and Devon, suggests that even there, there were plenty of coins around, though nothing like as many as in the 'hotspots' of Dorset and Wiltshire.

The central arguments in this paper are twofold. First, that the distribution of coin finds in Wessex is broadly representative of their loss; that the distribution really reflects the loss of coin and therefore its use, and is not simply a record of metal detectorists' hunting habits. Secondly, that the distributions can be used to argue for a lively trade from the late 7th century into the mid-9th, which was in part international, based upon entry points along the eastern coast of Dorset and the Hampshire coast on the western side of what later became the New Forest. This trade, it will be argued, carried up into Wiltshire and probably connected with movements along the Thames Valley. However, it did not much affect Somerset and Devon, which were effectively cut off from this activity and received their trade and exchange, such as it was, via the west-facing Somerset river system and for Devon the rivers of the south coast. It will also be argued that the discernible patterns of finds suggest that the connections with the trading site at Hamwic during the 7th and 8th century were no more important than the more 'international' connections, and that like these, they were chiefly carried on by sea.

THE RELIABILITY OF THE EVIDENCE

There are of course an increasing number of studies using material from the PAS and from the EMC. However, even as recently as 2013 Alice Thomas admitted to some doubt about the reality of the coin distributions she addressed in her paper on the coastal zone between the Humber and the Wash in the middle Anglo-Saxon period,¹¹ and there is a tendency among some commentators to view a map of the distribution of coin finds as a map of the activities of metal detectorists. There is a need, therefore, to first set out the case for regarding the distribution of coin as shown in this paper as a true reflection of the distribution of casual losses during the period in question.

This paper uses material from the two major sources mentioned above, and in addition some material is drawn from the Historic Environment Records of the four counties where it does not duplicate the coins and objects from the two major sources. The suite of material under consideration thus falls into two samples. The first comprises 204 coins that represent all coin finds within the study area as of April and May 2014 when the databases were interrogated. Some coins in the databases have only the vaguest of references to their location, so that the discovery site may be listed as 'Wiltshire'. This inaccuracy springs mostly from the reluctance of the finders, almost invariably metal detectorists, to reveal their 'hunting grounds'. Others are museum acquisitions, often of some antiquity and not provided with a decent provenance. These coins, 13 in number, were excluded from consideration, leaving the sample of 191 because they each have at least a four-figure grid reference and thus can be located within 1 sq km. They were also chosen because their minting dates span the period c ad 600 to 880; the period which saw the greatest activity before the sharp diminution in the minting of currency which took place in the late 9th century and which was not reversed until the mid-10th century.

The second sample consists of 200 objects, found within the study area, against which the distribution of the coins was tested, and consists of lead, bronze, silver and gold material,

¹¹ Thomas 2013.

mostly the broken remnants of dress fittings and fastenings, ornaments such as brooches and decorative parts of weapons — all the detritus of Anglo-Saxon daily life which has not corroded away. They were chosen from the PAS records and selected because their assigned dates are contemporaneous with the date range of the coins.

Discussion with a trusted source within the metal-detecting community suggests that the number of coins reported and therefore available for study is far outweighed by those which are never reported and are either retained privately or put into circulation among collectors. There is probably no bias in the retention of coins except, perhaps, that the very finest and least worn examples may be kept back, so such unreported material can be regarded as 'undiscovered'. Objects are probably even more under-reported than coins. Many metal detectorists get rid of such material as soon as it is found, so that it is either dropped back into the soil or disposed of nearby. Here, it is likely that people keep and report 'objects' which are regarded as 'interesting', while superficially unrecognisable material is thrown away. Both coins and objects are therefore a sample of the finds which are actually made, but would not seem to have a real bias in retention and reporting, except that in one case the best is kept back and in the other the worst is thrown away. These finds are also likely to be a random sample of the material still lying in the ground. Since the objective of this study is based upon the distribution of coins, not on the number in circulation, the failures of retention or reporting are not material and are likely in any case to be random. The question is, of course: is the distribution of coin as shown on the maps a reflection of the real distribution of the material still in the ground, or does it merely reflect the habits of the finders? Do metal detectorists work where they know there will be coin or do they work everywhere they can — do they have hunting territories?

The coins and the 'objects' have been mapped on separate but identical maps and recorded as the number of coins and the number of objects in each 10 sq. km (Figs 1–3). The two samples were tested one against another on the premise that all were collected by metal detectorists. If the distributions were statistically identical, or closely allied, this would suggest that the distribution merely reflected the habits of the collectors. If the two samples were not connected statistically, then knowing that all the material was collected by the same group of people, we can safely assume that distribution of the sample items does reflect their occurrence in the landscape, not the behaviour of the collectors — that for instance, they only collect where there is extensive plough-land, or where they have reason to suspect that there might be coins to be found. The preliminary statistical analysis does in fact show that the two populations are not closely related. The distributions of objects and of coins are separate entities, with their own profiles. They are not simply a reflection of the places in which metal detectorists have worked.

THE TESTS

The data were analysed using chi-square tests. The chi distribution describes the behaviour of categorical data, allowing assessment of the similarity between expected and observed distributions. In this case, it considers the sum of the differences between the number of occurrences expected in equally sized areas, if the probability of occurrence at each point is constant, and the numbers of occurrences actually observed.

The first test was applied separately on the 'objects' and coins. For the 200 'objects', $\chi^2 = 192.96$, d.f. = 31, $P < 0.01$. For the 191 coins, $\chi^2 = 281.63$, d.f. = 31, $P < 0.01$. In both cases, the statistics reveal that it is very unlikely that the distributions observed have been generated by a process which is likely to produce finds in all parts of the study area. Certain regions are more likely to produce finds than others. There are 31° of freedom, since we have to join the 10 sq km together to ensure an average of at least five items per region.

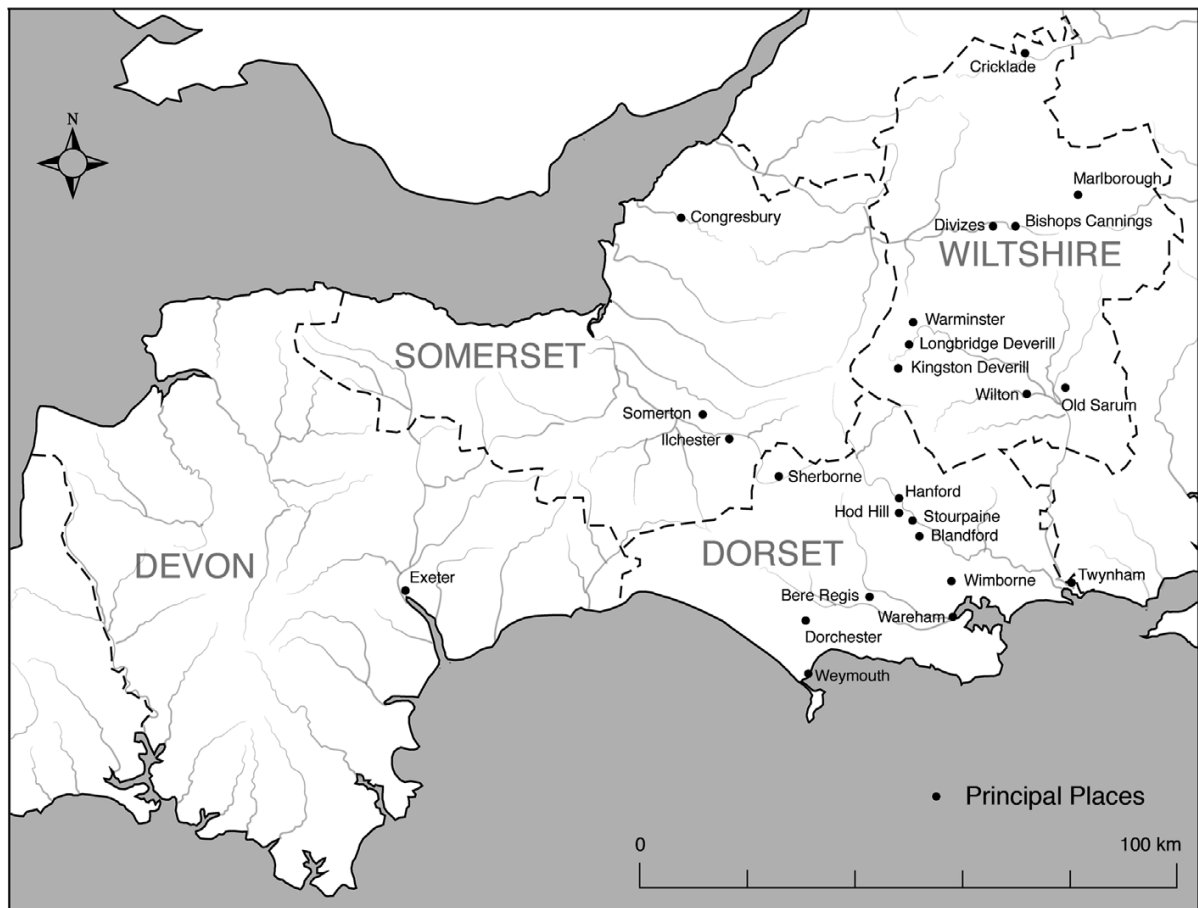


FIG 1
Principal places mentioned in the text. Illustration by S Grice.

The second test compares the two types of find against each other — it treats them as examples of a single type of ‘find’, the distribution of which varies across the regions we have established. It then asks if the observed distributions are likely, on the basis that they are just random deviations from this single ‘find’ distribution (of course, we scale the joint distribution to take account of the different total numbers of ‘objects’ and coins). Again, here $\chi^2 = 75.65$, d.f. = 27, $P < 0.01$. Note that there are fewer degrees of freedom in this case, as some regions have to be discarded as they have an expected count of zero (i.e. neither type of find is present).

The conclusion of this test is that the process generating coin finds and ‘object’ finds is different — it is very unlikely that they are simply generated by metal detectorists happening on coins when they are actually present in the soil evenly mixed with ‘objects’. Either the coins are present in different proportions in different places, or detectorists in one part of the south of England are more likely to report coins rather than objects than in other parts of the region.

It is possible that the almost complete lack of data from Devon and West Dorset, for example, is due to a lack of detecting, perhaps the result of the rugged terrain and lack of arable, but that does not invalidate the distributions. In practice, there are good grounds from discussions with metal detectorists to believe that metal-detecting does go on in these regions. However, the important point is not that some areas lack all material, but that the two types of objects, coins and non-ferrous detritus, have different distributions and that it is likely that as the pattern is filled in by more collection, the differences between the two bodies of material will be maintained. This is a real sample of two different types of material, which are clearly related to one another, since they were lost by the same populations during the same time span, but by those with different geographies

and different social, cultural and economic identities. 'Objects' can be said to represent the rubbish from domestic sites and reflect the prevalence of such material among the general population. Coin finds represent the losses by people engaged in using money. Obviously, the two groups must overlap, but they are not identical. The objects used in everyday life were widely dispersed, showing that cultural habits were reasonably uniform throughout the whole region and that there were means to distribute such objects throughout the population. Coins, on the other hand, are not so uniformly distributed and are a sign of a distinct range of activities which did not occur everywhere through the region, or which if they did, proceeded at too low a level to have left a mark as yet discernible.

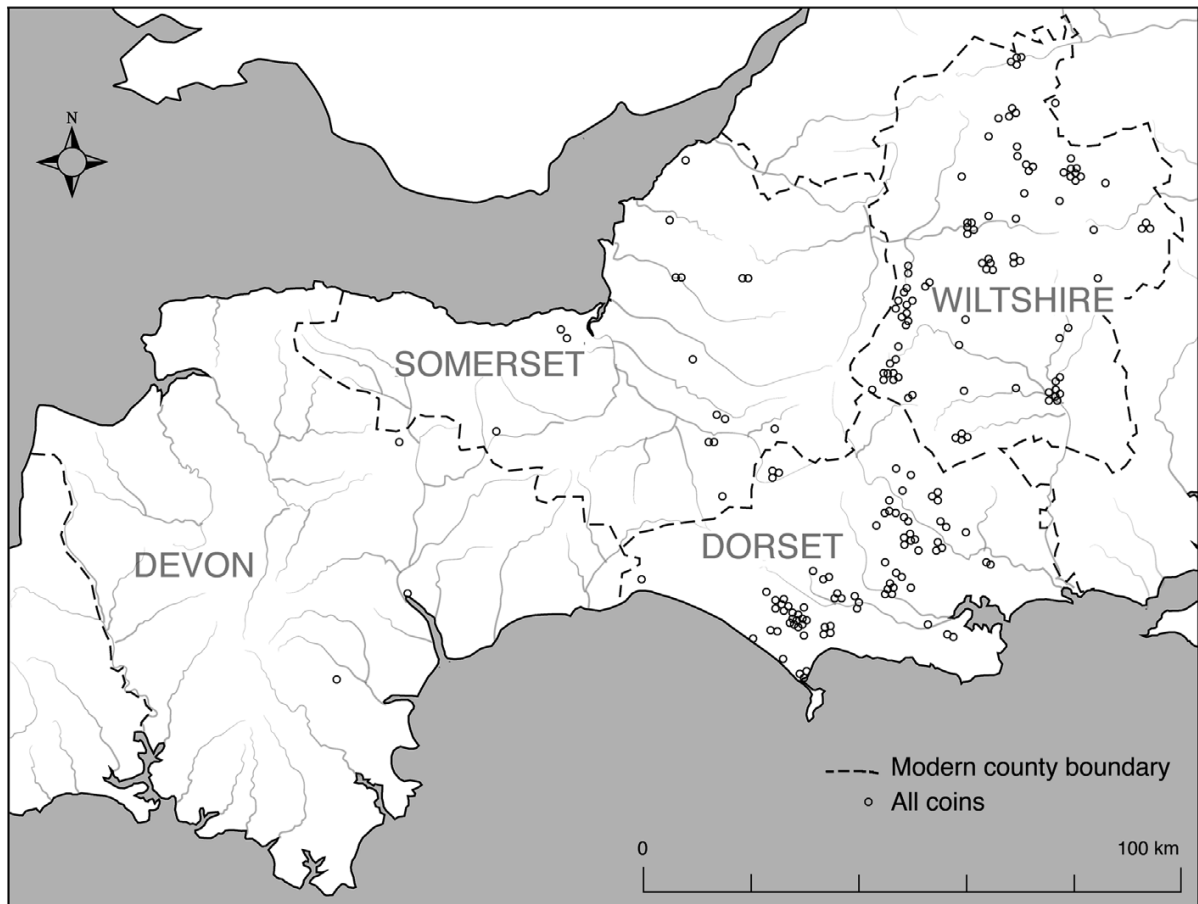


FIG 2
The distribution of all the coins used in the study. Illustration by S Grice.

THE EARLIEST COINS

Prior to the early 7th century, the Anglo-Saxons did not use money and produced no coins. Those coins which have been discovered and which date from the 6th century are all continental issues. These were gold coins and were nearly all Merovingian. The first 'English' coins seem to have been struck in Kent, perhaps in the very early years of the 7th century, followed by some very small issues perhaps from c ad 630.¹² For the study area, there are only two examples dated before ad 600. They are both coins which could have been in circulation after that date and both are from Gaul. One, from Rodez, has no find site and therefore cannot be mapped. The other, a Merovingian issue, could have been produced at any time between c ad 590 and c ad 670. One cannot deduce whether they were used in exchange or gift, or were simply ornaments.

¹² Grierson and Blackburn 1986, 161.

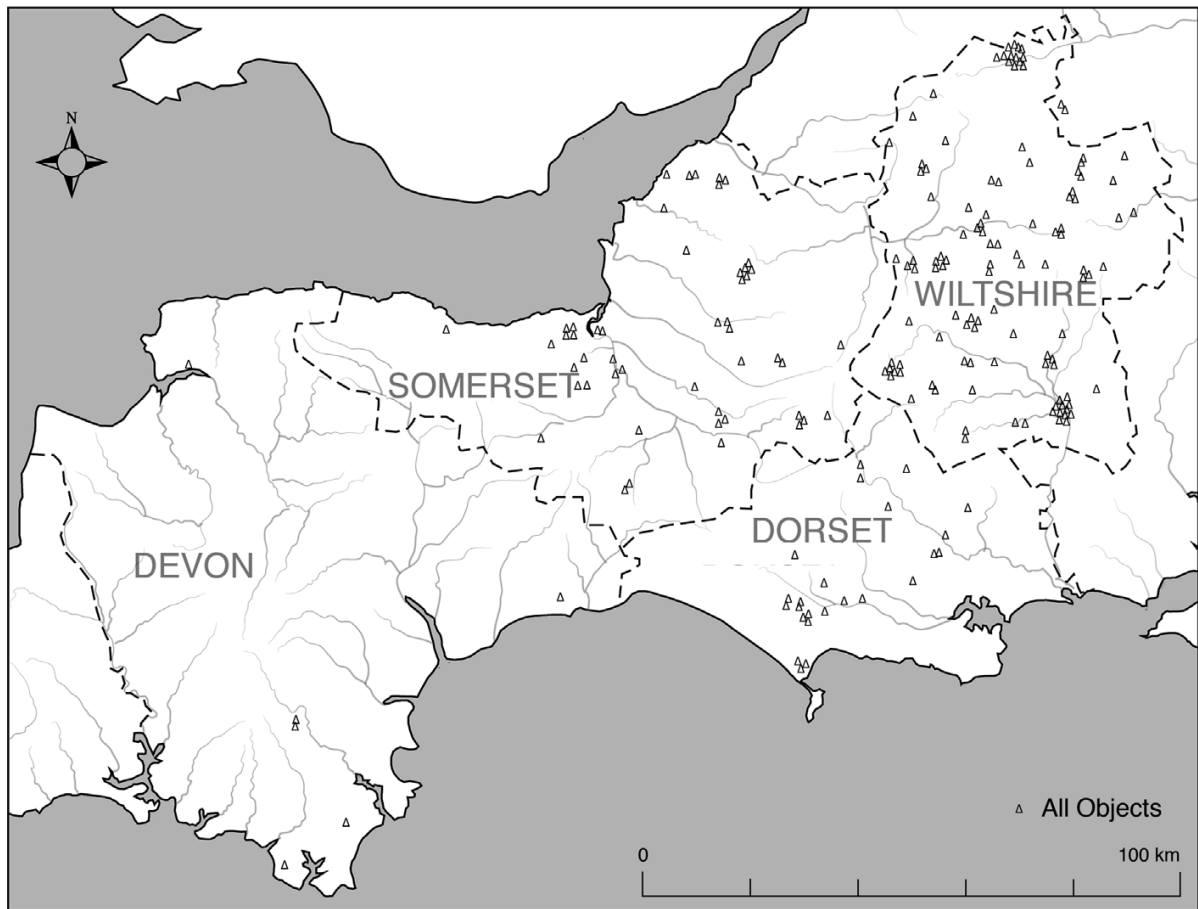


FIG 3
The distribution of all the objects used in the study. Illustration by S Grice.

The first English coins, like continental issues, were of gold and the quantity struck was clearly limited.¹³ The quality of these gold coins declined rapidly as gold became increasingly scarce throughout Europe.¹⁴ However, by the later part of the 7th century, the late 660s or 670s, a new silver coinage — early pennies, now often called sceattas — was in circulation which included an influx of sceattas from Frisia and northern Francia. These too were produced in silver as part of a general move towards the silver currency which was to dominate northern European economies throughout the Anglo-Saxon period and beyond.¹⁵ Many of the coins minted in Frisia may have come from Dorestad, though this was not the only source, and the total number of coins from all sources circulating in north-western Europe was probably very large. These pennies form the bulk of the finds and, as in other parts of the country, the later 7th and first half of the 8th century was a period when a very great number of coins were

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Blackburn 1995, 539.

¹⁵ Spufford 1988, 27–30.



FIG 4
Finds of coins dated c ad 500–699. Illustration by S Grice.

in circulation. Michael Metcalf long since demonstrated that the volume of the currency in the 8th century was likely to have been in the ‘tens of millions’.¹⁶ Discussing the generalised pattern of finds across England, Mark Blackburn is clear that the primary sceattas of the late 7th century mark the beginnings of a rise in coin circulation which was followed by a much larger increase in the first half of the 8th century and a subsequent sharp fall in the mid-century. The crisis in the mid-8th century was partly reversed by Offa in the 780s, but thereafter the decline in the number of finds suggests a decline in the size of the currency to a low at the end of the 9th century.¹⁷ The plots of coin discoveries in the four counties are in line with this observation.

The finds for the early period in Wessex are necessarily few in number (Fig 4). There are three in Dorset and five in Wiltshire. The Dorset coins are in the eastern part of the county: one is at Weymouth, one at Hanford and one at Sixpenny Handley. In Wiltshire, there is one each at Alverdiston, Salisbury, Shalborne, Warminster and Wilton. It is impossible to draw any conclusions from such a meagre sample, except to note that western Dorset, Somerset and Devon have no finds at all. Clearly, whatever brought these coins into Wiltshire and eastern Dorset was specific to that area and did not affect the lands further west. It is also noteworthy that Anglo-Saxon penetration of these westerly parts of Wessex did not start until the mid-7th century and that may have influenced access to early trade using coins.

¹⁶ Metcalf 1967.

¹⁷ Blackburn 2011.

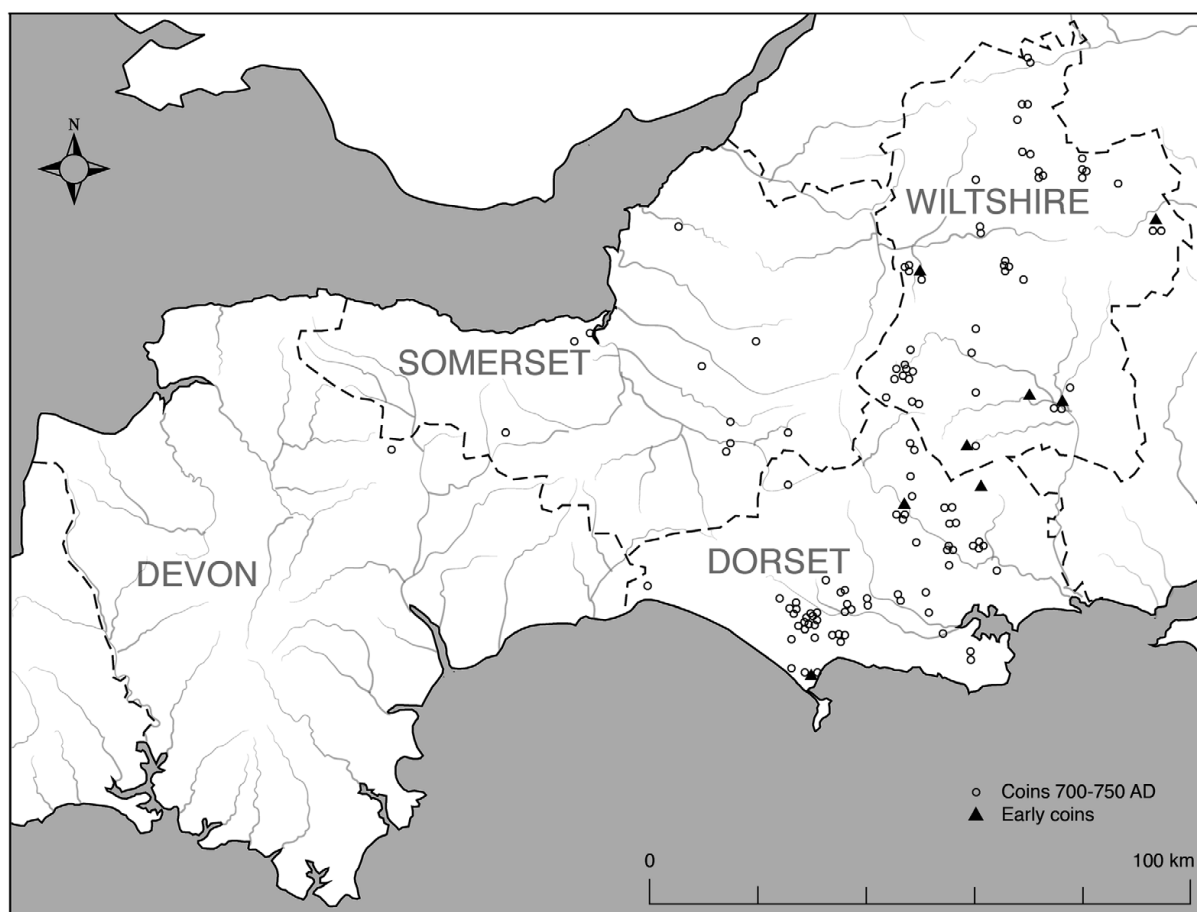


FIG 5

Finds of coins dated c ad 700–750. Finds of earlier coins have been added for comparison. Illustration by S Grice.

POINTS OF ENTRY

The ‘golden period’ for coin use, loss and discovery is of course the 8th century. Fig 5 shows the finds up to ad 750, with those of the pre-700 period inserted for comparison. In Dorset, it seems quite clear that the coins are concentrated in three major groups. Group one is centred upon Dorchester. ‘Dorchester’ is given as the find-site for no fewer than ten of the coins, and other settlements close by, Martinstown, Bradford Peverell, Charminster, Winterborne Monkton, and West Stafford, also contributed a combined 13 coins. All these places are within a 6 km radius of central Dorchester and may have been part of its extended estate in the mid-Anglo-Saxon period. Twenty-three coins from a total of 191, 12% of the total, shows that throughout the 8th century Dorchester must be regarded as a major centre for exchange and trade. The report in *Æthelweard’s Chronicle* that three Danish ships arrived ‘at the port’ between ad 784 and 800 and turned out to be pirates rather than traders, probably illustrates a normal part of local activity (apart from the killings). The king’s reeve from Dorchester, on receiving reports of the ships, went to the ‘port’ and ordered the men he assumed were merchants to proceed to the town. This must have been the usual sequence of events in the 8th century.¹⁸ The port was clearly Weymouth or somewhere near to it. The twin towns of Weymouth and Melcombe Regis are both post-Conquest foundations.¹⁹

¹⁸ Campbell 1962, 26–7.

¹⁹ Beresford 1988, 429–30.

Waymouthe as an estuary was supposedly noted in 939, and the mouth of the river was contained within the two manors of Wyke Regis and Radipole.²⁰ Wyke was royal land in 1066, as a part of the manor of Portland, as was a part of Radipole.²¹ The place-name evidence here may be significant. 'Portland', which gave its name to the whole of a large manor, is now a name confined to the island of Portland, but Fägersten suggested that the 'land' element might refer to 'an estate'. It could, therefore, refer to more than simply the island of Portland.²² The 'port' element is of course Old English port, a harbour, from the Latin portus.²³ The place is first mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for ad 837 where it is simply referred to as 'port'.²⁴ The name need not therefore have been attached directly to the island at this point, though it certainly was much later in 1086, where it was porland.²⁵ Wyke as part of the Portland estate might also have a significant name, since the wic element has been connected with trading sites, with the meaning 'an extra-mural place for trading'.²⁶ There are three coin finds in the immediate Weymouth area and another not far away at Chickerell.

All these finds fall within a large tract of land which was exploited as part of the royal estates around Dorchester and it seems reasonable to regard Weymouth or somewhere in its immediate vicinity as a port for Dorchester. It is probably impossible to disentangle Weymouth, Wyke and Portland now, especially as the sites of the coin finds are so imprecise. Wyke, for instance, included the river mouth on the southern side and the later founded town of Weymouth stood within the parish of Wyke. The ships of the day could easily have dried out on the mud close to the shore somewhere inside the river mouth. That such sites did exist in this period is amply demonstrated by the site of Sandtun in Kent, close to West Hythe and below the remains of the Roman Fort of the Saxon Shore at Lympne. Here, a site beside a now defunct inlet of the sea has been shown to have been a landing point for goods. It had the advantage of having access to a Roman road, Stone Street, which ran directly north to Canterbury.²⁷ Although in the Weymouth/Dorchester area we have nothing like the variety of material associated with Sandtun, the very large concentration of coin finds around Dorchester strongly indicates that the trade which brought the coins came by sea through waymouthe. It had, like Sandtun, a Roman road, giving a direct connection with Dorchester which is still in use today. It has been suggested that wics served chiefly as toll collection centres and Dorchester may well have been such a centre, even if we cannot regard it as a conventional wic. It was certainly a villa regalis, with an important church at Fordington, just outside the town walls, and was a settlement visited and used regularly by the Wessex kings.²⁸ This would explain why the 'merchants' were required to go to Dorchester and agrees with the observations of Grenville Astill on the process of early urbanism.²⁹ Ine's Laws deal with the regulation of foreigners who may have been traders and merchants.³⁰ Whether these laws were of the early 8th century is not clear, but they certainly represent legislation of the 8th century and were still deemed relevant in King Alfred's time, when the rules concerning traders suggest that they travelled in a substantial group including men who were in some way servants. Such groups needed to be approved by a royal official at a public meeting.³¹

20 Sawyer 1968, no 391.

21 Thorn and Thorn 1983, 1.1.

22 Mills 1977, 217.

23 Smith 1970, vol 2, 71.

24 Swanton 1996, 62.

25 Thorn and Thorn 1983, 1.1.

26 Coates 1999, 88.

27 Gardiner 2001.

28 Keen 1984, 207.

29 Pestell 2011; Astill 1991, 101–3.

30 Whitelock 1955, ch 32, n 25.

31 Ibid, ch 33, n 34.

The second point of entry was through Poole Harbour to Wareham. The coins then spread up the river valleys from the entry point as far as Puddletown and its environs. Some 14 coins come from Bere Regis, Burleston, Tolpuddle, Puddletown, Piddlehinton and Piddletrenthide. At Wareham, the British inscribed stones of the 7th and 8th century suggest continuity of Christian activity from the pre-Anglo-Saxon period.³² The minster church is likely to have predated the construction of the Alfredian burh and Teresa Hall adduces the burial of King Beorhtric at Wareham in 802 as strong evidence for the existence of the church by the beginning of the 9th century.³³

Twynham (now Christchurch) provides the third major point of seaborne entry. Christchurch, the minster which dominated the settlement, had its parochia to the east of Dorset, in Hampshire.³⁴ However, the trend of coin discoveries is along the rivers to the north-west, in Dorset, and not eastward into Hampshire. The Dorset Stour and its tributaries provided the route for the distribution of coins at Wimborne, Charlton Marshall, Blandford, Winterborne Kingston, Winterborne Whitchurch, Winterborne Zelston, Turnworth, Witchampton, Iwerne Minster and Stourpaine, a total of 16.

These three entry points are extremely important and they focus attention upon eastern Dorset and its coast. Other less important entry points also existed. In Somerset, the principal avenue for transport and trade would seem to be the river system, dominated by the basin of the Parrett, with its tributaries, the Tone and the Yeo (Fig 2). This would explain the coins found near the mouth of the Parrett and those in the Ilchester area and at Ilchester itself, as well as the finds at Sherborne, also in a river valley which is part of the Parrett basin. There is other evidence to support this view which suggests that Ilchester served as a major transshipment and trading site in the middle Anglo-Saxon period.³⁵ Outliers to the north of the Mendips, Congresbury, Portishead and Chewton Mendip, also had access to the Bristol Channel. It is notable that north-eastern Somerset has no finds, while the concentration in western Wiltshire stops abruptly at the border between the two counties. The two counties were clearly members of two different trade distribution systems in the 7th and the 8th century.

Devon seems to be a land apart. There are so few finds that all that can be said is that the two on the southern coast, one at Teignbridge and the other at Exeter, are the result of seaborne traffic which made use of the river estuaries and rias, but how far trade might have reached must await further discoveries. The lack of coin finds in Devon is consistent with what is known about finds of later periods. They are extremely rare.

Consideration of the three Dorset entry points would suggest that Dorchester should be regarded as pre-eminent, with a port at Weymouth and the royal vill of Dorchester as a grouping which would have allowed the king to control tolls demanded from merchants. Both Wareham and Twynham, on the other hand, were the sites of important minsters. John Blair has pointed to the connection between the wealth of the early Anglo-Saxon kings and the foundation of so many minsters.³⁶ He also argues that minsters were often centres of considerable wealth with signs of a significant 'consumer culture', and that many of them developed as substantial economic centres, often able to

32 RCHME 1970, 310–12.

33 Hall 2000, 14–15.

34 Hase 1994, 62.

35 Costen 2010.

36 Blair 2005, 84.

exploit positions on rivers or close to outlets to the sea.³⁷ There is good evidence from elsewhere in middle Anglo-Saxon England that ecclesiastical sites, particularly the earliest minster sites, do have strong trading connections and they can be seen as influencing factors in the trade patterns associated with emporia.³⁸ It may be that these two minsters were either founded to take advantage of the trade and tolls already available at these two places, or that their foundation was intended to encourage trade through those points. Similarly, it has been suggested that there are clear signs that Ilchester in Somerset, which was certainly the site of a minster, acted as a port on the river Yeo before the establishment of the burh and trading centre within the old Roman town.³⁹ Here, the royal vill at Somerton nearby may have used Ilchester and its minster as a station for toll collection, while the Fosse Way and the Roman road to Dorchester provided easy travel.

INTERNAL DISTRIBUTION

Distribution from these entry points in Dorset and Somerset up river valleys and basins presents little in the way of problems of interpretation, but when we move further north into Wiltshire the patterns become more complex. In the east of the county, there are a great many coins described as being found near Salisbury. Six are from 'Salisbury' itself which may indicate discoveries close to Old Sarum, with a find at Wilton and two at Ford, 2 km to the east of Old Sarum on the road to Winchester where it crosses the Bourne. One of the coins from 'Salisbury' is from Marseille and was minted between ad 600 and 675, while the Wilton example was an early London coin of ad 600–675 (Fig 2). While these coins might have come via Twynham, it seems just as possible that they were carried along the Roman road from Winchester to Old Sarum and on to Wilton and that they are signs of an overland route from Hampshire into Wiltshire at an early date. In 1066, Old Sarum was a manor of the Bishop of Salisbury and was a large 50-hide estate.⁴⁰ The borough of Salisbury at the Old Sarum hillfort was an 11th-century phenomenon and Jeremy Haslam argues that Old Sarum was re-fortified by King Alfred as a burh and that subsequently, when the estate was granted to the bishop, the king reserved the burh for himself. He also argues that Wilton, the royal burh and a monastic site, needs to be seen alongside Old Sarum as part of the royal estate complex and that Wilton should be regarded as the major centre, which was established as a defended burh site along with urban development in the time of Edward the Elder. Old Sarum, he concludes, did not become an urban centre in the 10th century.⁴¹ It may be that in the later 7th century and during the 8th century Old Sarum acted as a trading centre, perhaps as the site of a fair. Unfortunately, we do not know the precise find-sites for these coins. Old Sarum itself would seem unlikely, since metal-detecting would never be permitted there, but coins found in the neighbourhood do indicate intense activity locally. We might then see Wilton as the settlement with the king's residence and a monastic presence, and the old hillfort site as the meeting point for merchants and traders, well provided with Roman roads which meet there, removed from the royal site, but still within a convenient and controllable distance.

North of Salisbury Plain, there is a broad distribution which runs up to Cricklade in the far north and to Marlborough in the north-east. Cricklade was a burh constructed as part of the defences of Wessex, either in the late Alfredian period, or during the time of Edward the Elder. It was the site of a minster church and also stands beside a Roman road and close to

37 Blair 2005, 204, 254–61; Astill 2006, 238.

38 Palmer 2003, 51–3.

39 Costen 2011, 149–50.

40 Thorn and Thorn 1979, 3.4.

41 Haslam 1984, 122–9.

a crossing of the Thames.⁴² This road ran from Winchester via Marlborough to Cirencester. Cricklade, very close to this road, is also proximate to the boundary with Oxfordshire and thus to Mercia.⁴³ It should not, therefore, be a surprise that it has four coin finds and a substantial quantity of metalwork finds also. Cricklade may have been a major point for trade and exchange across the boundary between the two Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and a route towards the trade of the Thames Valley and north-westward towards Cirencester, Gloucester and Worcester. A minster would, perhaps, have provided an agreed neutral point for meeting and exchange. The quite dense concentration of coins across northern Wiltshire might also suggest that traders entered this area from Berkshire and northern Hampshire and were perhaps able to use Cricklade as a toll point. The distribution of finds within Hampshire shows that there would be no impediment to trade running north-westwards into north-east Wiltshire and from there to Cricklade and into Mercia. One question, of course, would be what might be the objects of trade and an answer might be 'salt'. John Maddicott has assembled a powerful case for a Mercian trade, largely controlled by the Mercian kings, in which salt from Droitwich formed a major component.⁴⁴ Although there is a Salterton in Wiltshire, in Durnford parish, there is no indication of salt-working there, even in Domesday Book.⁴⁵ Salthrop House, in Wroughton parish in north-eastern Wiltshire is *salteharpe* in 1086.⁴⁶ This is 'salt sieve'.⁴⁷ It does lie close to the Roman road which runs from Gloucester to Winchester and so might well be connected with the trade. Wiltshire must have needed to import its salt, but Dorset and Devon much later had salt-workings along the coast and it is possible that this trade already existed in the 8th century.⁴⁸ A further speculation might be slaves, a topic discussed further below.

WEALTHY SITES

So far we have considered the coins in terms of their movement and the possible trade routes they may indicate. Broadly, the seaward entry points allowed for penetration deep into the interior, but by the time we reach the more northern and western parts of Wiltshire the coast has become quite distant. Concentrations of coins need to be explained in a different way, in terms perhaps of concentrations of exchange and trade rather than distribution. Certain 'nodes' do stand out.

In Dorset, there is a grouping of three finds at Hod Hill, and very close on the northern side of Hod Hill, at Hanford, a Merovingian coin of c ad 590–670. Two very early Anglo-Saxon brooches were discovered not far from the fort. Both can be dated to the mid-5th century or earlier, long before Dorset came under the control of the nascent West Saxon kingdom.⁴⁹ Hod Hill is in Stourpaine parish where there are two late 8th-century coins reported. Since this Iron-Age hillfort was not inhabited in the 8th century, it may be that it was used as a fair or market. Bruce Eagles and Catherine Mortimer suggest that the brooches might be the result of a wealthy British warlord employing Saxon mercenary troops and clearly this suggestion needs to be taken seriously.⁵⁰ However, it might also

42 Pitt 2003, 59; Hill and Rumble 1996, 199–200.

43 Ordnance Survey 1973.

44 Maddicott 2005.

45 Gover, Mawer and Stenton 1939.

46 Thorn and Thorn 1979, 27.8.

47 Ibid.

48 Darby and Welldon Finn 1967, 390.

49 Eagles and Mortimer 1994.

50 Ibid, 138–9.

be the case that the hillfort was a traditional market site of great antiquity and that the brooches represent early traded objects, coming up the Stour from Hengistbury. The point is reinforced by Philip Grierson's and Mark Blackburn's remark on the Hod Hill coin finds and also their reference to similar discoveries at other hillforts in the south, St Catherine's Hill near Winchester and Walbury Camp in Berkshire, as well as the likely use of Old Sarum hillfort for the same purpose.⁵¹

Just a few kilometres further north into Wiltshire there is a very substantial group of coins in the Deverill Valley. There are seven at Kingston Deverill and a further example from Longbridge Deverill. It is noteworthy that Kingston Deverill has also produced seven items in the object category. All this may of course be the result of assiduous search by a metal detectorist, but the material is there to be found. Here an original estate of 'Deverill' was broken up and quite large parts were eventually received by Glastonbury Abbey.⁵² The *De Antiquitate* also notes an Osfrith who granted a ten-hide estate of Monkton Deverill to the abbey.⁵³ A reconstitution of the estate from Domesday Book entries shows that the original estate had contained at least 40 hides, perhaps more. It was probably dispersed by the Wessex kings in the 9th and 10th centuries.

Slightly to the north-west of the Deverills, there is a marked concentration of finds around Warminster. The estate can be identified by its name as the site of a major church settlement, while the name Westbury, just a few kilometres to the north, may be a reference to the existence of a royal burh, in this case the 'western' one. Warminster, Westbury and West Ashton, close by Westbury, were all three 40-hide estates in 1066, lying close together near the south-western border of the county.⁵⁴ Both Westbury and Warminster were royal lands and West Ashton belonged to Romsey Abbey as part of their estate of Steeple Ashton.⁵⁵ In the mid-10th century, King Edgar granted that estate to himself.⁵⁶ He was probably converting the land into bookland preparatory to making a grant of it. It looks, therefore as if these three estates were ancient royal land. Warminster was not hidated, but surveyed in plough-lands, suggesting either that it had been royal land for a very long time, and may be regarded as part of the king's core estates in the shire, or that the ancient minster had originally been free of tribute and so never hidated. If that were true, then a case might be made for Warminster as an ecclesiastical trading place. Alternatively, this may be an example of a high status royal estate grouping which was already a site of exchange and trade in the early 8th century. Taken together, there is a concentration of finds which runs from East Knoyle up to Westbury. This looks like a rich area in the 8th century.

At Bishops Cannings, the site of a minster church, the bishop of Salisbury had a very large estate of 70 hides in 1066.⁵⁷ It is not clear when the estate passed to the bishop, though it is likely that he received it in the early 10th century. It clearly had a long history as a major territory. Its name is of the 'ingas' type, 'the people or followers of Cana', and is thus a name describing a group of people rather than a geographical unit and is likely to have been formed close to the period when Old English became the dominant language in the area, perhaps in the mid-6th century.⁵⁸ Large

51 Grierson and Blackburn 1986, 168; Hinton 1994, 33.

52 Sawyer 1968, no 1714; Scott 1981, 113.

53 Scott, 1981, 113.

54 Thorn and Thorn 1979, 1.4, 1.16, 15.20.

55 VCH 1965, 198.

56 Sawyer 1968, no 727 of ad 964.

57 Thorn and Thorn 1979, 3.2.

58 Watts 2004, 113.

territories of this kind seem to have functioned as administrative and economic units and these 'regiones' occur quite commonly in western Surrey and in Berkshire in the Thames Valley.⁵⁹ Early Cannings included All Cannings (the name means 'Old' Cannings).⁶⁰ Also within the ancient parochia were Roundway, to the north of Devizes, and the chapelry of St James as well as the detached settlement of Chittoe.⁶¹ All Cannings has one find. Bishops Cannings itself has only one find, but Devizes has five. Devizes is of course absent from Domesday Book but the settlement grew up around the castle built by Bishop Roger of Salisbury during the mid-1130s.⁶² It stood on the boundary — *devisae* — of the Bishop's manor. It might be a reasonable speculation to wonder if there was a long-standing tradition of trading close to the place later chosen as the site of the castle, since the coin finds there are serious signs of commercial activity in the area during the 8th century, within the Cannings estate, but not too near the minster site.

In Dorset, Dorchester is clearly the pre-eminent royal site, with more minor, but nevertheless quite productive sites around it. Bere Regis was an unhidated royal estate.⁶³ There are five finds, so it was clearly an important exchange centre and other places nearby also have finds — two more coins at Winterborne Kingston, only 3 km distant and a royal estate in 1066. Wimborne, another unhidated royal estate, was the site of an extremely important monastic house of women, founded in the very early 8th century by King Ine's sister, Cuthburh.⁶⁴ Here, the two finds were close to the monastic centre, not scattered among its outlying settlements. At Wimborne and in Wiltshire at Warminster and at Bishops Cannings, it is probably impossible to disentangle the roles of king and minster in the consumption of goods and the control of exchange. At Wimborne, where there was powerful patronage, it is possible that the church may have been more heavily involved in trading than in more provincial minsters such as Bishops Cannings, or even Warminster.

MINT PLACES AND THEIR COINS

The region or place where the coins were struck is often difficult to establish, but potentially the distribution through the study area of coins from different mint sites is of great interest. 21% of the sample of 191 coins are unidentifiable in that respect, though one might expect them to have been fairly evenly distributed among the known mint sites or districts, since the failure to identify them is normally the result of their bad condition.

'Frisia' provided the largest identifiable single source for the sample (Fig 6). The Frisians of the 7th to 9th century came from the Rhine Delta, with Dorestadt as their principal trading settlement. However, their trading sites also included Quentovic, at the mouth of the Canche, which Stéphane Lebecq has suggested was a site originally founded by Anglo-Saxons as a base for their traders.⁶⁵ Some of the 'Frisians' may actually have been Franks, he suggests, and certainly much later the name 'Frisian' seems to have been used as a generic term for a merchant. The trade routes of these merchants ran across to Britain, along the Frankish coast and up the Seine to the fair at St Denis; eastward to Ribe and via Haithabu, to Birka and Helgö in Sweden as well as southward along the Rhine to Cologne and onwards to Strasbourg.⁶⁶ Richard Hodges long since established the connection between Hamwic and Rouen and it is entirely possible that merchants from the city traded into Dorset and Wiltshire.⁶⁷

59 Blair 1989, 100.

60 Watts 2004, 113.

61 VCH 1953, 187–97.

62 Potter and Davis 1976, 78.

63 Thorn and Thorn 1983, 1.2.

64 Thorn and Thorn 1983, 1.3; Coulstock 1993, 7.

65 Lebecq 1997, 75.

66 Ibid, 85–90.

67 Hodges 1991, 882–7.

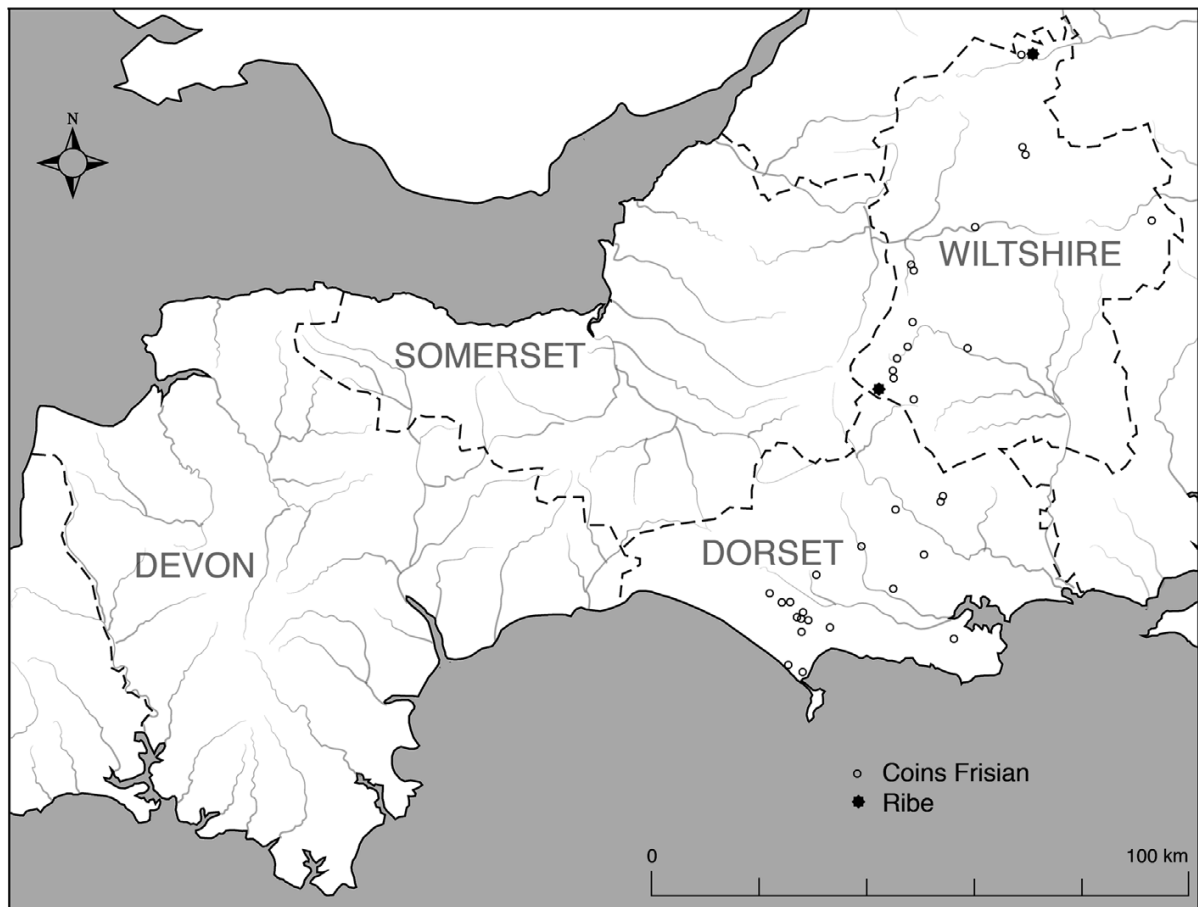


FIG 6
Finds of coins described as 'Frisian' and 'from Ribe'. Illustration by S Grice.

They would have used the same coin as their 'Frisian' contemporaries. We cannot say securely that the discovery of these coins points unequivocally to the presence of Frisian or Rouennais merchants in the region. The finds of coins from East Anglia, 8% of the total, and others from as far afield as Northumbria (two examples), show that the coins circulated because they were acceptable as money and so could have passed through many willing hands to get from Northumberland to Wiltshire. It would not be necessary to posit the existence of East Anglian or Northumbrian traders to account for their presence. The same might be true of the Frisian issues — Alan Morton has argued that there is evidence from the literature of saints' lives that in the early 8th century, regular commercial traffic between English trading sites and those on the mainland of Europe was quite restricted to these routes and connections. The Southampton Water area, he posits, traded almost exclusively with Rouen.⁶⁸ However, the very large number of Frisian coins in western Wessex does strongly suggest that many were the result of direct trade with the north-east of continental Europe. They can be placed in the 50 years from c 700 to c 750 and they made up 18% of all discoveries (24% of those coins which have a mint region). Their distribution (see Fig 6) strongly suggests that they came in as the result of seaborne contact through the proposed Weymouth port and from there to Dorchester, with a strong showing in the Dorchester area as well as the royal site itself.

⁶⁸ Morton 1999, 51–4.

As well as the concentration of finds in the Dorchester area, there is a scattering of coins across eastern Dorset, which is connected with the river valleys, and another concentration up the south-western border of Wiltshire, through the Deverills to the Warminster region. One find at Corfe might point to some access through Poole Harbour and Wareham and coins in the far north at Cricklade might indicate contact with the Thames Valley region. Quite striking is the complete absence of finds from Somerset and Devon. Despite Devon's excellent seaward connections on the southern coast, Frisian merchants clearly did not go there, at least not detectably at the moment. Somerset seems also to have been difficult for them to access or more probably, like Devon, it had little or nothing to offer them as trade goods. Among the 'Frisian' coins were two from Ribe. One was found at Mere and the other at Cricklade. They could, of course, have been exchanged by Danes, but it is much more likely that they are a token of the Frisian trade to Scandinavia.

Since the distribution around Dorchester is so marked it must be inferred that the Frisian coins came in chiefly through the proposed 'Weymouth' port and were then traded northwards through eastern Dorset into Wiltshire. A second inference is that the traders came directly from the Continent, rather than passing through another official entry point, such as Hamwic. Had they arrived from Hamwic in significant numbers, there might be more evidence of the 'Frisian' coins arriving through Twynham and Wareham. We can conclude therefore that Weymouth/Dorchester was an official entry point for foreign traders even in the very early 8th century. The long trail of finds stretching northwards to Cricklade also suggests that Frisian traders travelled into Mercia by this route. The immediate question is: what were they buying? The presence of so much coin strongly suggests that they paid for something which they took away, rather than that the population bought goods from them, though local people may well have purchased items which we cannot recognise among the artefacts recovered so far. Britain had little in the way of silver resources, apart from what could be recycled from hoards and jewellery. The coins suggest a positive balance of payments, if only locally. The most likely object of trade and export must be either wool or woollen goods, or both. Ine's Laws mention the payment of a blanket or cloak from each household as *gafol*, that is rent or tax.⁶⁹ The same law states that the blanket or cloak (the word used is *hwitel*, which can mean either) was to be valued at sixpence, a substantial sum, while a specific mention is made of the value of a sheep and her lamb — a shilling — until a fortnight after Easter.⁷⁰ The sheep was not to be shorn before midsummer and if it was, then the fleece should be paid for at the rate of twopence.⁷¹ At a sixth of the valuation of the sheep, this was a high price set upon the wool. Maddicott has noted the ubiquity of loom weights and spindle whorls in excavations and has suggested that the English may have been producing high-quality goods, with, presumably, a correspondingly high value.⁷² However, one cannot discount the probability that the trade goods also included slaves. Levison discusses the sale of slaves from England in north-eastern Francia in the early 7th century and remarks on Eligius, the goldsmith and moneyer who later became Bishop of Noyon (ad 641–660), who was buying and redeeming English slaves before 641.⁷³ Ine forbade the sale abroad of slaves from Wessex (were exports driving up internal prices too much?), but it is unlikely that this prohibition had much impact.⁷⁴ Slaves were too valuable a commodity to renounce. The work of Michael McCormick has shown how important and lucrative the trade in slaves was and the continuing internecine warfare among the Anglo-Saxons of the 7th century and even the 8th century must have presented many opportunities for money-making slave raiding.⁷⁵

69 Whitelock 1955, Ine 44, 1.

70 Ibid, Ine 55.

71 Ibid, Ine 69.

72 Maddicott 2002, 54–5.

73 Levison 1946, 9.

74 Whitelock 1955, Ine 11.

75 McCormick 2001.

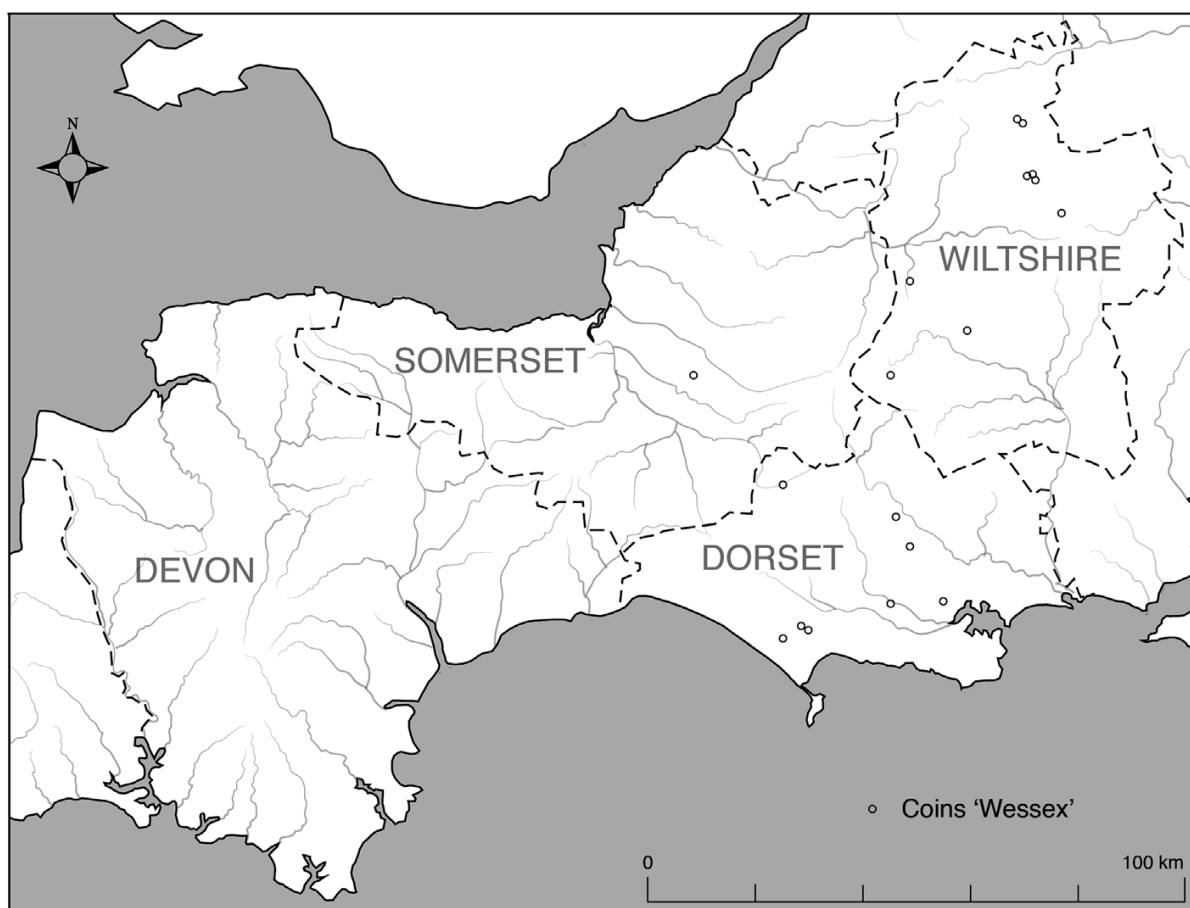


FIG 7
Finds of coins described as 'struck in Wessex'. Illustration by S Grice.

The concentration of coins suggests that we should see Dorchester and the Warminster districts as collecting points for the exchange and sale of the wool or woollen goods and perhaps slaves also. Both sites have ready access to areas which in later times carried many sheep — in Dorset the hills to the north and northeast of Dorchester, and in Wiltshire the plain to the east of the Warminster-Westbury area.

There are three other broad categories of coins to consider, all struck within the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and probably in Wessex: Early English, Wessex and Southampton/Hamwic, as defined in the EMC and PAS databases. Coins with an English origin, 'Early English', are 12% of the total and their distribution shows them clustered around Dorchester with an example at Weymouth (Fig 6). A few examples in the more easterly parts of Dorset might suggest river traffic via Wareham up the valleys of the Frome and the Piddle. Somerset has three examples. One is at South Cadbury, one at Portishead and one near the mouth of the Parrett. These last two suggest trade along the coast of Somerset and the example at South Cadbury might suggest Ilchester as the likely market site. The scatter in northern Wiltshire suggests a link to Hampshire through Roman roads running towards southern Gloucestershire.

A further 18 coins are recorded as minted in 'Wessex', dated to the first half of the 8th century, contemporary with the Southampton/Hamwic examples (Figs 7 and 9). They are widely scattered across Dorset and Wiltshire, with a single example in Somerset. While the Dorset examples might have arrived by sea, the Wiltshire coins and the example near Sherborne and in Somerset could well

have been the result of overland trading. Furthermore, the northern cluster in Wiltshire may be a component of trade into Mercia.



FIG 8
Finds of coins in Hampshire c ad 650–750. Illustration by S Grice.

Clearly Hampshire, or at least Winchester and its commercial centre at Hamwic, was enormously important in Wessex in the later 7th and early 8th century. A map of the coin finds for Hampshire demonstrates the centrality of Winchester as a hub for exchange (Fig 8). At Hamwic, a large number of coins was found during excavation work, of which 70 were middle Anglo-Saxon sceattas and

pennies.⁷⁶ As well as being a trading centre, Hamwic was also a mint site and ‘Hamwic’ coins would tend to demonstrate trading and exchange connections when found on another site. However, the arguments of Alan Morton concerning the status of Hamwic in the 8th century need to be taken seriously. It should not necessarily be regarded as a general semi-monopolistic trade centre, but much more as a useful adjunct to the Wessex kings’ major centre at Winchester.⁷⁷

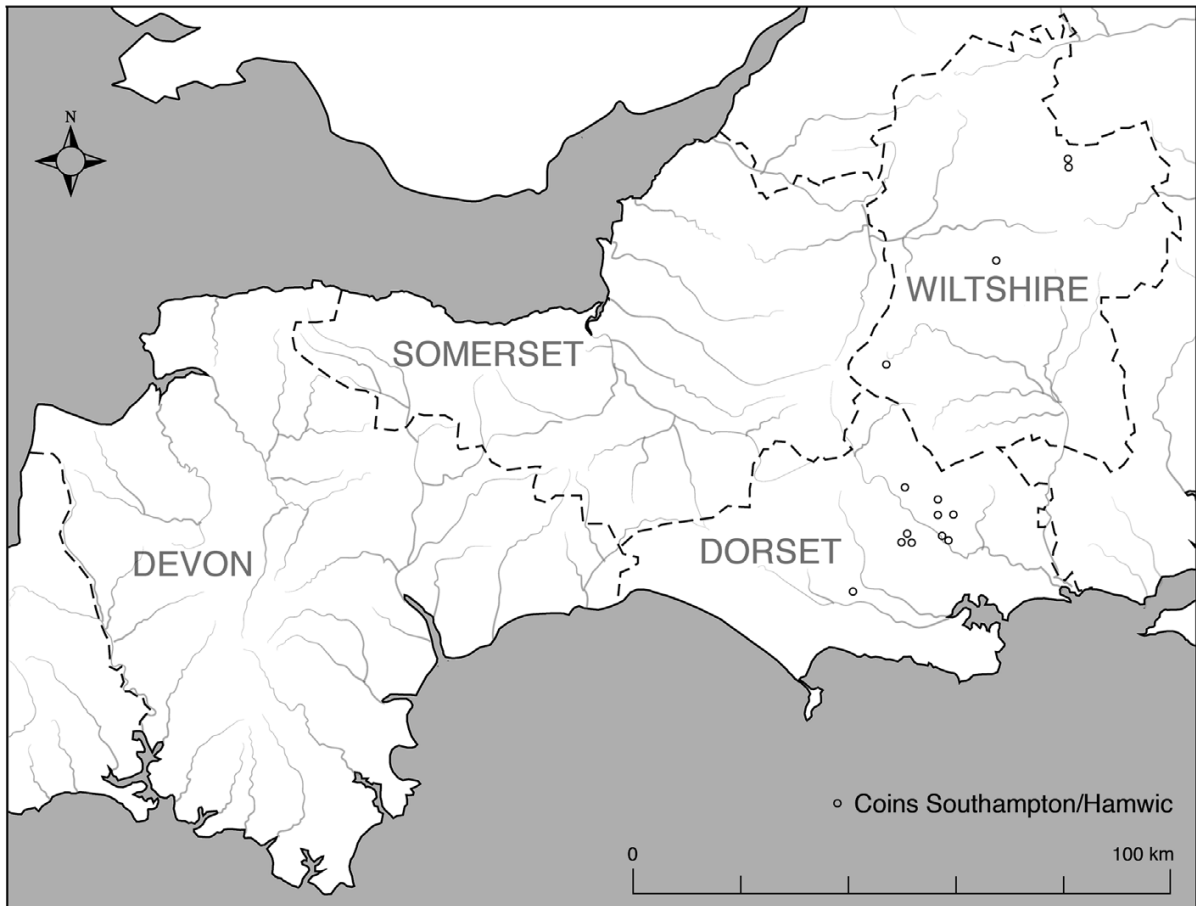


FIG 9
Finds of coins struck at Southampton/Hamwic. Illustration by S Grice.

In the study area, there are only three ‘Hamwic’ coins recorded. However, this is probably due to a peculiarity of recording, since there are a further 11 coins labelled as having a ‘Southampton’ origin. Both groups are given the same date-range c ad 720–740 (Fig 9). It is immediately apparent that the coins from this source are grouped in a manner which suggests that they came into Dorset via Twynham and the Dorset river valleys leading from it. The one example in south-west Wiltshire should probably be ascribed to the same travel route, while the three examples further north may have entered by an overland and more northerly passage. An isolated example in Dorset at Burleston near Puddletown looks as if it is representative of a subsidiary trade link through Poole. It certainly seems as if most trade from the Southampton Water area used the nearest available port — in this case normally Twynham — and that most trade was by sea. This may be evidence of some specialised link between Hamwic and eastern Dorset and their proximity to Hod Hill and Stourpaine might indicate activity at a fair or seasonal trading site.

⁷⁶ Andrews and Metcalf 1997, 210–15.

⁷⁷ Morton 1999.

This is of course a discussion about the situation in the 8th century and more specifically in the first half of that century. From the 760s onward the coin finds are predominantly English and they nearly all originated in the south-east, Canterbury being easily the most common source (Fig 10). Trade with Frisia, or at least trade which can be recognised, seems to have declined sharply. However, coins from East Anglia and a few from London suggest more distant contacts. Mercian coins, apart from those from London, are rare, which is surprising, given the political dominance of that kingdom during the later 8th century. Trade during this long period was noticeably feebler than it had been in the early 8th century, but it continued to conform to the overall pattern already established for coins produced in England. There are hints of activity in Somerset at Cheddar, where the minster was important in this period. A coin at East Coker, in south-eastern Somerset, is a reminder that much later it would be revealed as a royal possession, and in Devon one find at Exeter hints that a revival of trade through the town had begun. Overall, the coins point to a trade regime within England which was slightly less confined to Wessex and more open to contacts from other English kingdoms.

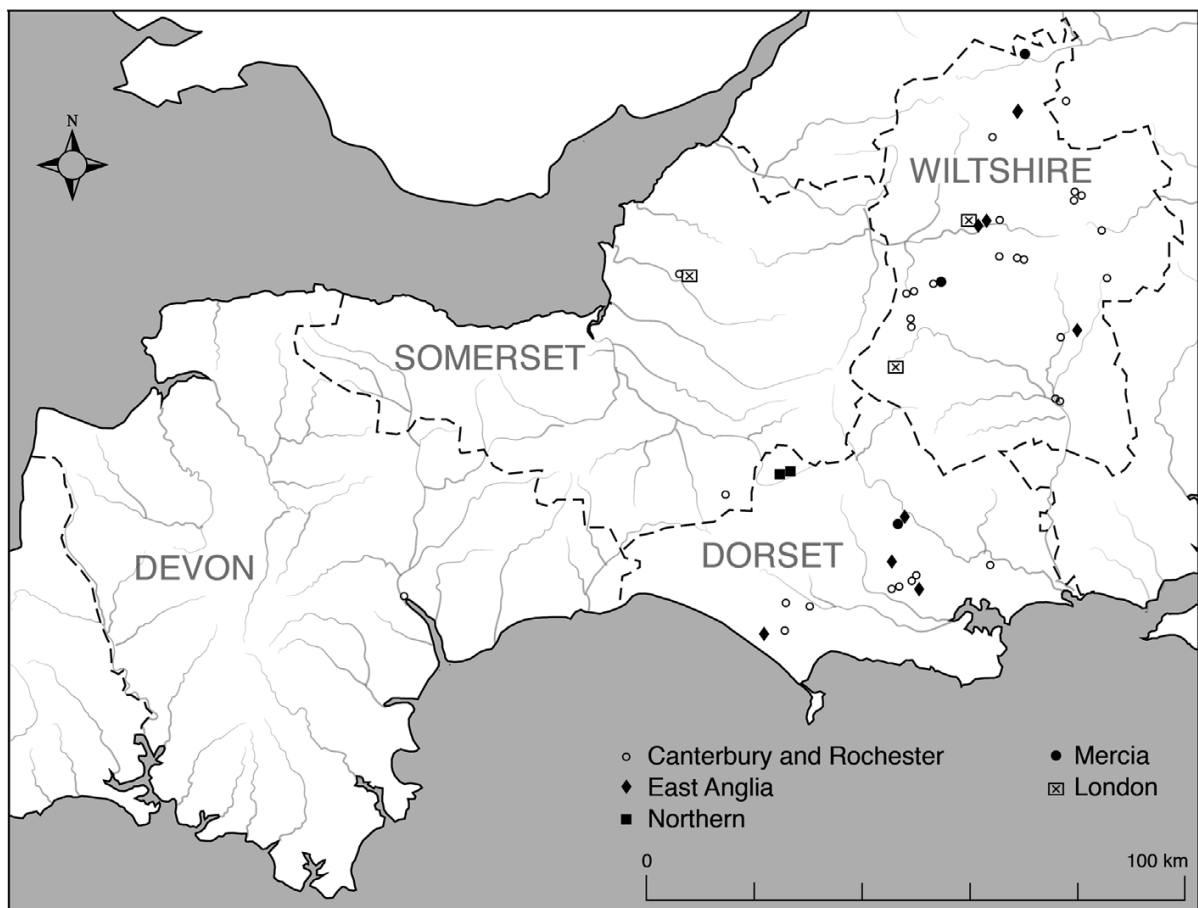


FIG 10
Finds of coins dated after c ad 760. Illustration by S Grice.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that coin use in Wessex is connected with trade and exchange. The English of the new Wessex were certainly using coins as money by the middle of the 7th century when they colonised the western parts of the new kingdom. The rise of Wessex as a kingdom goes in step with the expansion of coin use. The striking upsurge in coin loss in the later 7th century reflects the

burgeoning of exchange in the region and is entirely consistent with what happened elsewhere in southern and eastern Britain.

Coin loss across western Wessex shows that there were two distinct general trade movements in progress during this early period. The first was an internal Wessex trade, some of which arrived by sea, probably from Hampshire and perhaps also from further east. The other component was an influx of trade from the northern near Continent. The traders came to buy a product, as is clear from the quantity of coin which must have been in circulation in order for the losses we see to accumulate. There must have been a positive balance of trade, since

there was no ready source of silver available inside Britain. Most of the silver in circulation must have come from the Continent and Peter Spufford thought the most likely source was the mines at Melles, near Poitiers.⁷⁸ However, the coins were made in quantity in north-eastern Europe and in Britain, not in western Francia, suggesting that the metal was under Frisian control. Silver sourced from somewhere east of the Rhine seems more likely.⁷⁹ The Frisian traders came to buy something obtainable in Dorset and Wiltshire and the most likely commodity was wool or woollen goods. Other high value goods at this time might have included slaves, but the pattern of losses suggests that the commodities were bought quite locally, while slaves would have been purchased under more controlled conditions, probably at a wic. It is noticeable also that districts further west — western Dorset, Somerset and Devon — perhaps not important sheep rearing areas at this time, had little connection with this continental trade. Indeed, there is every indication that the trade at this period hardly crossed into Somerset and Devon. What trade those shires had was connected with the Bristol Channel for Somerset and may have looked more towards Ireland or Brittany than north-eastern Francia.

The influx of coin and the trade and exchange which went with it came through three major ports, Weymouth or its near vicinity, Wareham and Twynham/Christchurch. Weymouth, connected to Dorchester, stands out as the pre-eminent centre and it may be that here or in Dorchester, not only were tolls collected from incoming and outgoing merchants, but a good deal of the trade was actually carried on. The other two ports also distributed to a wide area; Twynham in particular seems to have been the port of entry for a considerable trading movement northwards into Wiltshire.

The second flow of coin began at a low level in the 7th century and continued throughout the 8th and on into the 9th. This is evidence of a much more local trade, coming into western Wessex through the ports, with Twynham favoured, suggesting Southampton/Hamwic as the source. It is possible that this trade also came into the region overland, especially into Wiltshire. Again, the trade may also have passed into Mercia and there is also evidence of some trade into Somerset.

The ports at Wareham and Twynham seem to have been under the control of the minsters at those two places. At Twynham, it may be that the minster was founded with the trade in mind, either because it provided a method of exercising royal control without the need for royal officials to be present, or because the king was anxious to provide an important foundation with a lucrative source of income. At Wareham, the evidence of post-Roman British Christianity at a site which had little agricultural potential but had control of a transshipment centre, might suggest that trade through there was not something which only emerged in the later 7th century.

⁷⁸ Spufford 1988, 32–3.

⁷⁹ Blackburn 1995, 547.

This trade was into a countryside which by the 8th century clearly had its wealthy places. The pattern of coin losses, in Wiltshire particularly, reveals a major concentration of wealth in the south-west of the shire between Warminster and Westbury. This royal area may have been a major collection point for wool or woollen goods, produced around the Plain. Similarly, on the other side of the shire Wilton/Old Sarum attracted trade, indicating that Wilton may have been established early in the life of the Anglo-Saxon Wessex because it controlled an important trade point, with strong links to Winchester by the Roman road from Old Sarum and to the port at Twynham to the south. To the north, the region around Bishops Cannings may have evolved to manage trade across the northern part of the shire, with links to the north and Mercia as well as eastward towards eastern Wessex.

The barrier between Wiltshire and Somerset was all but impermeable. Wiltshire, to the north-west, is devoid of finds and this is matched by a similarly sterile region in north-eastern Somerset. Trade into Somerset was mainly from the Bristol Channel up the catchment of the Parrett and its tributaries, including the Sherborne district. Somerset certainly did not share in the prosperity brought by the Frisian trade. Western Dorset and Devon seem to have been even more underdeveloped.

What is revealed by this study is the way in which access points and trade centres had developed by the early years of the 8th century and this is a more optimistic view of 8th-century Wessex than some other commentators have managed.⁸⁰ A sophisticated pattern of exchange existed which owed little to a central distribution or access point. The toll sites of the 8th century could have regularised and controlled existing trade routes, perhaps with deep roots in the post-Roman economy of the region. The kings of the West Saxons were quick to grasp the potential of this burgeoning of trade and the laws governing merchants encouraged and protected them and the trade. The suggestion has been made that Wessex exported wool and woollen goods and possibly slaves, but it is possible that the outpouring of silver bought other agricultural products and it seems unlikely that the merchants brought in only silver coins. Goods from the Rhineland probably came also, luxury items, weapons, jewellery, expensive fabrics, wine, but as yet their existence is conjectural.

This brief flowering of a monetised economy may well have been important to the local aristocracy of early Wessex by offering them access to the luxuries which helped to define their status in 8th-century society. The scatter of coin through the countryside also suggests that many of the peasants were gaining access to the new wealth. However, for the kings of Wessex, already hard pressed by their powerful Mercian neighbours, the trade gave them an opportunity to consolidate a system of tolls on merchant traffic which provided them with access to ready money as well as providing a profitable outlet for the surplus resources of their recently acquired extensive estates in the west of Wessex, some of which had only become theirs in the mid-7th century.

Behind it are hints of a much older pattern of trading places based not in major royal burhs, but at rural centres, including hillforts. Underpinning everything there must have remained an extensive network of non-monetary exchange based upon rural products — animals, grain, foodstuffs, ironwork — which could continue even when coin became scarce and the foreign trade had all but ceased.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The data used in this study were gathered from: The Corpus of Early Medieval Coin Finds, The Department of Coins and Medals, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge — <www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/dept/coins/emc> and The Portable Antiquities Scheme, The Trustees of the British Museum — <www.finds.org.uk/database/>. Both databases were interrogated May–June 2014.

Illustrations were prepared by Sue Grice.

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Abbreviations

RCHME Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

VCH Victoria County History