

A PENNY OF COENWULF OF MERCIA
FOUND AT YAXHAM, NORFOLK

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THROUGH the kindness of the authorities of the Castle Museum at Norwich I am able to put on record what appears to be an unpublished minor variant of the silver penny of King Coenwulf or Cenwulf of Mercia (796-821).¹ The coin was found quite recently in a field at Yaxham near East Dereham in Norfolk, and would seem to be a single-find despite the fact that its appearance is that of a hoard-coin. In his still standard work *English Coins*, the late Dr. G. C. Brooke has divided up the coinage of Coenwulf into five main classes, and the new coin from Yaxham belongs to his Class II, the second of the four groups which he rightly associates with the mint of Canterbury. The obverse consists of a right-facing diademed bust of the king which breaks the legend from which it is divided off by a plain inner circle. As usual with coins of this period the portrait is modelled on that which is normal on the fourth-century Roman coinage, and the king is shown in consequence beardless and in profile. The legend begins at the top of the coin and runs:—

+ C O E N V V L F || R E X M

The reverse type consists of a neat cross moline, and there is no inner circle. In each quarter of the cross there is a small wedge, and it is this feature that does not appear to have been recorded before. The legend runs:—

+ T I D B E A R H T M O N E T A

The die-axis is 90 deg., and the weight 23.15 grains. Because the coin failed to "ring," and also because the patina was somewhat unusual, it was subjected to various tests. The density (10.30) is, however, normal for a Saxon penny and the workmanship excellent—few with any real knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon series would subscribe to the theory that "nearly all Anglo-Saxon coinage" reflects "an impoverished culture" with "the level of design falling to a correspondingly low level of technical achievement"—and the failure to "ring" in fact is due to a hair-line crack running across much of the flan.

As will be gathered from the accompanying enlargements of direct photographs, (enlarged to 3 diameters), the style of both obverse and reverse

is consistent with that of other coins of Brooke's Class II, though in execution it is possibly superior to most, and the authenticity of the coin from Yaxham cannot be doubted. It is a characteristic product of the Canterbury mint, and may be presumed to date from the second decade of the ninth century. The moneyer Tidbearht was a prolific Canterbury moneyer at this period, and after Coenwulf's death struck for the Kentish usurper Baldred and for Ecgbeorht of Wessex. What is at first sight surprising is that a Canterbury coin should be found so far to the north when there was a mint operating under Mercian control actually in East Anglia, but in this connection it should be stressed that the scale of output of the East Anglian mint seems always to have been far inferior to that of Canterbury. The Kentish mint, it seems, continued to strike the bulk of its coinage in the names of Mercian Kings until the *débâcle* of Wroughton in 825, and the occurrence of the Canterbury coin at Yaxham serves only to remind us of the ease with which coins passed and repassed the line of the Thames in the period before the great Danish invasions. It was not until the second half of the ninth century that the penny won acceptance west of the area confined by a shallow arc running from the Wash to the Isle of Wight, and it is one of the paradoxes of numismatic history that the area of dominant circulation of the Canterbury penny should have contracted as the new coin began to bring money into the life of the ordinary English man and woman.

As we have seen, the appearance of the penny found at Yaxham might suggest that it is to be considered a "stray" from a hoard rather than a single-find. In either case it exhibits singularly little wear, and the presumption must surely be that it was lost—or concealed—within a decade at most of its striking. An obvious occasion would be the East Anglian revolt which followed if it did not contribute to the deposition of Ceolwulf I in 823, and in this connection it may be significant that East Anglian independence was not guaranteed until the autumn of 825 when Ceolwulf's successor himself was slain at the hands of the East Angles only a few months after they had sought West Saxon intervention in the revolt. That they should have had to seek outside help after the Mercian rout at Wroughton may suggest that all had not gone well with the rebel arms, and the truth is that we just do not know how the fortunes of war had swayed this way and that across Norfolk during the intervening period.

¹The coin is now in the cabinet of Mr. C. E. Blunt, F.S.A.



Penny of Coenwulf, found at Yaxham, Norfolk (obverse)



Penny of Coenwulf, found at Yaxham, Norfolk (reverse)

($\times 3$ diameters)