

A CELTIC INTAGLIO FROM CAISTOR ST. EDMUND

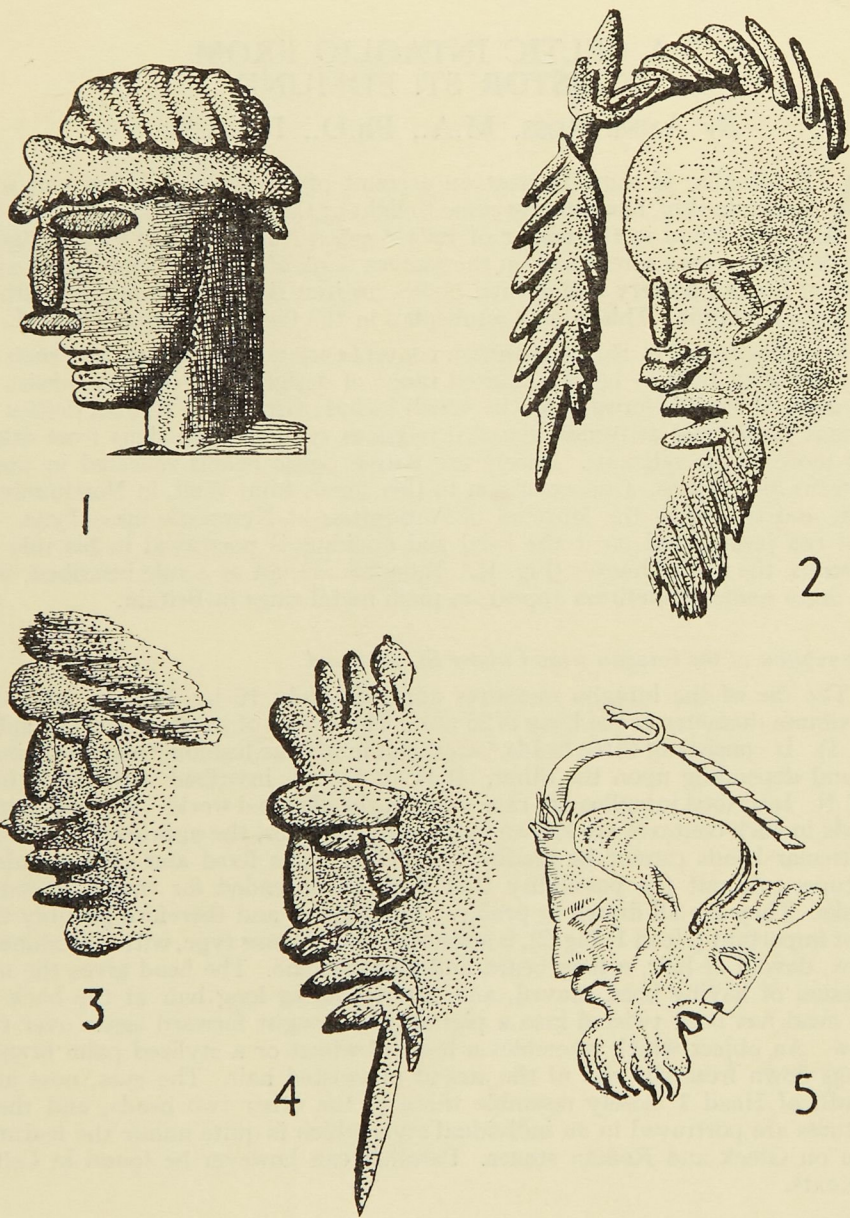
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AN intaglio, of some interest on account of its unusual design and fine workmanship, has recently come to light at Caistor St. Edmund, Norfolk. It was found in the winter of 1964-5 when the River Tas was dredged. The dredgings were spread out on the eastern bank of the river and, amongst a mass of broken pottery and animal bones, an iron ring was found, set with a red jasper intaglio. This is now on display in the Castle Museum, Norwich.

Intaglios found in Romano-British contexts are not numerous, and such as they are they tend to be of a limited range of design. The designs consist in the main of straightforward motifs which include Greek and Roman deities in various traditional attitudes, classical religious symbols, and signs from other and more exotic religions. Rarely are native Celtic beliefs reflected in these patterns and figures. One exception to this comes from Wall, in Northumberland, and is now in the Museum of Antiquities at Newcastle-upon-Tyne. It is of red jasper, and on it the local god Cocidius is portrayed in his role as Silvanus, the divine hunter (Fig. 1).¹ Intaglios are not as a rule inscribed, but the deity names sometimes appear on plain metal rings in Britain.

Description of the intaglio from Caistor St. Edmund

The die of the intaglio measures approximately 16 by 12 mm., and the maximum diameter of the hoop is 25 mm. The design of the intaglio is singular (Pl. I). It consists of three heads,² arranged in gryllus fashion,³ each conjoined to and depending upon the other. It is, moreover, inscribed with the letters C E N. Inscribed intaglios are rare, even in the classical world. Whereas triple heads in such contexts are known on Roman intaglios, the appearance of these particular heads cannot be readily paralleled.⁴ The fixed and expressionless features rule out the possibility that they are intended for tragic or comic masks. They are all drawn in profile. The largest, and therefore possibly the most important (Head 1, Fig. 2), is suggestive of a Silenus type, with a prominent brow, devoid of hair, a long beard and a moustache. The head gives the impression of having been shaved, and the remaining long hair at the back of the head has been twisted into a pigtail and brought forward again over the brow. An object which resembles a head of wheat or a stylized palm branch hangs down from the end of the strand of twisted hair. The eyes, nose and mouth of Head 1 closely resemble those of the other two heads, and these features are portrayed in an individual style which is quite unlike the features seen on Greek and Roman stones. Parallels can however be found in Celtic contexts.



Figs. 1-5



Plate I. Red Jasper Intaglio, Castle Museum, Norwich



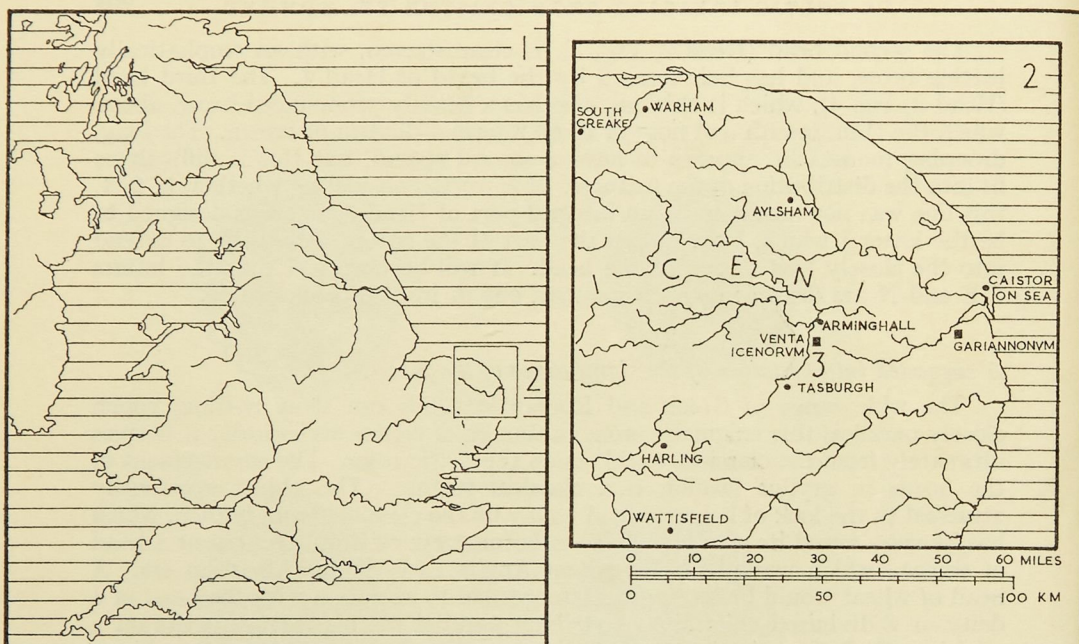
Plate II. Icenian Coins, Castle Museum, Norwich (x2)

The second head (Head 2, Fig. 3), is clean-shaven, with an emphatically jutting brow, and has hair formed by the beard of Head 1. The third head (Head 3, Fig. 4), which is chinless, also has a heavily pronounced brow, above which the chin, mouth and nose of Head 2 form a diadem or crown. The long, drooping moustache appears to have a second strand, but this is difficult to fit into the distribution of the features. It is worth considering whether, in fact, this line was not meant to be an integral part of Head 3, but was designed to be the letter I which, by a slip on the part of the cutter, was made to extend into the closely knit design of the head. It will be observed that the letters C E and N are drawn in such a manner, one in front of each profile.

A suggested interpretation of the significance of the intaglio

The wide range of Greek and Roman intaglios can show nothing which closely parallels this enigmatic stone, although of course stylistically it derives ultimately from the classical world, as do the Celtic coins. The arrangement of the heads in gryllus fashion is a classical feature. The object apparently attached to the lock of hair on Head 1 may be the classical palm branch, which has likewise found its way into Celtic coin imagery; or it may represent a head of wheat—which was plentiful in East Anglia early in the Christian era. A head of wheat would be an appropriate symbol to associate with the head of a deity or a divinised chieftain. A striking parallel to this feature exists on a sard from Italy, now in the Florence Museum (Fig. 5).⁵ In this case the object, which would seem to be a palm branch, emerges from a bearded, classical type of male head combined with a serpent-like object. Moreover, it goes backwards over the head, and not forward as in the Caistor St. Edmund example. This is the closest likeness to any one feature from the Greek or Roman worlds; and it may well be that we have here the stylistic origin of this individual object on the British ring. Otherwise, there is nothing immediately obvious in the repertoire of classical stones which is closely similar to the individual features of the three heads or the inscription.

Having looked to the classical world for parallels to this ring, we must now look elsewhere for information. The ring was found in a river at an important Romano-British site (Fig. 6).⁶ Although many objects must have found their way into water by chance rather than design, the Celtic custom of sacrificing to the gods by ritually casting objects into sacred waters—pools, rivers, springs—is fully attested.⁷ The intaglio was found in the river close to where this must have been bridged, and Roman pottery dating from the first to the fourth centuries, together with many animal bones, have been dredged from the bed over a stretch about one mile long. This may or may not be suggestive of ritual activity, but it must be borne in mind as a possibility here. The proximity of the find-spot to the three Romano-Celtic temples may also be of some significance. The existing temples are themselves comparatively late in date, while the heads on the intaglio suggest an earlier date; but it is perfectly possible that the area had a religious character even in pre-Roman times, and that it was furnished with no permanent shrine of the classical type until the



SKETCH-PLAN OF VENTA ICENORVM

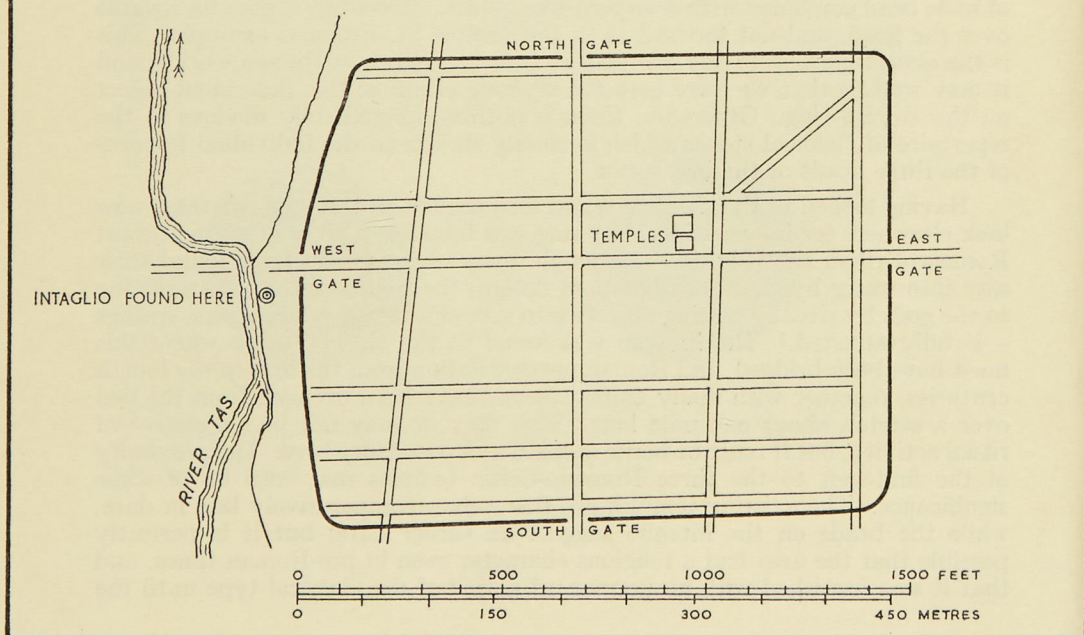


Fig. 6

temples were built. The presence of Iron Age sherds in the inner ditch of the henge monument at Arminghall nearby may point in the same direction.⁸ It is therefore possible that the ring had a British origin and a native significance.

We must now consider the features that would allow a Celtic origin for this intaglio. The fact that *three* heads are figured, even though they are in the form of the classical gryllus, is of significance when attempting to interpret this ring in the light of native ideas. The Celts not only hunted human heads and prized them as evidence of military success, but they also venerated them. We find the symbolic head occurring in every aspect of Celtic religious and artistic expression.⁹ It may be portrayed as bearded or clean-shaven, with or without a moustache; it may be horn-bearing; it may have two or three faces, or two or three heads may be conjoined. The head appears with amazing frequency in the toreutic repertoire of the La Tène Celts; and later, under the influence of Rome, it was fashioned from stone—still with a wealth of different, but distinctive, features and styles. The number three was sacred to the Celts, and the divine head having three faces clearly added up to a very potent and apotropaic symbol. The faces of some of the three-faced heads differ from each other, while those of others are identical. The three heads on the intaglio differ in some ways one from the other, but have some features in common.

We must now consider the individual features of the three heads on the intaglio. The treatment of all the eyes, noses and mouths is remarkable, and not easy to parallel outside the Celtic world. Celtic coins exhibit many fantastic and non-naturalistic ways of portraying eyes; and some from Armorica and elsewhere do in fact depict eyes in precisely this fashion, more or less like a capital letter I (Fig. 7, a, c, e). The nose and lips likewise appear in a variety of forms in the coin art of the early Celts; and again, these features on the intaglio can be shown to be closely similar to those on certain coins (Fig. 7).

The hair-style of Head 1 becomes intelligible in the light of Celtic custom. We know the Celts to have been very proud of their hair, and their vanity in this respect is recorded in the early Irish tales and in the writings of classical ethnographers. Diodorus Siculus, for example, makes relevant comments.¹⁰ He says:

“For they continually wash their hair with lime-wash and draw it back from the forehead to the crown and the nape of the neck, with the result that their appearance resembles that of Satyrs or of Pans, for their hair is so thickened by this treatment that it differs in no way from a horse’s mane”.

It can be shown that the hair on some of the Celtic coin heads is treated just as it is on the intaglio, the front seemingly shaved away from the brow and the long hair twisted forward again over the forehead (Fig. 7, f, g). The objects which, as the figures show, are attached to these locks may be highly stylized remains of the wheat or palm branch motifs. One head (Fig. 7, a), with eyes depicted exactly as on the intaglio, has such an object at the back of the head this time, where it seems to form part of the head-gear. This feature is also associated with a chariot-warrior wearing a hair style such as Diodorus describes (Fig. 7, h, l); it may originally have been borrowed from the classical

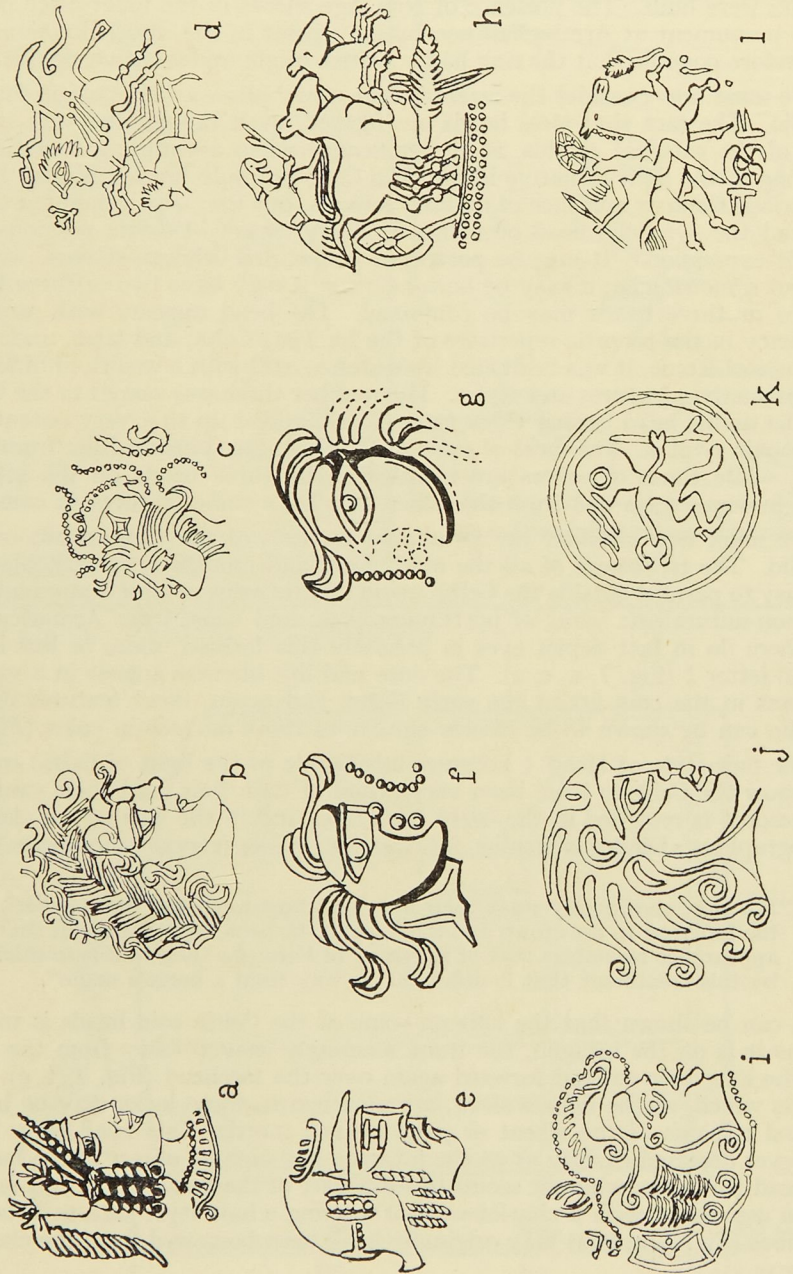


Fig. 7

world, as were many of the Celtic coin motifs, but adapted by the Celts and developed into the fantastic religious symbols which so characterized their art. Flowing moustaches are also well attested for the early Celts. In the same place Diodorus tells us that some of the Celts shaved their cheeks but let their moustaches grow long so that they covered the mouth. Head 3 has a long, drooping moustache. It is interesting to compare the features of the Caistor St. Edmund intaglio with those of the Cocidius intaglio from Wall and to note marked similarities (Fig. 1).

The fact that the intaglio is inscribed is of great interest, and because such inscriptions are rare indicates that the ring was of special importance. Bronze letters of the alphabet are known from Romano-British sanctuaries, such as Woodeaton,¹¹ while alphabetical signs are figured together with a hare on a piece of bronze recovered from a votive well at Winterborne Kingston, Dorset.¹² The single letters were presumably used to make up the names of particular gods or goddesses. The presence of inscribed letters on the intaglio, however, is suggestive of some religious or personal significance as is the case with Celtic coins which were inscribed with the name of the tribe, king or chieftain. The Caistor St. Edmund ring was found in an area of Britain which from pre-Roman times had been occupied by the Celtic tribe *Iceni*. The letters on the intaglio are C E N; and if we take the lower stroke near the moustache of Head 3 to have been designed as an I, then we have a reading of (I) C E N.

The local Icenian coins are frequently decorated with human heads (Pl. II), with an object coming out from the front of the brow which may represent something similar to that on Head 1 on the intaglio, and bearing a resemblance to that referred to on Gaulish coins. The head of wheat or palm branch also appears on Icenian coins, as do the letters E C E N or I C E N, abbreviations of the tribal name. Such letters on this ring would be fully intelligible in the light of the tribal name of the region in which it was found. It is of interest to note that the form of the letter N on the intaglio is identical with that on some of the Icenian coins.¹³

The context of the intaglio

In attempting to find a reasonable context for this fine intaglio, it may be apposite to consider the East Anglian legend of the Princess of Colchester.¹⁴ According to the story, three heads inhabit the Well of Life, and like true Celtic severed heads, these are believed to be capable of speech and movement, to possess prophetic knowledge, and to have the power to impart fertility and prosperity. At different times each head comes to the surface of the water to converse with a woman who has gone to draw water from the well. The first head is bearded, the second has wheat growing from it, the third is filled with gold. This tradition of severed heads in a sacred well, the fertility associations of the head, demonstrated by the wheat and the gold, in an area where some Celtic traditions may perhaps have lingered orally into medieval times, may have some bearing on the symbolism of the Caistor St. Edmund intaglio with its three heads, one bearded and corn- or palm-bearing, and one wearing a crown

or diadem. It may be that both the design on the ring and the motifs in the story originated in a similar legend. The Celts venerated wells and springs, and they offered animals and both broken and intact pottery and metal vessels to their deities by casting them into the water. They also threw in votive objects of many kinds, such as pins, brooches, rings and actual human heads. The fact that the intaglio was found in a context which may allow such an interpretation may again support its Celtic origin.

Summary and Conclusions

The intaglio, found in a type of situation from which many Celtic objects have been recovered, is decorated with three heads in profile. The features of these cannot be closely matched by those on Greek and Roman intaglios, but strikingly similar features can be found on Celtic coins. The heads on the Caistor ring would thus seem to be Celtic, but taken from coins rather than resembling the wider range of La Tène heads on metal-work. The La Tène heads, apart from the coins, are rarely drawn in profile, whereas the coin heads are as a rule so depicted. These derive ultimately from classical models. They have undergone a metamorphosis in the hands of the Celtic craftsmen, making them essentially native in style, but they do nevertheless differ on the whole from the frontal La Tène countenances. This applies especially to the Armorican coins, where there is a thickness of lip, a coarseness of feature and a general fantasy about the heads which is quite distinctive. The coins bear inscriptions, which are rare in the field of intaglios. The head was sacred to the Celts, as was the number three. The treating of the hair in such a manner as to stiffen it, and the drawing of it back into a pigtail effect are features which are well known amongst the early Celts. The ring may never have been intended for wear, but fashioned as a votive offering to some deity. It may on the other hand have belonged to and been worn by some powerful local ruler, such as Boudicca herself, if we can believe it to be as early in date as that, and perhaps sacrificed to a god or goddess at some time of crisis. Rings bearing divine names are known—such as SUCELLOS and TOTATES from York and NODONS from Lydney¹⁵—while other inscribed rings occur elsewhere in the Celtic world. The Caistor St. Edmund intaglio, then, found in what was Icenian territory, inscribed with what would seem to be an abbreviation of the tribal name, decorated with symbols which are fundamental to pagan Celtic religious beliefs, and found in a context which is at least suggestive of ritual, would seem to owe its origin to an essentially native milieu—a milieu profoundly influenced by Greek and Roman models, but one which emphatically held on to its own ideas of religious and artistic expression, blending classical imagery with its own superstition and belief, and producing—especially in toreutic contexts—an impressive and individual style.

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¹Ross, 1967, 372.

²One of these is of youthful appearance and clean shaven, and I take it to be that of a youth. When three heads are figured on classical intaglios, however, one is often a female, and this could perhaps be the case here.

³*Gryllus* (or *grillus*): Lewis and Short *Latin Dictionary*—1) a cricket or grasshopper—Pliny 29, 6, 39, 138; 2) transferred, in painting, a kind of comic figures—Pliny 35, 10, 37, 114.

⁴A further point of difference between the classical intaglios and the Caistor St. Edmund example is that when three heads occur on Roman rings two are placed back to back and the third on top, whereas here they are set in triskele form, facing outwards.

⁵Gori, *Museum Florentinum* i, plate 50, no. 2.

⁶For information about VENTA ICENORUM, see Hawkes, 1949.

⁷Ross, 1967, 20 ff.

⁸Clark, 1936.

⁹Ross, 1967, 61 ff.

¹⁰Diodorus Siculus, V, 28: Tierney, 249.

¹¹Ross, 1967, 48.

¹²Ross, 1967, 32.

¹³But perhaps significant here is the fact that Venta Icenorum appears as Venta Cenomum in the late source Ravenna 103 (*Archæologia*, xciii, 48). This would make an abbreviation C E N possible for the intaglio.

¹⁴Ross, 1967, 110.

¹⁵Ross, 1967, 172.