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## A COUNTERMARKED AS OF CLAUDIUS I FROM CAISTOR ST EDMUND

by Robert Kenyon

A recent coin-find by a metal detector user at Caistor St Edmund is worthy of a brief note here, not for its intrinsic value – for this is a common Roman coin in poor condition – but for questions it raises about the behaviour of coins in circulation in 1st-century Roman Britain.

The coin is an imitative *as* of Claudius I (AD 42-54) (*cf.* Sutherland, 1935), with a mostly illegible legend, which bears the Roman countermark *BON* incuse across the neck of the obverse 'portrait' bust. The reverse-type is that of Minerva holding a shield advancing right with raised arm holding a spear (*cf.* RIC 100). It may be recognised as a contemporary imitation not only by its very indifferent die engraving but also by its reduced module and eccentric die-axis (24mm, die-axis 240°, 4.93g) which can be seen to be grossly undersize and underweight when compared with the module of an orthodox Claudian *as* (30mm, die-axis 180°, 10-11.5g). This particular worn copper coin is slightly corroded from deposition in the earth, but now is stabilised by conservation.

The relative frequency of finds of imitative Claudian *asses* of this type may be contrasted by the rarity of this particular countermark in Britain: to be more specific it may be useful to put figures to those observations. In a recent study of bronze coins of Claudius I found in Britain (Kenyon 1992), the author records c. 3,500 Claudian *asses* as having certain or likely British provenances. Of those, two-thirds have the Minerva reverse-type and almost all are imitative specie. Inspection of published coin-lists from major Claudio-Neronian sites such as Richborough, Kent (Reece, 1981, 57) and Colchester, Essex (Crummy, 1987, 84-92) will show



Obverse



Reverse

Plate 1

Countermarked Claudian *as*. Scale 1:1

the reader that this coin-type is the most common of all 1st-century Roman coins recovered as stray or excavated finds in Britain. Of the c.3,500 Claudian *asses* with a certain or probable British provenance, only five are countermarked *BON*; one each from Bath, Avon (Walker, 1988); Hambleden, Bucks – this coin has been stamped *BO(N)*, *BON* (private coll.); Neatham, Hants (private coll.); Saham Toney, Norfolk (Brown, 1986); Swanton Morley, Norfolk (Norfolk Museums Service) – the example from Caistor, unearthed in December 1994, can now be added to that group. The paucity of illustrations of a *BON* countermarked *as* in a readily-available British publication demands the inclusion of its photograph here. (Robertson, 1962, plate 17 has an illustration of a *BON* countermarked Claudian *as* in the Hunter Coin Cabinet, University of Glasgow but the scarcity of that volume today would make it difficult to study for all but the keenest scholar).

The study of Roman countermarks has attracted the attention of numismatic scholars throughout the 20th century, particularly in Britain and Europe: for the interested student today, a clear outline to the complexity of Roman countermarks, still relevant and useful though written over seventy years ago, can be found in the pages of the general introduction to Mattingly's *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*, Volume 1, (1965, reprint of 1923 edition). Questions which arise when considering these often enigmatic groups of letters usually relate to the behaviour and function of countermarks: what do the letters of the countermarks mean? what was the purpose of these countermarks? how were coins countermarked? when were they used? why were they employed? where were they used? who used them? An understanding of the reason why certain coins were selected for countermarking, or why particular countermarks were used on coins can add to our knowledge of the use and circulation of coins in general in the western provinces of the Roman empire in the 1st century AD.

Roman countermarks are invariably composed of letters and are brief in form: some can be easily read, others require more attention and consideration. Proposing an expansion from the letters of a particular countermark to words or names can lead to debate between scholars about the merits of this or that interpretation. In the case of *BON*, opinion is agreed that the expansion refers to *BON(us nummus)* = 'good money' or perhaps more plainly *BON(um)* = 'good'. The purpose of stamping 'good' on a coin would seem to be clear: that particular coin was considered suitable for continued circulation. A proclamation such as *BON(us nummus)* gave validity to a coin which, in the market-place, may have prompted questions about its value, perhaps because it was underweight, or heavily worn, or suspect in some other way.

The consistency of the incuse shape of the countermark *BON* - all examples are rectangular - may be contrasted with the variation in form of the letters composing the legend. In some cases the letters are of an even size, in others, as with the Caistor coin, "O" is much smaller than the other letters. In most cases, the coins selected for countermarking are Claudian *asses*. The pattern of consistency continues with the position of the countermark on coins: invariably, it is positioned horizontally across the neck of the obverse portrait bust: the legend reading correctly with the obverse head upright. One can begin to appreciate the regimentation of the operation by noting the separate stages required for countermarking and by recognising how, at each stage, variation could occur:

- 1 With few exceptions, only *asses* of Claudius I were selected for countermarking solely with *BON*
- 2 The selected coin was placed, with the obverse uppermost, on a wooden block or anvil
- 3 The obverse bust of each coin was aligned to have an upright orientation
- 4 The countermark punch - a rectangular iron-bar with the three letters B-O-N 'engraved'

in mirror-form at one end – was positioned squarely across the neck of the ‘portrait’ bust

- 5 After checking that the legend was also upright, the coin was struck with one blow of a hammer

Describing this procedure makes it sound rather ponderous, in practice, the necessary manipulations of coin and equipment would have been carried out deftly and speedily. The consistent behaviour of this particular countermark indicates it was applied following a prescribed pattern or instruction.

Identifying when and where *BON* was employed may help us to determine the circumstances in which it was used and why, and may guide us towards learning who countermarked the coins. Attempting to give a date of issue for an imitative coin is on the one hand problematic, but on the other, one knows that it was struck (very few examples of cast imitative Claudian *asses* have been noted) after the model it seeks to imitate was issued. Some progress towards being able to date these imitations has been made by closely inspecting coins excavated from sites which can be dated by archaeological features and artefacts other than coins. Analysis of Claudian *asses* excavated from the well-dated site of Colchester shows that a reduction in module of blanks which were struck as imitated Claudian *asses* occurred during Claudius’ reign and possibly into Nero’s reign (Crummy, 1987, 84-92). This reduction in module when plotted against the identified strata in which coins were found gave a means of dating Claudian *aes* (bronze coins). By applying the dates proposed for coins found at Colchester, it can be deduced that the countermark *BON* occurs on coins of the ‘late-Claudian’ module which gives the mid 50s AD as the earliest date for its use. Though the majority of these countermarked coins are very worn, it is conceivable that wear occurred after newly-struck coins were countermarked but one would then wish to answer the question why relatively new coins should warrant a stamp of validity. The most obvious answer is because the coins were of inferior and unacceptable quality. We have seen already that *asses* countermarked *BON* were imitations and smaller and lighter than orthodox issues from the mint of Rome, but excavated coin-finds in Britain suggest that these larger, heavier models had been driven out of circulation (into the melting pot?) by the beginning of Nero’s reign. It would seem unlikely therefore that the smaller, lighter, newly-struck imitative issues would be compared with their prototypes. It would seem more likely that the coins had seen circulation and become worn before they were countermarked. One must ask then, what circumstances might provide the need for a stamp of validity on worn coins? Two answers seem acceptable: a shortage of currency and, again, currency of inferior and unacceptable quality. It was to be a decade after Claudius’ death before Nero’s first issue of bronze coins were struck at *Lugdunum* (Lyons, France) and dispatched to the military bases and administrative centres of Rome’s northerly provinces. Until those new coins arrived, the small change available for daily transactions and payment was the worn bronze coins of Claudius and his predecessors. The arrival of Nero’s newly-struck bronze coins would undoubtedly have placed his coins at a premium in the market place over the worn, underweight Claudian *aes*. However, wholesale replacement of all old worn coins would have been impossible and is not supported by coin-find evidence in Britain; coins in circulation in the northern provinces of the Roman empire could only be supplemented by the new Neronian issues of the mid 60s AD. Undoubtedly, the arrival of these new coins, which were at double the weight of ‘late-Claudian’ imitated issues, would have driven out of circulation much of the decrepit currency; however, some coins were clearly considered suitable for further use. The addition of shiny, large, new coins to the currency pool could provide the circumstance for the

use of a countermark on worn coins to sanction their continued circulation at face value, while other more inferior coins were withdrawn from circulation. The next influx of newly-struck bronze coins, when similar circumstances might have pertained, was during Vespasian's reign in the early 70s AD by which time Claudian bronze coins were possibly of less significant numbers in the pool of circulating currency and their continued circulation of less importance. A date during the late-Neronian – early-Vespasian period (the mid-to late 60s AD) is therefore perhaps the most likely time for the use of this countermark.

Finds of *asses* of Claudius, and less commonly those of his predecessors, which have been countermarked *BON* occur almost exclusively in the upper northern provinces of the Roman Empire: the majority, at Rhenish frontier military posts in the province of *Germania Inferior* (roughly the area of the Netherlands and the upper reaches of the River Rhine, Germany). A search through available numismatic and archaeological literature and personal communication with a number of museums in the Netherlands allowed the author to record twenty-seven Claudian *asses* countermarked *BON*. A similar search for the province of *Gallia Belgica* produced nine Claudian *asses* with the countermark *BON*: six were noted from Giard's detailed list of coins deposited at the Gallo-Roman shrine at Conde-sur-Aisne, Northern France (Giard, 1968, 76-130). The geographical distribution of finds of this countermark, which is largely centred on the military posts of the Rhenish frontier, indicates its likely origin at one or more of those camps: coin-finds at *Novaesium* (Neuss, Germany) and in the surrounding area (Chantraine, 1982) include thirteen *asses* countermarked *BON* – this prolific site must be considered a potential source for this countermark.

If the origin of this countermark is a military base it suggests the attention of, or perhaps even supervision by, military personnel for this validating operation rather than the activities of a money-changer in the market-place with his testing-nicks and -digs of knives. The consistent pattern of behaviour and the loud proclamation of this countermark argues against an originating role for money-changer in the operation. The authority to sanction continued circulation at full value of worn, underweight coins must have rested with the military or administrative offices of a province keen to ensure sufficient acceptable bronze and copper currency for payment to troops and others. It may not surprise the reader to learn that this countermark was itself subject to imitation!

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