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A typology of coin distributions

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It is now nearly a decade since I published in *World Archaeology* my first article on theoretical problems of pre-Roman coin distribution (Collis 1971), and since that time some major advances have been made in related disciplines such as the paper on 'Regional Analysis' by Smith (1976) which has great implications for archaeology, and makes some reconsideration overdue. I have also been criticised on a number of matters, for instance that the models I produced for Britain were not applicable to France and that if we are going to attempt cross-cultural comparisons in coin-using, generalised models of wide application are essential. Mainly, however, the criticism has been of specific interpretations rather than of general approach, some of which I concede, as I do tacitly in this paper on the assumption that the adoption of 'low value' coinage necessarily implies the existence of a fully developed market economy. Whatever 'low value' coins were produced for, it was not to facilitate market exchange which is a secondary function, and this is as true for Roman and medieval Europe as it is for pre-Roman. Such a coinage was normally made for official payments to state workers, soldiers, jurors, and so forth. A different case occurs with the medieval jettons, the primary function of which was for accounting, but they were also used for small financial transactions despite numerous laws prohibiting this extension of their use (Barnard 1916). The general trend of thought is in fact against me, and it has now been suggested that even the early Roman economy was largely 'embedded' within social ties rather than being essentially market-based (Reece 1979; Hodder 1979).

Only Rodwell (1976) has criticised the more fundamental approach, renewing the conflicts of the 1960s between the model building 'new archaeology' and the more traditional 'historical' approaches. My allegiance to the former is evident and undiminished. Much of his criticism is specific to pre-Roman coinage, and this I have answered elsewhere (Collis 1981); indeed, the attempts by Rodwell and his predecessors to use pre-Roman coinage to define invasions and political units is an almost unique phenomenon in the numismatic literature. The approach founders because we have little possibility of testing the historical conclusions or indeed confirming the tacitly assumed starting-point that coins necessarily have ethnic and political significance. More recently (1981) Rodwell has suggested that the quality of the data is insufficient for what I am trying to do. This is, in fact, a much more damaging attack on his own particularist historical approach where he needs *total* distributions to define areas of military penetration or political influence; anything less renders his interpretations flawed. Historical interpretations are by definition unique; more generalised models such as I suggest should

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recur at different times and in different parts of the world. Inadequate data does not destroy my models, it merely postpones the testing until better controlled data is available, whereas historical interpretations which are related to a single set of data can be rendered meaningless. I am not so pessimistic about our samples and, over time, irregularities in reporting of data can balance out (Hodder and Orton 1976:22–4). In any case, most aspects of my models can be tested by a limited number of excavations on key sites; for instance, to investigate what sorts of coins, if any, turn up on certain categories of sites.

We must start with the assumption that coinage was not necessarily functioning as it does in our own society, and that its circulation may be restricted to specific uses and/or social classes. This is self-evident with the early gold coinage, but may be equally true of the 'low value' coins. This may lead on to the prediction of the status of sites known only from stray finds, as I attempted to do in the case of Winchester in 1971. And, despite statements to the contrary (Cunliffe 1976; Rodwell 1976), the present archaeological evidence still supports my predictions (Collis 1978) that there was no major settlement on the site in the Late Iron Age. Likewise my prediction that we would find evidence of coin minting on 'minor' settlements, which was criticised by Spratling (Wainwright and Spratling 1973) has now been generally accepted (Megaw, Collis and Spratling 1973; *pace* Rodwell 1976:282), and has recently found striking confirmation in the excavation of the small industrial village at Aulnat, near Clermont-Ferrand, France (Collis 1980) and at Šaštin, near Bratislava, Czechoslovakia (L. Zachar pers. comm.; Tournaire *et al.* forthcoming). In brief, the value and stimulus of theoretical approaches have been more than demonstrated in the last decade.

In this paper I want to stimulate discussion on how we should investigate the nature of coin distributions as a preliminary to a major project on pre-Roman coinage which is just getting underway (Haselgrove and Collis 1981).

Distributions

Distributions of pre-Roman coins fall into two basic classes, 'dispersed' and 'nucleated'; that is, they are either concentrated on certain types of site or not. Dispersed types usually only occur together in hoards, while 'nucleated' types occur on major settlements. Finds from temple sites form a separate problem, as both the hoarding and the exchange aspects of coinage may be present.

a *Dispersed distributions*

These seem to be of two basic types – ones which show a concentration, perhaps around the area of production with a fall-off in surrounding areas, so producing the classic bell curve (fig. 1a), as found with Class I potin coins which show a concentration of find spots around the Thames estuary (Allen 1971). Secondly, and less expected, some types seem to have an even distribution over an area with no obvious concentrations (fig. 1b), for instance the gold coins of Cunobeline (Allen 1975).

Great play has sometimes been made, especially by those of the 'historical school', with the presence or absence of coin types in an area, usually by scanning maps by eye. But it is clearly important to distinguish between the two types of pattern and also to get a rough estimate of

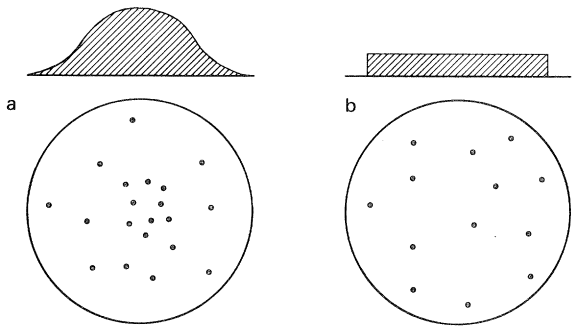

Figure 1 Examples of dispersed distribution types:
a concentrated bell-shaped distribution
b even

the number of coins likely to have been minted – something that can be done approximately from a study of the number and pairing of coin dies. As yet I have no specific examples as the data is still being computerised to allow analyses such as this (Haselgrove and Collis 1981). The area of distribution will obviously vary according to the numbers that have survived, and the rarity of the coin type in the first place. Are the very localised distributions of coin types such as British N, as against the wide distributions of say Gallo-Belgic E, merely due to the latter being more commonly struck (or lost), or to their having different types of distribution? The percentage of coin survivals can obviously have a profound influence on the apparent distribution of coin types. We may find a further subdivision of distribution types based on a matrix of commonness of striking and area of distribution:

	wide distribution	*narrow distribution*
many struck	x	x
few struck	x	x

All four types seem to exist; for instance, Nash has noted a very wide distribution of the early, rare gold type with A monogram in eastern and central Gaul (Nash 1978:85), which obviously forms a contrast with the tight distribution of the rare British N.

Both the mode of production and the means of dispersal will affect the distribution patterns. If production is centralised at one point, we may reasonably expect some form of concentrated distribution with the bell-shaped dispersal pattern. An even distribution could be caused by dispersed production – that is, a number of centres may have the bell-shaped distributions coalesced into an even distribution. This might be detected by different distributions of different dies, but sample sizes are usually too small to distinguish this. The gold coins of Cunobeline mentioned previously represent a different case. Here centralised production at one or two centres can be assumed, but the distribution is even. The distribution of other artefacts, notably imported bronze vessels and amphorae, is related to that of the gold coins (Collis forthcoming), and dispersal seems to have been through social and political channels rather than purely economic ones. The gold coins may represent the distribution of a social class throughout a political territory. Indeed, if coinage is used by the centre to protect its borders, we might expect the reverse of the bell-shaped distribution.

b *Nucleated distributions*

These are mainly characteristic of the lower value coins, bronze, potin and silver minims. The reason for striking these low value coins is still unclear – the high value gold and silver coins obviously had status and the effort of striking them, as with the production of gold ornaments, perhaps enhanced the value of the basic metal. With the bronze and especially some of the roughly cast potin coins, this can hardly have been the case, and with some types such as the MOTVIDIACA series in Gaul, no attempt was made to produce a uniform weight. Even if, as is doubtful, there was some form of market exchange before the advent of low value coinage, it is unlikely that the coins were manufactured for this reason – even as late as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, states were loath to provide small change. The advent of bronze coinage in Athens was for the city to pay its citizens for state business, for instance jury service, and the potential use of coinage as a medium of impersonal exchange through a market was a secondary innovation, though it could have been a rapid development. Coinage could also be a unit of account, for example for the fixing of property rents in the medieval period, even though the rents were often paid in kind. Again this represents a secondary function, and one which by its very nature would not leave much trace in the archaeological record.

In the case of the inscribed bronze coins of south-eastern England such as those of Cunobeline where we are obviously dealing with a centralised state, it seems likely that there was some form of state production, but this seems less likely for many of the Gaulish series where there are no identification marks. Unlike at St Albans (Frere 1979, fig. 1), coin production does not seem to have been taking place in the upper class area but rather in the artisan areas of the settlement, as at Mont Beuvray. It does, however, raise the possibility that we may be dealing with administrative and social factors as well as possibly marketing factors. Ignoring the problem of religious sites, and roughly following Smith's classification of regional systems, we can perhaps postulate three main possibilities:

A *Administrative* If coinage is being used for largely administrative purposes, it is likely to be circulating among only a limited section of the population: those near enough to the centre to participate in state functions and possibly of sufficiently high social status to participate in those activities (though it is worth noting in passing that in some societies the social élite consider it demeaning to handle coins). This could have produced a highly centralised situation in which the coins only appear on the major sites (fig. 2a), as may have been the case in central France on sites such as Gergovie (Nash 1978). Alternatively, these coins might also be found on rural sites, but only those of high social standing (fig. 2b) – the Colchester bronze coinage might be a case worth investigating. Finds are common at Colchester itself but virtually unknown in the surrounding countryside.

B *Monopolistic market* Where urban development is strongly influenced by administrative factors, but where coinage starts to be used as a medium of market exchange, we may see the appearance of monopolistic markets; that is, administrative centres which are acting as a market centre for the immediately surrounding area but which are unaffected by competition from other more distant surrounding centres. In fact there will be rural areas too far away from any centre for them to be affected by the market. Smith quotes examples from Japan, but it seems a plausible model for some of the Late Iron Age *oppida* in Europe. The resulting distribution is

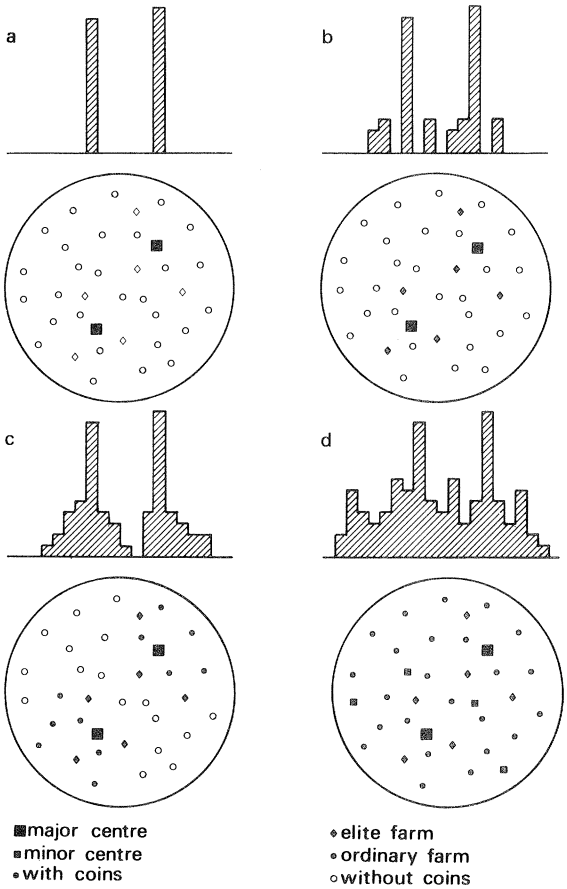

Figure 2 Examples of nucleated distribution types:
a, b 'administrative'
c monopolistic market
d competitive market

depicted in figure 2c. This might be difficult to distinguish from the 'administrative' pattern, the major difference being that coinage will turn up on low status settlements in the vicinity of the urban centre. This is something which cannot yet be demonstrated for any site in Iron Age Europe – the data are insufficient. But it might be applicable to the distribution of silver minims around Stradonice in Bohemia (Collis forthcoming).

C *Competitive market* As trade develops, secondary centres may appear, offering subsidiary services: competing with, if not in certain respects outstripping, the original centres. The whole of the countryside can thus fall within the ambit of a market centre, a process well documented for the early medieval period and which may have started already in pre-Roman Britain; for instance, around St Albans or in France around the *oppidum* of Pommiers in the Aisne valley. This situation is illustrated in figure 2d.

Discussion

These are some of the main possibilities that can be suggested, but there are others: for instance, a coin-using market may be functioning on the urban site itself while the surrounding farms are not using coinage. Hodder has recently queried this (Hodder 1979:191), as he cannot envisage how such a system could function. He obviously does not read the right bedtime stories to his children, as Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods* describes beautifully personal non-market monopolistic exchange between a farmer and the town store based on credit, barter, and agreed prices.

There are thus several factors to explore: the distance to market, regularity of contact (daily to annual), the social structure (for example, was everyone free to visit market, or was surplus channelled through a local chieftain/squire?), and the complexity of the central place. Is there a point in time when the economy becomes so complex and the central place so large, with such varied and specialised services, that the personal relationship was no longer possible? These are factors relevant not only to pre-Roman Iron Age of Europe, but to a large number of early urban societies in the initial stages of coin using. It emphasises more than ever the need to understand the context of coin finds.

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Abstract

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A typology of coin distributions

Supporters of the 'historical paradigm' for interpreting pre-Roman British coinage still have not answered basic criticisms that neither their initial assumptions nor their results are capable of testing. Likewise use of distribution maps is simplistic, and fails to take into account the differing types of coin distributions. A number of different find patterns are suggested for discussion, reflecting different types of coin usage for administrative and exchange purposes, and these will form one group of questions in a new survey of coinage which has just been initiated in Britain.