

Local History: Iron Age Stater Die



The Alton die, which was brought into the Curtis Museum for identification back in 2004, is the size and shape of an average thimble, slightly narrower at one end just under 2cm in diameter and it weighs 46.75 grams. It is composed of copper with a high tin content. The smaller end has an engraved design of a horse with a shadowy figure behind holding a stick. Below the horse is a vertical line and a lyre shaped object.

The design on the die has its origins in the 4th century BC gold stater coins struck by Philip II of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great. The obverse depicts the classical laureate head of Apollo and on the reverse a two horse chariot. This coin was

imitated throughout Europe over the following centuries, but with the passage of time, the design soon became forgotten and was replaced by a crude version of the original. In some cases it became so debased it was reduced to a jumbled abstract, where an occasional ear, lock of hair or a wheel might be identified.

The Alton die would have produced Gallo-Belgic B type gold staters, which were some of the earliest coins found in Britain, dating to the late 2nd century BC. They are generally found to the east of Hampshire, particularly around the London area and also on both sides of the Channel. Lack of evidence for coin production here lead some to believe that staters were made in Gaul, modern day France, and transported to Britain by merchants. Alternatively, it was thought they could have arrived as gifts for the elite, or even been brought over as wages to pay mercenary troops.

Coins were produced by striking a cast gold blank between two dies, an obverse and a reverse die, each generally having an engraved design. The lower was held in a vice, the blank placed on top and the upper die sometimes strengthened by an iron sheath, lowered over the blank. This was then struck hard by a hammer, the blow transferring the design to both faces of the coin blank.

The Alton die produced the reverse side of the coin. This depicts a horse with a shadowy figure standing behind, holding a stick, which on the Phillipus coin would have been a charioteer cracking a whip. The obverse of the Gallo Belgic B coins are known to be deliberately defaced by a series of lines, unfortunately the obverse die producing this was never found, although the area was examined.



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So Hampshire has produced a unique stater die of national importance, only one other is known from Britain. Clearly this now suggests we were making our own stater coins, and not relying on the French to bring in supplies. Something we really knew must have been the case all along, but not having found any convincing evidence could not be confirmed.

The original was acquired by the British Museum, but two replicas are on display in the Curtis Museum.