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TONY ABRAMSON, *Coinage in the Northumbrian Landscape and Economy*, c. 575–867, BAR British Series 841 (Archaeopress, 2018. £59.00 xxi + 207 pp., inc. 161 figures, 13 graphs and 10 plates, ISBN 9781407316536

This volume presents the doctoral research of the author, a driving force in early medieval numismatics. In it, Abramson contends that the kingdom of Northumbria, at least in the ninth century, possessed a monetised economy, created by controlled devaluation of the coinage to a level suitable for everyday purchases; that an enigmatic Northumbrian gold coinage was the first in post-Roman Britain and issued by Paulinus, first bishop of Anglian York; and that the Yorkshire Wolds, especially, were a focus of economic enterprise. The first of these contentions is arguably demonstrated; on the other two, more is said below. Abramson has also used an unprecedented volume of numismatic finds, including substantial unpublished data gathered by the late Elizabeth Pirie, which constitutes a major contribution to the field. Furthermore, his datasets are freely available as downloads from his publisher's website (currently at <https://www.barpublishing.com/additional-downloads.html>).

This division between the print work and its electronic component is mostly handled well, but the overall organisation of the volume is bewildering. While the largest part of it (97-173) is a series of schematic and illuminating case studies, the preceding chapters largely fail in explaining Abramson's methodology; despite two preceding chapters with titles involving 'monetization', his meaning only becomes clear in Chapter 6 (86), which is about something else. Themes are picked up and dropped across plural chapters and often better explained away from relevant-seeming headings than under them. There are occasional fragments of floating text (e. g. 117), many typos, and statements are offered without relation to surrounding discussion. The numerous, attractive images are grouped at chapter ends, but not always those of the chapter where they are mentioned, and some are never linked to the discussion. There is no general index and the reader must therefore pore over every paragraph, in case it contains the missing key to some other section's discussion. The Bibliography, although huge, omits perhaps a tenth of the author's references and scrambles others: thus, the whole Transformation of the Roman World series becomes one monograph by Ian Wood, 196). Archaeopress could have done better by their author.

Despite the confusion of the text, Abramson's mastery of his data is consistently apparent and impressive. His database consists of 7,575 coins, 1,242 with secure provenances and findspots. To this he adds the voluminous archaeological finds made available through the Portable Antiquities Scheme database. This is already a lot of data, much of it gleaned from the records of Miss Pirie, but it is often clear that Abramson knows yet more through his connections with wider numismatic circles, and he makes clear where this information might alter his conclusions, but keeps it separate from his own calculations.

Reading the case studies thus gives the reader an intimate sense of the state of local history, archaeology and numismatics, but Abramson's interpretations may still sometimes be questioned. This reviewer wondered, for example, why Abramson is prepared to accept an apparently unfounded tariff of the 9th-century copper-alloy coin known as a *styca* to the silver *sceatta*, as offered by a 17th-century source (112–13), when he insists that the two coinages were not contemporary. Abramson denies a coinage to one Northumbrian king, Ælfwald II, because he believes, *contra* Pirie, that its lettering is the same as Ælfwald I's (55), but the illustrations clearly justify Pirie's palaeography, and a list of disputable iconographic interpretations could go on at length. This reviewer's biggest disagreement with Abramson relates to the supposed Paulinus shilling, since none of the 23 known specimens comes any closer to the legend that he proposes, PAVLINVS EP(iscopus), than PAOIIENVL EP, with less literate versions more common (40–44). A later date, as proposed by the late Mark Blackburn, seems more likely than that contemporary engravers would so muddle the name of their educated, Roman employer, but this would undermine Abramson's claims of Yorkshire progressiveness (xxi, 55, 56, 91...). Nevertheless, other points, such as that Anglian South Newbald was more likely an assembly than a market site as usually thought (122–25), and that the famous Fishergate dig in York probably did not uncover the Anglian *wic* or trading site, but a secondary craft production and settlement area, are convincingly argued from the coin evidence (99–109).

The main contention of the volume, that of Northumbrian monetisation, is more ambiguously convincing. Abramson's case is arguably proven by the simple existence of his evidence. Seven-and-a-half thousand surviving coins, of which the bulk are the low-value *stycas*, found in hoards and, more often, as single losses scattered all over the East and North Ridings (Abramson does not cover the West Riding), must represent an original production hundreds or thousands of times larger. There is no sensible way to explain this except by the widespread availability of coin. Abramson wisely draws a distinction between a society like ours, in which almost every transaction involves money in some form, and one in which money was available to most people as a medium of exchange, but his data pretty clearly demonstrate that the latter sense of monetisation did apply in late Anglian Northumbria.

This, however, is not the argument that Abramson deploys. Instead, he argues for the ordinariness of coin in the Northumbrian landscape by correlating its occurrence with other forms of material culture preserved in the archaeological record. His premise is that if coins occur together with goods for which they might have been exchanged, it suggests the normality of monetised exchange. This has obvious problems. His cross-correlation figures are a straightforward count of sites with both coins and objects divided by one of sites with only objects: thus, where an area has few of either kind of site, it scores the same as one that has many of both (admitted p. 86). This generates apparent conclusions that even Abramson then rejects, such as that Roman monetisation should have been lower than Anglian levels

in certain areas despite there being two orders more magnitude of Roman coin than Anglian in the datasets (85–86). Furthermore, in the case studies Abramson reads his figures in almost any way that supports his desired conclusion: around the city of York, a low level of finds thinly spread demonstrates monetisation (110–11), but so does a single hoard and almost no material culture around Ripon (117) or only 2 of 16 sites showing coin over Holderness (154–56). Only in the Yorkshire Wolds does his cross-correlation figure really deliver the results he wants (132), and on this rests his belief that that area was more ‘enterprising’ (171). The comparison he draws to the well-settled but finds-deprived Vale of Pickering, where denser aristocratic land-holding perhaps meant a more autarkic economy, is significant for the economic history of Northumbria (162), but ignored sentences later in order to claim monetisation here too. Abramson’s overall case does not require this unconvincing methodology, but he maintains it energetically.

It is, however, possible that Abramson’s work shows us something about the Anglian economy in Northumbria that he does not himself claim, and which might explain several other aspects of his findings. Abramson’s picture of a coinage declining in value over time, from debasing gold through debasing silver to copper-alloy, with a concomitant multiplication of specie in circulation, seems internally coherent; a little gold or silver would be worth a lot of copper. To Abramson this copper-alloy phase represents the final realisation of the monetised economy, but it was short-lived by his chronology, *c.* 830–67, ending in Viking take-over (66–71). An alternative explanation that links the *styca* coinage directly to Viking raiding might, however, better explain both its duration and the fact that *stycas* rarely turn up with other coins or even other goods, but were still apparently worth hoarding. That suggests that *stycas* were a special-use medium, for which nothing was a substitute. Abramson understandably believes that, with no intrinsic value, these must have been fiduciary coins, their value determined by royal fiat. He also believes that the kings of Northumbria operated some kind of tax system (never argued, but stated 58 and 68). If so, the *stycas* were presumably the kingdom’s means of payment. This rather changes our picture of the processes by which *stycas* (and perhaps earlier regal coinages) were circulated, and suggests that the Wolds were perhaps not more enterprising but, rather, more thoroughly taxed than the aristocratically dominated Vale of Pickering. It also implies considerable durability of fiscal administration through the numerous civil conflicts endured by the Northumbrian crown. Thirdly, it helps explain the short but prolific period of issue of the *stycas*, which would coincide more or less with the first intensification of Viking attacks on British shores. We may therefore be seeing in the *stycas* Northumbria’s Danegeld, created to enable a more general extraction of wealth from across the kingdom to pay for soldiery and goods with which to fend or buy off the attackers.

These suggestions, though tentative, are indications of the research possibilities that Abramson’s work opens up. Whatever one thinks of his own conclusions, this is a book which, with its allied datasets, will enable a myriad of new

researches, some of which may yet justify the more conjectural of Abramson's findings. New coins continue to be found, and they will provoke new thoughts, but Abramson has given us a great deal to work with meanwhile.