

Bracteate pennies and Clonmacnoise

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Semi-Bracteates ca. 1125/40

Most of the surviving semi-bracteates originate from a hoard discovered in February 1855 on Scrabo Hill, prior to the construction of the Tower, being located under a prehistoric cairn known as the “Giant's Grave”. Although it seems that some of the coins were dispersed, most of the hoard, numbering about fifty, plus fragments, are now in the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin.

Such pennies are described as *semi-bracteates* as each coin was produced by hammering a thin blank flan, and then being turned around and restruck with the reverse design. The obverse of the coin illustrated displays a degraded portrait with a beaded hair style, being based upon earlier coins of Aethelred II. The reverse shows a plain cross combined with a cross botonee with large triple annulet cross ends. The legend on both sides is represented by occasional 'I' symbols.



True Bracteates ca.1135/70

The semi-bracteates present us with features similar to earlier issues of Hiberno-Norse coins minted in Dublin, albeit of a cruder nature. However, the slightly later true bracteates, where only one side of the coin is die stamped, are very different in their design, and with their weight being considerably lighter. Many of these types originate from the famous Castlelyons hoard, in county Cork, which was discovered in 1837. An account of the find was detailed in John Lindsay's *View of the Coinage of Ireland* in 1839, mentioning that it was actually found at Curraghmore, which is close to Castlelyons. He also tells us that “the quantity found was said to

amount to two or three baskets full”. However he went on to say that “the greatest part was melted down as not more than about sixty came into the possession of the Cork collectors”.



True bracteate showing cross over quatrefoil, with a pellet in each angle and a series of “I’s” around. Ex. Spink NY.

Whilst there remains a general consensus that true bracteates were issued in Dublin, there is speculation that, alternatively, they could have been minted within the monastic settlement of Clonmacnoise, in county Offaly, on the orders of Turlogh Ua Conchobair (O'Connor), the High King between 1119 and 1156. This is based upon writings within the *Cambrensis Eversus*, effectively a history of medieval Ireland, by John Lynch, which was published in 1662, eventually translated into English between 1848 and 1852, stating that Turlogh “ordered silver to be struck at Clonmacnoise”.

The Annals of Clonmacnoise, is also a history of Ireland and was translated into English in 1627 by Conall Mag Eochagáin, being based upon a lost Irish chronicle, written in Gaelic, which enveloped events within Ireland from pre history to 1408. It states that “there was money coyned in Clonvickenos this year”. The year it refers to is 1170, which seems a bit late, but it may be simply an approximation.

In another work, *Antiquities and History of Ireland* by James Ware (1599 -1666), it is stated that “a mint was established here (Clonmacnoise) by Turlogh O'Connor in which silver coins were struck”.

These writings however, may have used the same source, or even borrowed from each other, which could help to explain the similarities in the narrative.

Michael Dolley left the question open as to whether a mint had been established at Clonmacnoise. He pointed out that Turlogh was a patron of learning and of the arts, suggesting an appreciation of decorative objects. He had also accumulated considerable wealth, as evidenced by his generosity in providing gifts and bequests. His prestige was reinforced by his political and militaristic standing, culminating with a hard won victory at Móin Mhór (Moanmore) in 1151. This may have enticed certain moneyers to seek employment by him, particularly when it is

considered that the Dublin economy was in general decline in the second quarter of the twelfth century.

Although the location of Castlelyons was about eighty miles from Clonmacnoise, it is even further away from Dublin and well outside the area they would normally have been expected to circulate. Also the coins do appear to have been minted around the year 1140, give or take a few years, so they are within the correct time period for Turlogh. It does not take a great deal of imagination to speculate that the coins could have been deposited prior to the great battle of 1151, especially when it is possible that Castlelyons, or more precisely, Curraghmore, could have been on a route towards Móin Mhór.

Six bracteates were also found under the floor of Kildare Round Tower, during excavations in 1843. One of these appears to be a very late variety and which may have been issued c.1155-70. This is implied by the design being found to be very similar to the reverse of that of Stephen of England's Awbridge type, which was struck c.1154-58, showing a voided pommée with crude fleurs in each of the quarters, and it would seem that such reverse features appear to have become fashionable during the second half of the twelfth century. Examples of these bracteates have also been recovered from Knowe (1852) and from more recent excavations in Dublin, and an unusual variant was also found in the Castlelyons hoard. The metal in these late types is very debased.



A late variety of a true bracteate showing a voided cross with a crude fleur in each angle c.1155-1170. Ex. Heritage Auctions.

It seems logical to conclude that the production of the Irish bracteates ended around 1170, following the Norman invasion. The earliest Anglo Norman coins to be minted were issued in Dublin by John as Lord of Ireland, and it is thought that this was around 1185, when he visited Ireland. These are known as the profile issue, and the inner reverse design is almost a continuation from that of the late bracteates.



John, as Lord of Ireland, profile penny c.1185. Ex.DNW

We will probably never know for certain, but if it could be proved, beyond reasonable doubt, that bracteates were minted at Clonmacnoise, under the authority of a High King of Ireland, it would be of enormous numismatic significance, for they would be the first purely Irish coins to be minted outside of Dublin.