

Coronation Medals and Stuart Iconography

Professor Andrew McRae in conversation with Dr Joseph Hone

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Andrew McRae: I'm sitting here with Dr Joe Hone and we're looking at some medals and coins from the Stuart era. Joe, we are quite familiar with the imagery of marks on coins, yet these ubiquitous products of material culture contained really important rich iconography through which the monarchs presented images of themselves and of their values. Monarchs were very keen to mint fresh coins to mark the inauguration the new reign. Medals, which we are particularly focusing upon here, were typically issued to mark the coronation. Some of the higher quality medals might be given out to dignitaries. Some of the lesser quality medals might be simply tossed into the crowd so that onlookers could take home a souvenir of the day. They could be rich in meaning. One commentator called them 'vocal monuments'. Others compared them to poems. Joe we're looking here at medal from 1702 to mark the coronation of Queen Anne. Can you tell me a little bit about it?

Joseph Hone: Well Andrew, on the obverse (that is, the side with the head) we have a portrait of Queen Anne. On the reverse we have something a little bit more arcane. To the left is an image of Pallas Athena (the goddess of wisdom and warfare). On the other side we have an image of a classical monster: a giant with snaky legs, two heads, and four arms. Now we know quite a lot about the meaning of this iconography because it was designed by the master of the Royal Mint, Isaac Newton, whom we know more usually as the era's greatest scientific mind. Newton's notes on the design illuminate the level of thought that went into its manufacture. Pallas Athena represents the queen. And the monster represents, in Newton's words, 'any enemy with which her Majesty hath or will have war'. The Latin motto around the outside translates as 'she is the vicegerent of the thunderer'. By vicegerent, there, we mean 'deputy'.

AMcR: Why was war such an important and contentious topic?

JH: Well, Britain and her allies had just declared war against Louis XIV of France to prevent his nephew for exceeding to the recently vacant Spanish throne. Together France and Spain had plans to become an all dominant catholic superpower, which Britain and her Protestant allies were naturally keen to avoid. But the War of the Spanish succession was a war for the British succession too, because Louis supported the Jacobites and harboured Anne's Catholic half-brother James Francis Edward Stuart, who we also know as the son of James II and figured so prominently in the warming pan scandal of 1688.

AMcR: In what other ways did the medal contain anti-Jacobite propaganda?

JH: Partly the anti-Jacobite messages of the medal were encoded in allusions to earlier Stuart iconography, particularly with reference to William and Mary's coronation medal from back in 1689. On that medal William was portrayed as Jupiter casting James II from his throne with a

thunderbolt. By describing Anne as the vice-gerent to the thunderer, then, this medal suggested that Anne succeeded from William and that her Stuart lineage was somehow less important.

AMcR: Was that because James Francis Edward actually had a stronger hereditary claim?

JH: Precisely. And the medal underscored the constitutional basis of Anne's claim rather than emphasising the arguments for hereditary succession, because those arguments could always be interpreted as pro-Jacobite messages by people with a vested interest in that cause. We need to remember that the Act of Settlement stipulated that, after Anne's death without an heir of her body, the throne should pass the house of Brunswick and Hanover and not to her Catholic half-brother James. And we see that legislation reflected in the iconography of the medal, in so far as it's an anti-Jacobite message that also suggests that Anne succeeds from William on account of statute rather than blood. Here then we see a small material objects endorsing a much larger more important piece of legislation.

AMcR: So how was it received by the public?

JH: We know that these objects were discussed widely because, Pepys, while out drinking in the Three Tun Tavern in Charing Cross, actually mentions going upstairs with some friends to pour over all the new medals of the day. So these were objects that though the ownership may sometimes be limited would have a much broader reach than just the people who owned them. As we might expect, the anti-Jacobite messages and the pro-war messages chimed particularly well with members of the Whig party, who supported those policies.

AMcR: Could you just remind me about the difference between the Whigs and the Tories?

JH: Well the Whigs emerged in the late 1670s, as essentially lobbyists for the exclusion of the Duke of York (later James II) from the line of succession because of his Catholicism. Tories emerged as rivals to the Whigs, as people who supported the Duke of York. And during the 1680s the rivalry between the two parties was consolidated, with the Glorious Revolution in 1688, and exacerbated during the 1690s. By the time Anne came to the throne in 1702, we were in the midst of what is now known as the age of party.

AMcR: So this is the very beginning of party politics as we know it.

JH: Absolutely. The origins of our modern political system.

AMcR: So you were talking about the record of Tory reception.

JH: And, strikingly, there is none. References to the medal's iconography are completely absent from pro-Tory poetry and pamphleteering. The only record we have of the Tory response is actually in Oxford, where the high Tory Vice Chancellor (a man named Roger Mander) actually prohibited students from writing or reading poems based on the medal's iconography. Indeed, if we believe these stories, Mander actively suppressed the message of the medal because it didn't chime with his Tory politics. So I mentioned earlier that anti-Jacobitism and pro-war messages were particularly popular with Whigs and that's equally so with their poetry, which supports those policies. On the other hand, Tory verse tends to support older values of hereditary monarchy, of divine right to rule. And these were issues that could occasionally veer into pro-Jacobite poetry, which we might consider as an offshoot from Tory literature.

AMcR: Could you say what were the key values of Tory literature, as opposed to the Whig literature?

JH: Well, in order to get to those key values we have to go almost all the way back to the formation of the Tory party. They formed because they wanted the Duke of York to become

James II. They thought that his right by hereditary succession was more important than his Catholic faith. So the predominance of hereditary monarchy over conforming Protestant monarchy is one key value. Another key value (seemingly contradictory) is support for the Church of England. So one of the key rallying cries of not just Tory poetry but Tory pamphlets and sermons to is that the church was in danger from the Whigs: so Anglican conformists who were liberal in their tolerance of Protestant dissenters. Dissent was anathema to high Tories.

AMcR: So how could the Tories reconcile their support for hereditary monarchy with a commitment to Anne?

JH: The Tory support for Queen Anne emerged partly because she was perceived as somebody who would restore the Church of England after the reign of the foreign Calvinist William III. If William III was perceived as a Whig monarch, then Tories thought of Anne as a Tory monarch. So this was a moment in which concern about the health of the Church of England rumps support for hereditary succession. Perhaps the Whig support for the iconography of this medal (and the Tory dismay in its iconography) originated with its designer Isaac Newton. We've got to remember that from time to time Newton also served as a Whig MP. So maybe he let some of his own political ideology seep into the designing process. The Tories didn't like the Coronation medal because they didn't think it did justice to Queen Anne. They thought of her as somebody who would bring new policies and rejuvenate the church, whereas this medal seemingly showed Anne simply continuing with William's old policies.

AMcR: So looking back over the reign of Anne how do you see this moment, this iconography of 1702 as a reflection upon her reign?

JH: Well the greatest achievements of Anne's reign were military. The War of the Spanish Succession finally ended in 1713 (one year before Anne's death) and Louis XIV was forced to sue for peace. Britain won huge gains in the treaty negotiated against Louis, including a monopoly over the very lucrative Asiento slave trade and several colonies in the South Pacific. Essentially, Britain as a modern trading power emerged from that peace treaty in 1713.

AMcR: So why do you think we should be looking at coins and medals, Joe?

JH: Well mainly because people look to them at the time. And people cared about the messages that were encoded into the allegorical symbolism of these medals. We need only look as far as Joseph Addison, who wrote just after Anne's coronation in his quite witty essay *Dialogues on Ancient Medals*, that one may often find as much thought on the reverse of a medal as in canto of Spenser'. That is, as is in a verse of Edmund Spenser's famous poem *The Faery Queen*. Now, partly we might think of this as a derogatory remark on Spenser. But it also shows that medals were being not just interpreted; they were being read. And they weren't just being read by scholars like Addison; they were been read by people on the street.

AMcR: So Edmund Spenser, the great poet of Queen Elizabeth I, being compared here to the coronation medal.

JH: Indeed. What it shows us is that we cannot afford to ignore these medals. They are just as important as the poetry, and, if we ignore them, then we are getting representations of Anne seriously wrong.

AMcR: So how, Joe, do you think we interpret the significance of these coins and medals circulating across the country?

JH: Well, in terms of Anne's coronation medal, we've already noted that there is some quite arcane symbolism in here. One would have to be quite educated in order to unpick and unravel

all the layers of meaning that were packed into that symbolism. But taken just as an image it's quite striking. It shows Anne as a goddess casting down a monster. One doesn't need to have knowledge of classical mythology in order to understand the thrust of the image, while one may need it to understand the intricacies. More generally, thinking about coins, we shouldn't underestimate the power of the portrait of a monarch on the side of something that carries value. In order for these tokens of metal known as coins to have value, they need the imprint of the monarch on one side. So, the monarch, the portrait of the monarch, gave value to items that are otherwise quite worthless

AMcR: And at a time, I guess, when the printed image was in existence but was nowhere near as prevalent as printed images are today, coins really mattered. Those images really mattered in terms of establishing an imagery an image of a monarch.

JH: And one of the reasons why they were so important is because print could come from anywhere anyone could print a broadside or a pamphlet the only the state could cast coins. And, as items of undoubted authority and if necessary use, they were all pervasive and I think quite powerful in shaping how contemporaries thought about their rulers.

Bodleian items featured (by shelfmark): Arch. Num. XI 23; 21995 f.1.