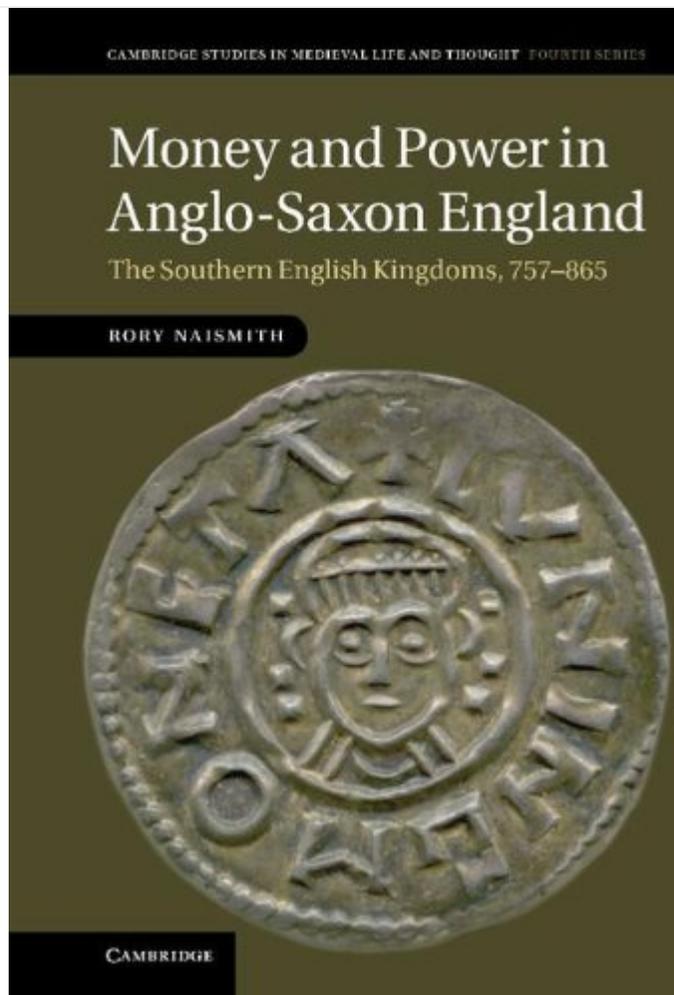


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Money and Power in Anglo-Saxon England: The Southern English Kingdoms, 757-865



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Reviewed Work(s)

Money and Power in Anglo-Saxon England: The Southern English Kingdoms, 757-865. By Rory Naismith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.) Pp. xviii, 351. Hardback, £67.50.

Rory Naismith's *Money and Power in Anglo-Saxon England: The Southern English Kingdoms, 757-865* is an innovative foray into the development of economic structures in high Anglo-Saxon history through the treatment of recent coin-horde finds. Dr. Naismith provides a detailed analysis of the iconography that links those findings to the political context within which the coinage existed and was utilized. Through a careful incorporation of primary source material—focused most directly upon the coinage itself—along with an expansive collection of secondary material, Naismith constructs the world of the Anglo-Saxon minter and the casted issues put forth by those minters; he also outlines the path from legal construction of minting law to its practical usage by kings and officers of the royal court. The reader is immersed in a detailed analysis of several different aspects of the history of coin production and usage. This is due in no small part to Naismith's previous work on Anglo-Saxon coinage, which adds to his command of the subject.¹ The analysis provided by Naismith is reflective of the overwhelming volume of study on Anglo-Saxon England, which has seen expansion in recent years due to increased interest in numismatics as a subject for historical research, and large-scale projects on the pre-Conquest era such as the Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England.

Naismith's goal is to illustrate that the study of the coins can be linked not only to numismatic reflection and iconography but can also be utilized to characterize the political and economic history of the eras in which they were minted. His ability to incorporate the study of the coins into an overarching synthesis while accommodating the contextual history of the minting system demonstrates the potential of numismatic evidence to enrich our understanding of Anglo-Saxon England.

The text itself is thematic in its approach, separating chapters according to topics associated with various historical contexts of coinage. Naismith

presents the work as an anthology, wherein most of the individual chapters could stand alone, with many providing their own complete conclusions detailing the various aspects of minting history, iconography and coin usage. This structure allows Naismith to address the various aspects of Anglo-Saxon coinage while analyzing the political dynamics associated with the policies and laws that were established during his stated period, 757-865.

The first chapter establishes Naismith's agenda by outlining a brief historical context for the southern English kingdoms and by providing an overview of the minting practices of the era, inclusive of dye-cutting, silver mining and the connection between the king and all levels of the minting enterprise. In chapter two, "Money in its political context," Naismith outlines the place minting and coinage had within the power structures of the Wessex and Mercian nobility. While Naismith incorporates the polarizing terminology of statehood in referencing these political entities, he is careful to elaborate that he refers specifically to royal authority and not necessarily administrative apparatus in regards to the Anglo-Saxon "state." Chapter three is devoted to the iconography of the coinage itself. Here Naismith branches out from a purely numismatic approach and focuses upon the symbolism of the coinage as an illustration of the "thoughts, insights and perceptions of the period." (84) The analysis is that coinage served a political motivation, the iconographic representation of the power of the monarchy, through propaganda as readily as it served an economic need.

This conclusion leads into chapters four and five, collectively titled "Authority and minting" in two parts, the first being "the king" and the second "mints, die-cutters and moneyers." This is the largest section of the text, and within Naismith outlines the development of the royal coinage and the processes by which the minting institutions were established and staffed. Two case studies are provided for each chapter outlining examples of Naismith's argument in favor of royal usage of coinage to facilitate political gain. Naismith also points out the inherent linkage between the king and the minting process, stressing that a form of symbiosis existed between the two in which one relied upon the other in regards to nearly all levels of the process, from the iconography, to the weight and purity of the coinage and even to the distribution of the end product. Chapters six, seven and eight focus primarily upon the technical

aspects of the coinage. In the first instance, addressing the establishment of a universal standard to which the coinage needed to adhere in regards to weight and the purity of the silver from which they were cast, and in the second, on the scale of minting as a whole. Chapter eight, “The circulation of coinage,” provides details about specific mints and includes an interesting analysis of the distribution of coins from select mints to different parts of the kingdoms. The conclusion reached is that coins from nearly all mints were evenly distributed throughout the realm regardless of geographic or political division (the coasts and Northumbrian regions as exceptions) having relatively little widespread distribution inland, perhaps due to the export of coins from the coastal regions to Scandinavia. Naismith characterizes this as evidence that there were “extensive interpersonal contacts and relationships” and that men of all social levels interacted in the general economic exchange. (218)

Chapter nine brings the culmination of Naismith’s thesis together with an analysis of the historic paradigm associated with the Anglo-Saxon period as being devoid of any regular commercial exchange, trumpeted by Mauss and Grierson, and contrasting it with the “gift-exchange” model that is typically cited as the normative economic system in pre-nation regions.² Naismith argues that the sheer volume of references to money, coinage and minting within the surviving corpus of charters and manuscripts from the pre-900 era, along with the legal apparatus surrounding the creation of a complex minting system and the widespread dispersal of those coins, at least suggests that the exchange of money for goods was common. He also argues that utilizing anthropological findings about other cultures (ones that show how the “gift-exchange” archetype of barter was the primary basis from which the economy developed) as evidence for how Anglo-Saxon economic structures developed is not consistent with the extant source material. (273) Naismith ends the book with a brief conclusion, which is followed by an extensive bibliography. This, coupled with the editor’s inclusion of footnotes, provides ample opportunity for further study on the topics addressed within the body of the text and allows for a nicely accessible read. To assist in this, the reader is also afforded an index and content listings for figures, maps and tables. Naismith draws exhaustively upon printed primary and secondary source material.

In sum, Naismith provides a thought-provoking, well-researched view of the development of the economic and political impact of Anglo-Saxon coinage while also providing numismatists a detailed iconographic study of that coinage. His ability to mesh the symbolic aspects of the coinage with political and economic analysis grants the reader a broad foundation from which to pursue more in-depth research on the Anglo-Saxon era. *Money and Power in Anglo-Saxon England* is not a “light” read but the clarity of its presentation makes it accessible and greatly beneficial for specialist and professional historians.

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1 Rory Naismith, *The Coinage of Southern England 796–865*, British Numismatic Society Special Publication 8, 2 vols. (London, 2011).

2 Philip Grierson, ‘Commerce in the Dark Ages: A Critique of the Evidence’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 9 (1959), p. 123-140; Marcel Mauss, trans. W. D. Halls. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: W.W. Norton, 1990).



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