

Title	On the reverse of the Liudhard 'Medalet'
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Publication date	2021
Original Citation	Woods, D. (2021) 'On the Reverse of the Liudhard 'Medalet'', Numismatic Chronicle, 181, pp. 331-336.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
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Download date	2026-08-09 00:21:02
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/16177

The Numismatic Chronicle 181 Offprint

NOTE

MEDIEVAL AND MODERN

On the Reverse of the Liudhard ‘Medalet’

by

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LONDON

THE ROYAL NUMISMATIC SOCIETY

2021

MEDIEVAL AND MODERN NOTES

On the Reverse of the Liudhard ‘Medalet’

DAVID WOODS

Abstract. It is argued that the reverse legend of the gold Liudhard ‘medalet’ was intended to read AMEN, AMEN and that in conjunction with the depiction of a cross on a globe, it may allude to the prayer at Psalm 71(72):18–19 that the glory of God should fill the whole earth.

The purpose of this paper is to propose a new reading of the reverse legend on the so-called Liudhard medalet and to explore the significance of this for our understanding of the associated design (Fig. 1).¹ This medalet, or shilling, was part of a hoard of nine coins and ornaments that were discovered in the grounds of the Church of St Martin, Canterbury, and was first published in the *Proceedings* of the Numismatic Society of London in 1844.² The obverse depicts a right-facing bust with diadem wearing a finely folded garment, while the reverse depicts a double-barred cross as its central feature. A legend occurs on both obverse and reverse. Attention has traditionally focussed on the obverse legend. This consists of twelve letters divided into four groups of three letters each, punctuated by three large pellets. The orientation of the letters reveals that they were intended to be read anti-clockwise, and most have their base towards the centre of the coin. The forms of some of the letters, however, are highly unusual and this resulted in some initial difficulty in properly reading this legend. Roach Smith read the legend as +EVPARDVS EPS and interpreted it as a reference to a sixth century bishop of Autun, while Haigh read it as LYVDARDVS EPS referring to bishop Liudhard who accompanied princess Bertha, the daughter of King Charibert of Paris (561–67), when she was sent to marry the future King Æthelberht of Kent (c.587–616) in c.580.³ Independently of each other, Brooke and Evans subsequently corrected this to read LEVDARDVS EPS but referring to the same

¹ This object has traditionally been described as a ‘medalet’, but as R. Naismith, ‘Currency, conversion, and the landscape of power in the Early Middle Ages’, in R. Flechner and M. Ní Mhaonaigh (eds), *The Introduction of Christianity into the Early Medieval Insular World* (Turnhout, 2016), pp. 281–304, at pp. 286–88 argues, it was probably a coin that had been mounted to serve as an ornament. I continue to describe it as a ‘medalet’ only because that is how it has been described in most of the literature and how it continues to be described on the website of the Museum of Liverpool where it is currently located (<https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/artifact/liudhard-medalet>).

² For the contents of the hoard, see P. Grierson, ‘The Canterbury (St Martin’s) hoard of Frankish and Anglo-Saxon coin-ornaments’, *BNJ* 27 (1953), pp. 39–51. A first group of three finds, including the ‘medalet’, was published in the *Proceedings of the Numismatic Society of London: Session 1843–44*, pp. 27–8. It remains one of the earliest known hoards from the early medieval period, although it has sometimes been suggested that that it may actually represent two smaller hoards from two different burials. See R. Abdy and G. Williams, ‘A catalogue of hoards and single finds from the British Isles c.AD 410–675’, in B. Cook and G. Williams (eds), *Coinage and History in the North Sea World c.500–1250: Essays in Honour of Marion Archibald* (Leiden, 2006), pp. 11–73, at pp. 15–16.

³ C. Roach Smith ‘Merovingian coins, &c., discovered at St. Martin’s, near Canterbury’, *NC* 7 (1845), pp. 187–91, at pp. 187–8; D.B. Haigh, ‘Miscellaneous notes on the old English coinage’, *NC* new series 9 (1869), pp. 171–96. On Liudhard and Bertha, see Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.25.

Liudhard.⁴ All modern commentators seem to agree with this reading of the legend and the identification of the bishop.⁵



Fig. 1. The Liudhard medalet, Museum of Liverpool (16.5mm, 1.57g)
Accession no. M7018 (1x & 1.5x)

By contrast, little progress has been made in reading the reverse legend. The chief characteristic of this legend is that the same letters are arranged each side of the cross. In other words, it contains the same term or group of terms written twice, one a mirror image of the other. There are two large inverted capital letters *As* above the cross at the top of the reverse, but it is not entirely clear whether they belong with the other letters or not. There are three V-shaped forms in the exergue, and it is not clear whether they are intended to represent letters or are just ornamental. If they are letters, the fact that the exergual line separates them from the main legend suggests that they do not form part of it.

Roach Smith read the four letter forms on each side of the cross to stand alone as *NINV* in reference to the town of Nivernum (modern Nevers) in central Gaul, but this rested on the mistaken reading of the obverse legend as referring to a bishop of Autun and no modern commentator accepts it.⁶ Haigh observed of the letters to the sides of the cross that ‘The workmanship is so neat that I cannot imagine these letters to be meaningless, though I confess my inability to interpret them’.⁷ By contrast, Evans dismissed all the apparent letters as meaningless, claiming that they ‘must be regarded as simply decorative elements which – although at that time they might give the idea of an inscription to the unlearned – here serve to fill up the vacant border round the elaborate cruciform design, which is the only part of the device that really counts’.⁸ Others have been more circumspect. Grierson described the reverse legend

⁴ G.C. Brooke, *English Coins* (London, 1932), p. 3; A. Evans, ‘Notes on early Anglo-Saxon gold coins’, *NC*, 2 (1942), pp. 19–41, at p. 26.

⁵ See e.g. C.H.V. Sutherland, *Anglo-Saxon Gold Coinage in the Light of the Crondall Hoard* (London, 1948), pp. 31–2; M. Werner, ‘The Liudhard medalet’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 20 (1991), pp. 27–41; A. Gannon, *The Iconography of Early Anglo-Saxon Coinage: Sixth to Eighth Centuries* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 157–8; R. Naismith, *Medieval European Coinage 8: Britain and Ireland c.400–1066* (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 50–1. Whether the accompanying bust was intended to depict Liudhard himself is another question altogether. A. Gannon, ‘Money, power, and women: an inquiry into early Anglo-Saxon coinage’, in S. Solway (ed.), *Medieval Coins and Seals: Constructing Identity, Signifying Power* (Turnhout, 2015), pp. 211–28, at p. 215 raises the possibility that, if the reverse was intended to celebrate the promotion of the cult of the True Cross, the bust may have been intended to represent the Byzantine emperor Justin II (565–78) who did so much to promote this cult within the West.

⁶ Roach Smith, ‘Merovingian coins, &c.’, p. 188.

⁷ Haigh, ‘Miscellaneous notes’, p. 178.

⁸ Evans, ‘Notes on early Anglo-Saxon gold coins’, p. 26.

in the briefest fashion possible, and did not comment on its origin or significance.⁹ Similarly, Werner described the legend in brief, but did not attempt to read it or explain its relationship to the cross that it surrounds, despite his focus on the origin and significance of this cross.¹⁰

One should start the investigation of this reverse by noting that the fairly clear literacy of the obverse legend, and the use of a novel type on the reverse, as will be seen below, suggests that there probably is a meaning to the reverse legend. It differs in this respect from many other seventh-century Anglo-Saxon gold coins which have heavily garbled or pseudo-legends on both sides and little obvious attempt at originality in their design. The symmetrical nature of the reverse legend may raise concerns as it is not the only early Anglo-Saxon type to display such symmetry. A group of five early Anglo-Saxon solidi were struck with two slightly different reverse dies, four with a die displaying a legend that was almost perfectly symmetrical about a cross on steps (Fig. 2) and one with a die that preserved a similar legend which is clearly identifiable as a corrupt imitation of the normal reverse legend from a standard seventh-century Byzantine solidus.¹¹ In this case, therefore, one can trace the symmetrical legend back to its Byzantine model. This example proves that the mere fact of symmetry in any legend does not in itself prove that it is a fictitious pseudo-legend rather than a poor copy of an originally meaningful legend.



Fig. 2. A cross-on-steps type Anglo-Saxon solidus (18mm, 3.17g)
PAS KENT-5E6A92. Ex Classical Numismatic Group, Triton auction XXIV
(January 2021), lot 1370

Unfortunately, no-one has plausibly identified a clear model for, or close parallel to, the design on the reverse of the Liudhard medalet. Werner reports that Blackburn had suggested to him that ‘the idea of a reverse design featuring a large cross may have been inspired by the coinage of Tiberius II (578–82), perhaps indirectly by way of Visigothic issues’, but the barred cross of the medalet bears little resemblance to any of the crosses on Tiberius’ coinage.¹² More important, this represents an exceedingly narrow numismatic approach to the problem when the reality is that the art of Late Antiquity was filled with all sorts of crosses in association with various types of circles, whether surrounded by wreaths, in roundels, or other devices. The

⁹ Grierson, ‘The Canterbury (St Martin’s) hoard’, pp. 41–3.

¹⁰ Werner, ‘The Liudhard medalet’, p. 8.

¹¹ Three specimens of this type were published by P. Grierson, ‘A new Anglo-Saxon solidus’, *NC* 113 (1953), pp. 88–91. S. Lyon, ‘A seventh-century Anglo-Saxon solidus pendant of the Cross-on-Steps type found in Kent’, in R. Naismith, M. Allen, and E. Screen (eds), *Early Medieval Monetary History: Studies in Memory of Mark Blackburn* (Farnham, 2014), pp. 399–402, added a fourth specimen. The fifth specimen (Fig. 2) was discovered at Medway, Kent in 2017 (PAS KENT-5E6A92).

¹² Werner, ‘The Liudhard medalet’, p. 28, n. 10.

use of a cross does not mean the engraver was copying a coin. It was an entirely obvious step in the general cultural context. Finally, there is no resemblance between the reverse legends of the coinage of Tiberius and that of the medalet.

One therefore needs to try and interpret the legend without preconceptions. Since the two letter As at the top of the reverse are larger than the rest of the letters surrounding the cross and are particularly well-executed, it seems natural to begin by treating them as the first letters of two identical sequences. This produces the sequence AΛNII descending either side of the cross, though the identity of the second letter remains unclear. It could represent the Greek letter gamma, but this does not produce an intelligible reading and seems rather improbable on a coin that was struck in south-eastern England during the late sixth century.¹³ Alternatively, it could represent a Latin V or perhaps even an L that is wrongly oriented in respect of all the other letters. Yet however one interprets the second letter form, this sequence does not preserve any immediately recognisable term or abbreviation.

A next step then is to consider the possibility that the underlying term may have been slightly misspelled. For example, the letters I and E were sometimes swapped at this period due to the fact that they were pronounced so similarly. The obverse of the London shilling of King Eadbald of Kent (616–40) spells his title REGES when it should more properly read REGIS ‘of the king’.¹⁴ Similarly, the obverse of the shilling struck by the moneyer Eusebius at Canterbury spells the abbreviation of his office of *monetarius* as MONITA rather than MONETA.¹⁵ It is possible, therefore, that the sequence under discussion should really read AΛNEI rather than AΛNII. Furthermore, the fact that this sequence descends both sides of a cross is important in that it suggests that the underlying term was probably religious in nature. It may well be identifiable as a term used in description of a cross or in prayer before a cross.

As one considers the identity of the short, presumably religious, term underlying the sequence AΛNII, perhaps better read as AΛNEI, one possibility springs quickly to mind, that it had been intended to spell the term AMEN, the Hebrew word meaning ‘so be it’ that passed into Greek and Latin usage through its occurrence in the Christian bible. It was a confirmatory response that was normally used at the end of a Christian prayer, and so a very common term indeed. If this is the case, then the engraver has completely misunderstood a letter M and created two separate letter forms from it. This would not be surprising given the poor familiarity with Latin letters demonstrated on the obverse where the initial letters L and E in the name of Liudhard are almost unrecognisable as such and the D in the middle of his name resembles a P rather than a D. Thus the engraver seems to have misread a capital M as a ligature of two separate forms, a Λ and a I, and then inverted the latter.

¹³ The sequences AΓ or AΓN could perhaps abbreviate the Greek ἅγιος ‘holy’ or ἄγνός ‘pure’, but it is difficult to understand what the rest of the letters might mean in these cases.

¹⁴ Sutherland, *Anglo-Saxon Gold Coinage*, nos 77 and 78. See now G. Williams, ‘The gold coinage of Eadbald, king of Kent (AD 616–40)’, *BNJ* 68 (1998), pp. 137–40. That REGES should read REGIS was pointed out by Marion Archibald in her review of D.M. Metcalf, *Thrymsas and Sceattas in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford* (London, 1993) in *BNJ* 67 (1997), pp. 150–3, at p. 152.

¹⁵ Sutherland, *Anglo-Saxon Gold Coinage*, no. 2. Some commentators, notably Arant Pol (pers. comm. 8 January 2020), have expressed doubts concerning the authenticity of this coin on the basis of its style, particularly the style of the lettering. However, the misspelling of MONETA as MONITA also occurs on the prototype of the Witmen series of shillings. See Sutherland, *Anglo-Saxon Gold Coinage*, no. 57.

It is my suggestion, therefore, that the reverse legend had probably been intended to depict the same word **AMEN** descending both sides of the cross in confirmation of some prayer in honour of Christ or his cross.¹⁶ In theory, this prayer could have taken almost any form, but one naturally inclines to favour a widely used prayer, something of particular scriptural importance. Furthermore, the form of the cross accompanying the legend is so unusual that one is encouraged to search for some sort of connection between it and the contents of this implied prayer. The fact that the legend seems to repeat the term *amen* encourages one to search the Bible for occasions where this term is repeated after a prayer. The Psalms contains three examples of this, and one (Psalm 71(72):18–19) proves particularly interesting.¹⁷ St Jerome (d. 420) composed two translations of the psalms into Latin, one based on a Greek text (*iuxta Septuaginta*) and another based directly on the original Hebrew text (*iuxta Hebraicum*).¹⁸ The former, which became known as the *psalterium Gallicanum* because of its popularity in Gaul, translates the original Hebrew *amen* as *fiat*, whereas the latter simply transliterates it as *amen*. So the *iuxta Hebraicum* translates Psalm 71(72):19 as follows:

benedictus Dominus Deus Deus Is-
rahel qui facit mirabilia solus,
et benedictum nomen gloriae eius in sempiternum
*et implebitur gloria eius universa terra amen amen*¹⁹

Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel,
who alone works wonders,
and blessed be the name of his glory forever,
and let the whole earth be filled by his glory. Amen, Amen.

The reason why this prayer is of particular interest is because of its idea that the glory of God should fill the whole earth (*universa terra*). The cross on the coin rests on a base or small mound on the exergual line, while a large semi-circle rises from the same line and intersects with the upright arm of the cross about a quarter of the way up it. Werner considers two possible interpretations of this semi-circle, that it represents either the globe of the earth or the hill of Golgotha, but rejects the former possibility on the basis that in most cases where crosses are depicted on globes ‘the

¹⁶ The Gospel of John frequently (25 times) describes Christ using the phrase ‘Amen, Amen, I say’ (ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω) in order to emphasise what he is about to say, whereas the other evangelists describe him using amen once only in similar cases, ‘Amen, I say’. An alternative possibility is that the legend may represent the words of Christ speaking from or about the cross, based probably on a passage in the Gospel of John. However, no passage in the Gospel of John stands out as noteworthy in this respect. Furthermore, this interpretation would not explain the unusual nature of the cross, particularly the fact that it appears to stand on a globe.

¹⁷ The other two examples are Psalm 40(41):14, 88(89):53. The psalter was central to early medieval education and prayer, so that its contents would have been familiar not just to the clergy and monks, but also to educated lay Christians. See e.g. N. Van Deusen (ed.), *The Place of the Psalms in the Intellectual Culture of the Middle Ages* (Albany NY, 1999).

¹⁸ For a summary of the history of the Latin texts of the psalms, see A.H. Blom, *Glossing the Psalms* (Berlin, 2017), pp. 40–1.

¹⁹ See R. Weber and R. Gryson, *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, 5th edition (Stuttgart, 2007), p. 859.

supporting globes are almost inevitably large and perfectly ovoid'.²⁰ One can equally well object that depictions of the hill of Golgotha normally show it as an irregular, often rocky, mound and that the semi-circle (or ellipse) is far too regular in shape to represent such a feature. A simple semi-circle (even if so poorly drawn as to represent an ellipse rather than a true semi-circle) easily suffices to convey the notion of a full circle or globe, but does not suggest any thing more substantial such as a hill or mound, unless far more detail is added. But why did the engraver not draw the circle or globe in full? The answer may be that he did not have enough space to do so unless he reduced the size of the cross far more than he was willing to do.

It is my argument, therefore, that the semi-circle represents the globe of the earth rather than the hill of Golgotha and that the design celebrates the idea of the cross rather than a particular historical monument, with the emphasis upon the global dominion of the crucified Christ rather than his purely local manifestation in Palestine. In other words, the design tries to emphasize the very point made at Psalm 71(72):19, that the glory of God fills, or should fill, the whole earth. In support of this interpretation, one notes its relevance to the situation in which Bertha, Liudhard, and their companions found themselves in Kent. As far as they were concerned, they had passed beyond the boundaries of Christianity to a hostile, pagan island at the edge of the earth.²¹ A daily reminder that the power of the crucified Christ was global in nature in order to counter any despair at the apparent flourishing of the paganism that surrounded them in Kent would have been more than welcome, and this was exactly what the medalet was designed to do. It also reminded them of the importance of their presence in Kent, that they were completing the injunction of Psalm 71(72):19 that the whole world should be filled with the glory of God in another sense, that is, the glorification of God, as they sought to convert the pagans to the recognition and glorification of the sole God 'who alone works wonders'.

In summary, it is impossible to discover a simple original model for the reverse of the Liudhard medalet because it was a highly original composition intended for a particular place and time. It is arguable that the reverse legend around the cross was symmetrical because it contained the same word *amen* twice in apparent allusion to the prayer at Psalm 71(72):18–19 and that the associated cross was depicted at the centre of a globe, or semi-circle designed to convey this notion, in symbolic allusion to the same prayer. As for the importance of this prayer to Liudhard, if it was really he who chose this design, he may have considered it particularly apt for the circumstances in which he, Bertha, and their companions found themselves as they promoted Christianity among the pagans at the end of the earth because when they prayed it they were actually praying for their own success.

²⁰ Werner, 'The Liudhard medalet', p. 37.

²¹ On the characterisation of Britain as an island at the edge of the earth, see J. O'Reilly, 'Islands and idols at the ends of the earth: exegesis and conversion in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*', in S. Lebecq, M. Perrin, and O. Szerwiniack (eds), *Bède le Vénérable: Entre Tradition et Posterité* (Lille, 2005), pp. 119–45.