

Coins have been made and used for a long time. They were invented by the Lydians in Asia Minor in the late 7th century (700–600) BC, almost 3,000 years ago. In Britain, the earliest coins came a few hundred years later, during the later Iron Age (400 BC–AD 100). Coins were first imported from France (then called Gaul) around 150 BC. Not long after the first coins were imported, the Iron Age peoples living in southern Britain began to make their own coins – a process called 'minting'. This process would have included a number of steps.

Step 1: Make a pellet mould.

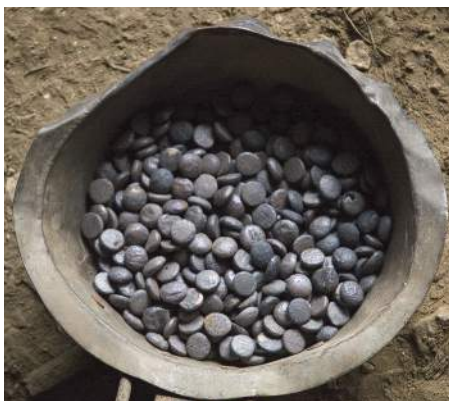


This is a pellet mould, which is used to make the metal pellets. It is made of clay. Not many pellet moulds have been found in Britain.

Step 2: Make metal pellets.



Bits of gold, silver, and bronze were placed in the pellet mould and then heated to high temperatures. This melted the metal and allowed the pellets (also called flans or blanks) to be the same size and shape. The results would have looked like this:



Step 3: Make the coin dies.



The images on coins were made using dies. These were like stamps made of metal and had ornamentation engraved on them. They would have been handmade by a skilled person. Two dies were needed to make a coin: the obverse die (front/heads) and reverse die (back/tails).

Step 4: Strike the coins.



Coins were made by placing the blank in between the obverse and reverse die and then striking them with a hammer.

Step 5: Use the coins!



Archaeologists debate what coins were used for in the Iron Age. Much of our information comes from the distribution of the coins (where they are found), what they are made of (their value), and the images used to decorate them. This is a gold Norfolk Wolf A Stater dated to around 50 BC (Photo: © John Talbot)

What is the Iron Age? The Iron Age is the last period of prehistory. In this period, people began making objects out of iron and the very earliest writing appears. The dates of this time are different in different parts of the world.

In Britain, the Iron Age began around 800 BC (2800 years ago) and lasted until around AD 100. During this period, people lived in roundhouses on small farms, but also created large enclosed hilltop areas called hillforts. The countries around Europe we know today were divided up into smaller areas controlled by different groups of people referred to as tribes. Burials of Iron Age people show us that they used chariots pulled by horses and made decorative objects such as necklaces (called torcs) and brooches.

This torc was made from electrum (gold mixed with silver) around 800 BC–AD 43 and was found in Lincolnshire. You can see it on display in Gallery 17: European Prehistory (© Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology: AN1927.6660).

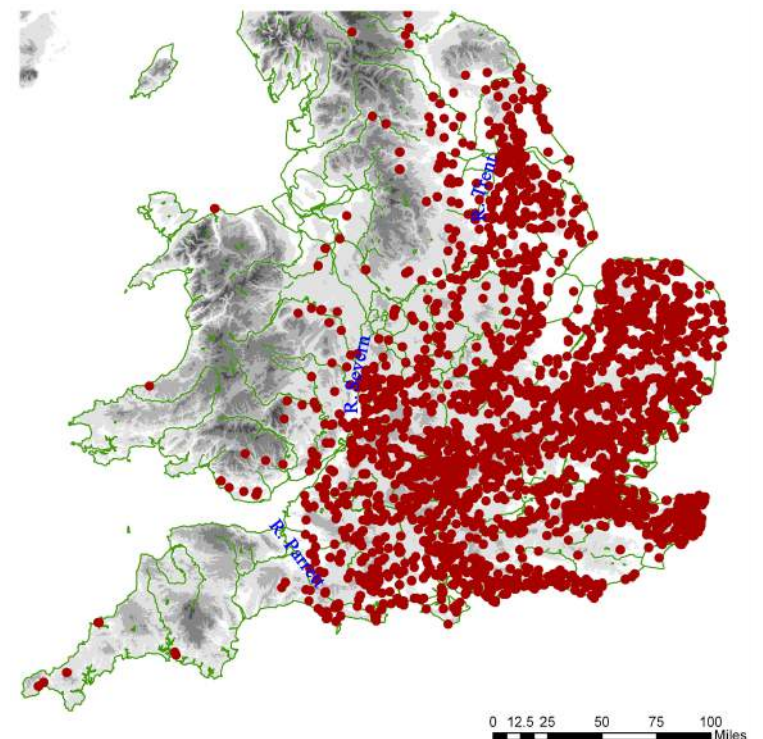


Iron Age coins in Britain are only found in certain areas, mainly clustered in the south and east of England, as you can see on this distribution map (© Ian Leins). Where coins are found and what images they portray tell us something about the people who were making and using them. In fact, many people use coins to differentiate communities in England before the Roman invasion in AD 43. This is an example of a silver unit from the East of England, north of the Thames, which depicts a helmeted head, potentially a depiction of Roma, and a stylised horse from c. 60–20 BC (© Ancient British Coins).



A reconstructed roundhouse at Butser Ancient Farm (<https://www.butserancientfarm.co.uk>; Photo: Ian Cartwright, Institute of Archaeology, Oxford)

Objects made of precious metals such as gold and silver would have been important, high value items in prehistory. Coins were made of bronze, silver, and gold and are rarely found in the settlements where people lived. This has made archaeologists think that the majority of coins weren't used as common, everyday money. Bronze coins may have circulated in daily life, but silver and gold coins would have had a much higher value. Some people believe they were used as payment to the people living in Britain to secure alliances or military aid. **What do you think coins could have been used for other than money?**



In Britain, the earliest coins were imported from France (then Gaul). This is an example of one of the earliest types of coins found in Britain. It is a Gallo-Belgic A gold stater (© Portable Antiquities Scheme). **What images can you see on this coin?**



Although the first coins were imported, communities quickly thereafter began to mint their own. The designs on the first coins made in Britain were heavily inspired by imported coins from the Continent. They include pictures of horses and human heads. They also included abstract images, which archaeologists try to identify and understand. This is an example of a silver unit from c. 50–20 BC which was found in Kent. It shows a head with animal representations and a horse with more of the same animal representations (© Celtic Coin Index, School of Archaeology, no. 02.0437).



After the initial period of coin production, communities began to develop their own distinctive style. New and exciting animal images such as wolves and boars were also created on coins. This new imagery referenced local traditions. This is a 'ECE B' silver unit from Forncett, Norfolk (© John Talbot).



Later, some groups in Britain began adding Roman names in Latin letters and Roman style images to their coins – this is the first evidence we have of writing in Britain. These coins were issued by the 'Client Kings' of Rome, who were non-Roman monarchs that were bestowed their leadership roles by the Roman state. These Kings borrowed Roman imagery to express their own power and prove their loyalty. Other groups continued to make their own distinctive imagery, retaining traditional designs. These changes, or lack of changes, in iconography – visual images and symbols – help us understand the changes that were happening in societies around Europe at the time of the Roman conquest.



This is a gold stater of Tincomaros showing a horse with a rider. This image was copied from a Roman coin. (© Portable Antiquities Scheme)

In AD 43, the Romans successfully invaded Britain, led by the Roman emperor Claudius. Shortly after, people in Britain stopped minting their own coins, but they continued to use the coins they had made in previous decades. By AD 100, Iron Age coins had disappeared and were no longer circulated – only Roman coins continued to be used.



This is a bronze unit of Cunebolinus from c. AD 10–40 showing the head of an important person (Cunebolinus?) and a mythical creature blowing a horn with the letters TASCIOVANI F (© Ancient British Coins)

Because there were no written records in Iron Age Britain (apart from the coins themselves!), these images help shed light on what people valued in these societies. This continues to be the case in modern times. Let's look at some modern coins. What images can you see in the coins below?

Swedish 1
Krona

EU 5 cent

British penny,
back and front



Norwegian
1 Krone

Danish 5
Kroner

Norwegian 20 Kroner,
front and back



The type of metal, size, and imagery each tell us something about the value of these coins, and what is important to people who made them. For example, on the Norwegian 20 kroner we see the head of King Harald on one side, and part of a Viking ship on the other (Oseberg Ship, Viking Museum, Oslo, Norway, © Larry Lamsa). However, we have to be careful when we interpret the icons of the past, as we cannot always know what the motivations of coinmakers were. They could have been used by people in power to assert ideas and values that they wanted people to believe. What is important to you? What would you want to put on your coin?

Want to know more about the Iron Age, coins, and archaeology?
Check out these websites!

Prehistoric Society: <https://theprehistoricsociety.school.blog>

More than Money: <https://ccid.web.ox.ac.uk/more-money-coins-iron-age-britain>

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