

JOHN KENT  
(28.9.1928 - 22.10.2000)



John Philip Cozens Kent was born on 28 September 1928 in Hertfordshire and maintained a deep-seated interest in the history and archaeology of Hertfordshire and London for the rest of his life. After his BA in 1949 at University College London, he immediately embarked on a PhD thesis. It was about the *comes sacrarum largitionum*, the Count of the Imperial Largesses, the senior financial officer of the late Roman empire. It was not so usual to write a PhD in those days, and in many ways his thesis set the tone for the rest of his career. It was very concise and it was completed in two years, under the supervision of Professor A H M Jones, the leading ancient historian of the time, and even today the thesis is still cited in academic writing, remarkably half a century after it was completed in 1951. However, more dominant influences over his subsequent career were provided by Harold Mattingly and especially J W E Pearce, the great Roman numismatists of the pre-war era whom he later described as ‘gentle giants’.

A period of National Service in the army (he used to tell stories of cockroaches and porridge) was followed by his appointment in 1953 as an Assistant Keeper in the British Museum’s Department of Coins and Medals. Although he was appointed to look after the collection of modern coins and medals, he devoted most of his energy to continuing his studies of the later Roman period. Previous generations of scholars had tended to concentrate on the coinage of the Roman Republic and early Empire, which John Kent claimed, unconvincingly, that he didn’t understand, but with his academic background it made sense for him to embark on the sustained studies of late Roman coinage that followed over the next decades. In 1960 he published with colleagues *Late Roman Bronze Coinage*, a short but indispensable reference book: *LRBC* is still used by a new generation of archaeologists, numismatists, historians and collectors, since its dense catalogue, though difficult to use, nevertheless gives all the basics needed to identify any bronze coin from Constantine I to Romulus.

More typical of his output was the brief but highly influential article, often in the *Numismatic Chronicle*, sometimes with telling acronyms such as ‘Constantinian

Hoardings And Other Studies' (CHAOS). They covered a wide range of topics: for example, the date of the fall of the western Empire (he argued for 480), the reclassification of imitative coins of the Dark Ages after the Roman departure in the 5th century as fake coins of the 3rd and 4th centuries, the dating of the Sutton Hoo ship burial to the early 7th century, or the role of gold coinage in the economy of the late Roman Empire. He was joint curator of a major exhibition and catalogue of *The Wealth of the Roman World* (1977), but the twin peaks of his work on the later empire were his two massive volumes in the *Roman Imperial Coinage* series. Volume VIII, covering the period from the death of Constantine in AD 337 to the accession of Valentinian in 364 came out in 1981, to be followed 13 years later by Volume X, covering the period from the division of the Empire in AD 395 to the accession of Anastasius in 491. This volume in particular showed his skill. It is a very difficult period of coinage and sorting out the imperial coinage from its "barbarian" imitators was greatly advanced by his unequalled ability to distinguish stylish minutiae in a systematic and convincing fashion.

He also worked in many other fields of numismatics, publishing on Byzantine, Merovingian, British, Stuart, Tudor, Victorian and even Indian topics. He organised a 'temporary' exhibition in the BM of 'Two Thousand Years of British Coinage', and though it opened as a temporary exhibition in 1978 it remained in place for some ten years. His wide knowledge of the Roman period as a whole could be seen well in the text he wrote to accompany the Hirmers' superb photographs in the volume of *Roman Coins* (1978). A paper on the dependence of Anglo-Saxon coins types on their Roman prototypes remains standard reading (1961), as does his classic paper on the interpretation of coin hoards (1974). Taking the example of the English Civil War he showed that the places in which hoards were deposited bore no close relationship with theatres of fighting or areas of wealth, and so undermined attempts to use hoards as a way of adding to the military or economic history of other, less well documented, periods.

A further area in which he established his reputation was the coinage of late pre-Roman Iron Age Britain, the hundred years or so before the Roman invasion of AD 43, taking on the mantle of the late Derek Allen. The coins that have survived from this period had been extensively used and misused in an attempt to create a history for a period about which we know so little. Kent used his visual and methodological skills to suggest new ways of interpreting or dating them, and he also inherited Allen's project of publishing the Continental Celtic Coins in the BM and other British collections, working on two volumes which were published in 1987 and 1990.

He received many distinctions in his career. He was promoted Deputy Keeper at the Museum in 1974, and then appointed Keeper in 1983, a post he held until his

retirement in 1990. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1986, and awarded the Silver Medal of Royal Numismatic Society 1990 and the Huntington Medal of the American Numismatic Society in 1993. He was President of the Royal Numismatic Society from 1984 to 1990, President of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society from 1985 to 1988, and for many years was active on LAMAS' Archaeological Research Committee. In 1986 he was elected to the Council of the International Numismatic Commission and in 1991 an honorary member of the INC.

He had many outside interests: the history of monumental brasses, early medieval music, the excavation of South Mimms Castle, and railways, both real and model. His ability to talk long and learnedly - and with a relish for the ironic use of the cliché - on any of these was well known among his wide circle of friends and acquaintances; his colleagues were as well informed on the impact of the railways on the development of London in the 19th century as they were on the finer points of the mint attributions of the bronze coinage of Zeno. Those same colleagues presented him with a medal to mark his retirement; he himself chose the motto 'nil sine labore' and characteristically enjoyed mistranslating it - 'no sign of effort'. After retirement he remained, in his words, 'a regular if unobtrusive' visitor to the department to which he had given so many years, encouraging the new younger curators and undertaking preparatory work for a volume of the BM Catalogue covering the 'sub-Roman' material that he knew so well and others so little.

He died on 22 October 2000.

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