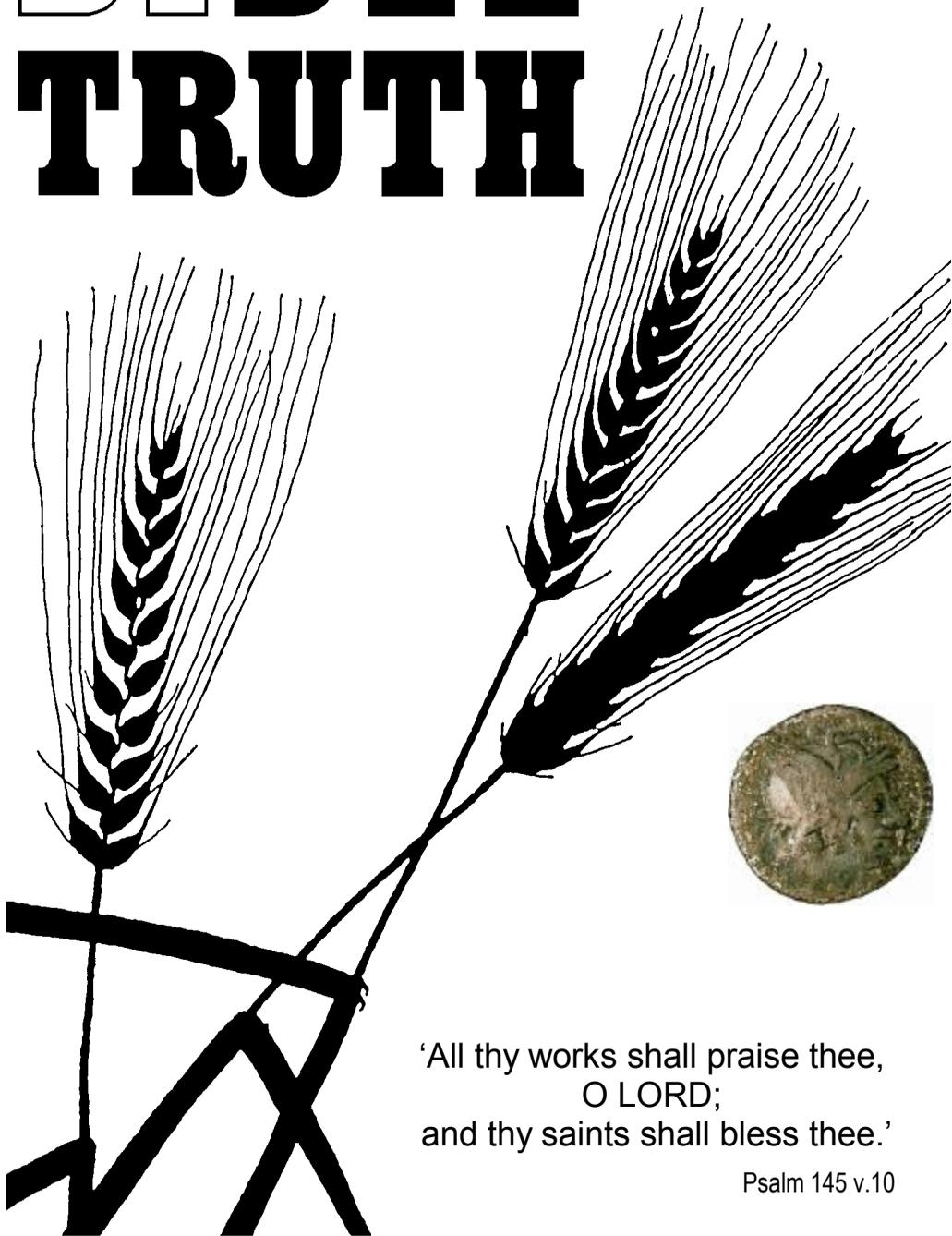


BIBLE TRUTH

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'All thy works shall praise thee,
O LORD;
and thy saints shall bless thee.'

Psalm 145 v.10

ROME, CARTHAGE, & CORNISH TIN

*Does the discovery of an early Roman coin
indicate a link with Phoenician traders?*

by **Rosemary Northway**

In the Spring of 2006, a Roman silver denarius was found by treasure hunters using a metal detector, in the Parish of St Winnow, beside the River Fowey in Cornwall.



Looking across the River Fowey at low tide towards the village of St Winnow

Picture by Natalie Strachan

This coin was of particular interest because it was struck in 146 BC, in the days of the Roman Republic, and just over 90 years before Julius Caesar landed in Britain. It is one of the earliest Roman coins to be found in this country. The obverse shows the head of the national figure, Roma, wearing a winged helmet with a visor, and an earring! The inscription reads, 'C.ÆSTI', being the mintmark of the moneyer, Caius Antestius. The reverse depicts the twin sons of Jupiter and Leda, Castor and Pollux, on horseback, with a dog running at the horse's forelegs. On this side the inscription is, 'ROMA'.



What was a single silver denarius, dating from long before the founding of the mighty Roman Empire, doing in the vicinity of a Cornish river where it had presumably lain for more than 2000 years? Most of the other Roman coins found in Cornwall, including some sizeable hoards, come from the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, well into the period of the Occupation.

A possible clue is provided by the date 146 BC which was the year in which the Third and final Punic War ended with the total destruction of the great Phoenician North African trading city of Carthage by its Roman enemies. During the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, Carthage, traditionally founded in 814 BC by Phoenicians from Tyre (in what is today Lebanon), and Rome, had been bitter rivals for control of the Mediterranean Sea. The Phoenicians were not of a single ethnicity and probably intermarried with several of their surrounding peoples. In particular this would have included Israelites from the time they entered the Promised Land to that of the Captivities. Sidon and Tyre were the most powerful of the Phoenician states in the Levant and the Scriptures relate the following with regard to this.



*Pictures of the coins are copyright
Royal Institution of Cornwall*

‘And Hiram king of Tyre sent messengers to David, and cedar trees, and carpenters, and masons: and they built David an house.’

2 Samuel ch.5 v.11

From 1 Kings chs.5 to 9 are several accounts of liaison between the Phoenicians and the united kingdom of Judah and Israel. In addition there are references to the Israelites working in conjunction with the Phoenicians in naval exploits such as 1 Kings ch.9 v.27 describes.

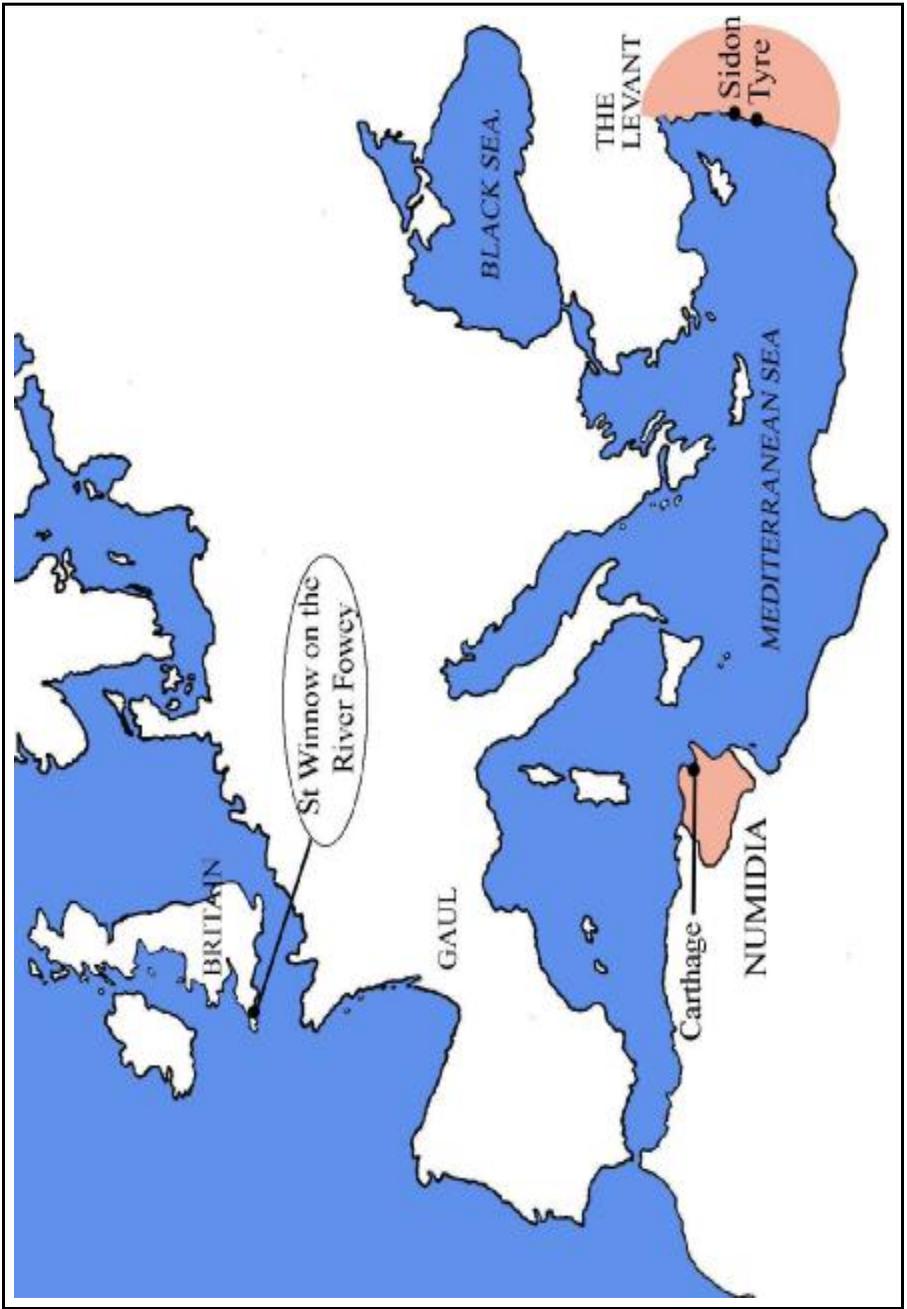
‘And Hiram sent in the navy his servants, shipmen that had knowledge of the sea, with the servants of Solomon.’

The Phoenicians had been seafarers and merchants from time immemorial, with a particular interest in trading in precious metals. They had built up commercial contacts in Asia, Africa, Spain, and almost certainly in Britain, where the tin mines of Cornwall yielded vital supplies of the metal which added to copper formed the alloy, bronze. As a result they had also made enemies of the other nations bordering the Mediterranean who saw sea power as a source of wealth and political domination. The eclipse of Tyre had brought her daughter-state, Carthage, to the fore and resulted in the Carthaginians engaging in wars with first the Greeks, against whom they were successful, and now the Romans, who inflicted heavy defeats upon them both by sea and on land. The First Punic War (Poenicus – ‘Dark-skinned’ or ‘Phoenician’) took place between 264 and 241 BC and the Second between 218 and 201 BC. The latter war ended so disastrously for the Carthaginians, despite the valiant efforts of their generals, Hamilcar Barca and his sons Hasdrubal and the famous Hannibal, that they were forced to accept the most humiliating terms from the Romans. These included the payment of a huge indemnity, the seizure of all their interests in Spain, from whence so much of their wealth was derived, the confiscation of their Numidian territories in North Africa, and a pledge not to make any declarations of war without Rome’s consent.

In spite of everything, Carthage soon recovered. Her economy prospered, thanks to her aggressive marketing of the agricultural surpluses from the rich lands which surrounded the city and which she controlled. Her territorial ambitions also revived. She became, once again, a force to be reckoned with.

The Roman statesman Marcus Porcius Cato, (Cato the Elder), came to epitomise the depth of hatred Rome felt for this rival power. A visit to Carthage in 153 BC filled him with such fear and detestation that he took to ending every speech he made in the Senate, regardless of subject, with the words, ‘Carthago delenda est!’ (‘Carthage must be destroyed!’)

Four years later, Rome saw her opportunity to carry out this resolve. By the terms of the recent peace treaty, Carthage’s neighbouring province of Numidia had been placed under the control of an ally of Rome, a Chieftain named Massinissa. He had been a thorn in the Carthaginians’ flesh ever since 201 BC, carrying out so many attacks and incursions into their territory that in the end they lost patience and retaliated. Rome promptly intervened on the grounds that this was a breach of the treaty, a war begun without her permission – and which she had covertly provoked. She immediately sent two armies to the aid of Massinissa.



The Carthaginians saw the situation was hopeless, and asked for terms, which were at first granted: but as soon as these were accepted the enemy increased its demands. They insisted that all weapons should be handed over, and then that the inhabitants should evacuate the city. To this last they refused to agree. They chose to resist, knowing that they and their city were doomed, but believing a fight to the end was better than an abject surrender to their vindictive foe.

There followed a desperate three-year siege. The Roman fleet blockaded Carthage's two harbours while the best legions encamped around and attacked the city walls. The Carthaginians for their part wreaked havoc among the enemy by stationing a cavalry troop behind the town, which harried the besiegers unmercifully and took many Roman lives.

It was only when the Senate in Rome appointed as supreme commander Scipio Aemilianus Africanus, namesake and grandson of the victor of the Second Punic War, that the end came. As a result of his tactics the city was finally deprived of all means of obtaining supplies. The Romans succeeded in establishing a bridgehead by the harbour entrance from whence they were able to bring up their battering rams and other siege engines. The walls were breached at last, but there followed several days of the most ferocious street-fighting imaginable. The battle concluded with the firing of the whole of the area around the port; the flames spread to engulf one quarter after another. Carthage burnt for seventeen days. When all was over, Scipio had the ruins cleared, the site ploughed and dressed heavily with salt, so that it could not be productive for many a long year. Thus Carthage ceased to exist, and with her fall came the decline of Phoenician trading supremacy in the Mediterranean and beyond.

What has this to do with the Roman silver denarius discovered so recently in faraway Cornwall? The removal from the scene of her hated rival meant that Rome could now pursue her own interests in what had been the Carthaginians' sphere of influence. She had long coveted the sources of those commodities that they and the merchants of Tyre had exploited and from which they had obtained such great wealth and power. In particular the lucrative Cornish tin-trade had aroused her greed as well as her envy.

Tin from this area had found its way onto the continent and elsewhere from Bronze Age times onward. It was transported via

local shipping, especially out of the Breton ports, but also from British ports along the Channel coast, as the recently discovered Dover Bronze Age boat testifies. On arrival in France it was then carried by packhorse and by river to its destination. The Phoenicians and Carthaginians acted as brokers and middlemen and held the monopoly of the tin trade, while their geographical location enabled them to control the supplies to the nations to the east.

About 450 BC, a Carthaginian navigator named Himilco, prompted by political and economic problems at home, and mindful of rumours of a shadowy land in the Northwest where there were large quantities of tin, had braved the unknown by exploring the Atlantic coast up from Portugal to Brittany and thence to Cornwall, where he sought to make contact with the local miners with a view to Carthage doing business with them direct. The usual policy was to buy into existing enterprises and then manage them. Such a move would ensure her ability to obtain plentiful future supplies.

While there is little archaeological evidence of an actual Phoenician/Carthaginian presence in the Cornish peninsular apart from a few coins in Truro museum, there is no doubt as to the extent of their involvement in the trade. It is possible that the loss of their Spanish possessions led them to look more particularly at working deposits further afield where Rome's writ did not run. This may be borne out by a story related many years later by the geographer, Strabo, about the captain of a Phoenician (Carthaginian) merchantman, who, discovering himself to be pursued by a Roman spy-ship, chose to wreck his own vessel rather than allow it to follow him and thus find out the route to the legendary 'Tin Islands'.

Now though, Rome was triumphant and could do as she pleased. Somehow the secret came out, and it is very probable that a Roman representative was sent on a mission to the Cornish coast with a view to assessing the state of the tin mining industry and how it might benefit the Roman economy. Could it be that it was he who lost the denarius found in St Winnow Parish by a 21st century treasure hunter using a 21st century type of 'divining rod'? Was the coin intended as a gift in return for information, or even as part of a miner's wages? We do not know. What we do know is that Britain was now within Rome's ken, and that in less than a century the first Roman invasion, led by Caius Julius Caesar, was to herald the annexation of much of the British Islands by that distant Mediterranean power.

Many years later the historian, Tacitus, referring to Roman Imperial policy, wrote what could well have been a fitting epitaph for Carthage.

‘Where they make a desert, they call it “Peace”’.

It is said that Scipio looked out across the ruins of Carthage with tears in his eyes and wondered aloud if such might not one day be the fate of his own city. He proved a true prophet.

Acknowledgements

Mr. Sam Moorehead of the Coins and Medals Dept, British Museum, kindly pointed me to evidences of Carthage’s part in the Cornish tin trade.

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I am particularly indebted to Mr. Roger Burton, of Rumsam, Barnstaple, North Devon, who has given me so much help and taken so much time and trouble in finding information for me on the subject of the Phoenicians and Cornish tin. Roger is an old family friend and an authority on mining in Devon and West Somerset. He has written a couple of books on the subject as well as articles for mining groups. Thank you, Roger.

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The Royal Cornwall Museum, River St, Truro is well worth a visit and the coin is currently on display in the Roman Coins’ case of the Main Gallery. Open Mon-Sat 10am - 4.45pm, Free entry.