

The *Agnus Dei* penny of King Æthelred II: a call to hope in the Lord (Isaiah XL)?

DAVID WOODS

ABSTRACT

It has traditionally been assumed that the so-called *Agnus Dei* penny of Æthelred the Unready (978–1016) depicts the dove of the Holy Spirit on the reverse. It is argued here that it may depict an eagle rather than a dove, so that the obverse alludes to the forgiveness of sins as described at Isaiah XL.1–2, while the reverse alludes to the effects of hope in the Lord subsequent to this forgiveness as described at Isaiah XL.29–31. Hence the coin may have been intended to proclaim the hope of Æthelred that, once the English have won the forgiveness of the Lord, they will ‘take wings as eagles’ and rout the Viking foe. If that was the case, however, the issue was quickly abandoned when it became clear that this would not in fact happen.

The recent discussion by Keynes and Naismith of the circumstances surrounding the issue of pennies of the so-called *Agnus Dei* type by Æthelred the Unready (978–1016), probably in the autumn of 1009, accompanied, as it was, by a complete set of illustrations of the twenty-one surviving specimens of this type, provides an opportunity to reassess the current understanding of its iconography and, therefore, of its wider significance.¹ This type receives its modern name from the fact that the obverse depicts the Lamb of God (*Agnus Dei*) – a lamb standing facing right, with a standard of the cross rising backwards across its back, and a nimbus about its head – and there can be no doubt whatsoever concerning the identity of this creature. Apart from any other iconographic considerations, a tablet is always depicted between the front-legs of the lamb, and one group of these coins, that representing a die-cutting centre probably located at Winchester, according to Keynes and Naismith following unpublished notes by Mark Blackburn, depicts the inscription A/G, AG/N, or AG/NV on this tablet in abbreviation of the Latin noun *agnus*.² This obverse is paired with a reverse depicting a large bird with wings outstretched in full flight, where this bird has traditionally been identified as a dove, a symbol not

¹ S. Keynes and R. Naismith, ‘The *Agnus Dei* Pennies of King Æthelred the Unready’, *ASE* 40 (2011), 175–223.

² Keynes and Naismith, ‘The *Agnus Dei* Pennies’, pp. 193–5.

only of the Holy Spirit, but of the peace granted by the Holy Spirit also.³ Hence the conclusion by Keynes and Naismith that the unprecedented depiction of the Lamb of God and the apparent dove in this manner ‘suggests a new and dramatic turn in numismatic “propaganda”, taking the form of a desperate appeal to God for peace’.⁴ The purpose of this note is to propose an alternative identification of the apparent dove, resulting in a new understanding both of the relationship between obverse and reverse, and of the political significance of the type more generally.

So why have commentators been so quick to identify the bird on the obverse as a dove in particular? Here one notes that none of the surviving specimens of this type displays any letters or abbreviated legend in association with the bird to assist in its identification. This is in contrast, for example, to the ninth-century Limpsfield Grange disc which displays the letters A and Q, in abbreviation of the Latin noun *aquila*, about the head of the bird which it depicts.⁵ Nor does the surrounding reverse-legend shed any light on this matter since it only ever refers to the moneyer and the mint. The second point to note is that the depiction of the bird itself does not assist much in its identification either. Keynes noted that, on some specimens of this type, the bird ‘looks more like a raven, or even an eagle’.⁶ Van Laere suggested that the bird on some Danish imitations of this type could be an eagle because its beak seems hooked, and Moesgaard and Tornbjerg noted that the specimens from Derby and Stafford display the same feature.⁷ Indeed, regardless of the precise shape of the beak, the size of the beak relative to the head reminds one of an eagle rather than a dove on all the surviving specimens where the head and beak remain visible: the beak is simply too large to be that of a dove. Unfortunately, however, one

³ See e.g. J. Lindsay, *A View of the Coinage of the Heptarchy* (Cork, 1842), p. 131; R. Sainthill, *An Olla Podrida* (London, 1844), p. 214; H. A. Grueber and C. F. Keary, *A Catalogue of English Coins in the British Museum. Anglo-Saxon Series II (Wessex and England to the Norman Conquest)* (London, 1893), p. 207; G. C. Brooke, *English Coins: From the Seventh Century to the Present Day* (London, 1932), p. 65; J. J. North, *English Hammered Coinage, I: Early Anglo-Saxon–Henry III c.650–1272*, 1st ed. (London, 1963), p. 111. This identification remains standard. See e.g. A. Williams, *Æthelred the Unready: the Ill-Counselled King* (Hambledon, 2003), p. 95; C. E. Karkov, *The Art of Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2011), p. 263. Exceptionally, in his 2nd ed. of E. Hawkins, *The Silver Coins of England* (London, 1876), p. 50, R. L. Kenyon described the reverse as ‘A bird with its wings extended, possibly the Danish raven.’

⁴ Keynes and Naismith, ‘The *Agnus Dei* Pennies’, p. 196.

⁵ E. Okasha and S. Youngs, ‘The Limpsfield Grange Disc’, *ASE* 25 (1996), 63–8.

⁶ S. Keynes, ‘An Abbot, an Archbishop, and the Viking Raids of 1006–7 and 1009–12’, *ASE* 36 (2007), 151–220’, at 192, n. 193.

⁷ R. van Laere in review of *Danish Coins from the 11th Century in the Royal Collection of Coins and Medals*, ed. J. S. Jensen (Copenhagen, 1995), in *RBN* 141 (1995), pp. 346–7; J. C. Moesgaard and S. Å. Tornbjerg, ‘A Sixteenth *Agnus Dei* Penny of Æthelred II’, *NC* 159 (1999), 327–32, at 327, n. 2.

cannot rely on such details alone, whether the shape of the beak, its relative size, or any other apparent physical characteristic, in an attempt to define the identity of the bird. In reality, the artists of the early medieval period were often quite careless about such detail. The result is that even in cases where there can be absolutely no doubt concerning the identity of a bird as the dove of the Holy Spirit, whether because of its association with symbols of the other two members of the Trinity or because of the addition of some other attribute, its physical characteristics often resemble those of an eagle rather than of a dove.⁸ As far as the depiction of the bird itself on the reverse is concerned, therefore, it may have been intended either as a dove or an eagle, if not something else altogether.

Since one cannot establish the identity of the bird on the reverse of the *Agnus Dei* penny by considering the reverse in isolation, the obvious next step is to consider it in the context of the depiction of the *Agnus Dei* on the obverse. Given that both the obverse- and reverse- types were new and unprecedented, it seems natural to assume that they were paired together in the way that they were for a deliberate reason, that they were probably connected in some way so that each contributed to the meaning of the other. The problem, however, lies in recognizing the nature of this relationship. Two possibilities have received some attention heretofore. Both start from the fact that when John the Evangelist describes how John the Baptist met and baptized Jesus Christ, he begins by having him describe Christ as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John I.29–32):

Altera die videt Iohannes Iesum venientem ad se et ait ecce agnus Dei qui tollit peccatum mundi. Hic est de quo dixi post me venit vir qui ante me factus est quia prior me erat et ego nesciebam eum sed ut manifestaretur Israel propterea veni ego in aqua baptizans. Et testimonium perhibuit Iohannes dicens quia vidi Spiritum descendentem quasi columbam de caelo et mansit super eum.⁹

⁸ In general on the depiction of the Trinity, see B. C. Raw, *Trinity and Incarnation in Anglo-Saxon Art and Thought* (Cambridge 1997). For eagle-like doves of the Holy Spirit, see e.g. fig. I b (London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius C. vi (Tiberius Psalter, s. xi), 7v, depicting Creation), and fig. XI b (Vatican, Bibliotheca Apostolica, Reg. lat. 12 (Bury Psalter, s. x), 88r, depicting the Trinity). See also T. H. Ohlgren, *Anglo-Saxon Textual Illustration: Photographs of Sixteen Manuscripts with Descriptions and Index* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1992), fig. 12.8 (New York, Pierpoint Morgan, M. 708 (Judith of Flanders Gospels, s. xi), 66v) and fig. 13.7 (Monte Cassino, Archivio della Badia, BB. 437, 439, p. 166v) for an eagle-like dove speaking into the ear of St John the Evangelist, seated writing in each case.

⁹ I quote the text of the Vulgate from *Biblia sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem*, ed. R. Weber (Stuttgart, 1983). The Douai-Rheims translation reads: 'The next day John saw Jesus coming to him, and he saith: Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said: After me there cometh a man, who is preferred before me: because he was before me. And I knew him not, but that he may be made manifest in Israel, therefore am I

One possible approach places the emphasis on John the Evangelist himself. Since John is the only one of the evangelists to describe Christ as the Lamb of God, and since he was also regarded as the author of the Book of Revelation where Christ is repeatedly described as a lamb, any reference to the Lamb of God naturally brings John the Evangelist to mind. Next, since the eagle has been regarded as the symbol of John the Evangelist since the early church, the depiction of an eagle brings him to mind once more also.¹⁰ Hence it is tempting to argue that the emphasis of the coin is on John himself, and that Æthelred intended it in honour of his cult.¹¹ However, there are three main weaknesses in such an interpretation. First, the eagle as a symbol of John the Evangelist was normally depicted with a book or roll, whether this was on top between its wings, or in or between its talons beneath it.¹² Given the absence of the book or roll in this case, it is not convincing that the eagle does act as a symbol of John here. Second, when an eagle was being used as a symbol of the Evangelist, it was normally depicted with a nimbus about its head.¹³ The omission of a nimbus from about the head of the bird here is all the more serious because it is in contrast to the depiction of a nimbus about the head of the lamb on the obverse. Finally, it is difficult to explain why Æthelred should suddenly have decided to honour John the Evangelist in this way in the context of the pressing military and political problems of 1009. His cult simply does not seem relevant enough to the situation that existed when this type was struck.

The second possibility places the emphasis on the Holy Spirit. It starts from the fact that shortly after John the Evangelist describes how the Baptist identified Christ as the Lamb of God (John I.29), he also describes how, when Christ was being baptized by the Baptist, the Holy Spirit descended upon him

come baptizing with water. And John gave testimony, saying: I saw the Spirit coming down as a dove from heaven, and he remained upon him.'

¹⁰ Keynes, 'An Abbot, an Archbishop', p. 192, n. 193, mentions this possibility, only to dismiss it immediately.

¹¹ See Van Laere, *RBN* 141 (1995), p. 347. The eagle was also the symbol of the resurrection or ascension of Christ. Hence Van Laere seems to wish the apparent eagle on the reverse to have operated on two levels as a symbol of both John the Evangelist and of the resurrection of Christ. This is unnecessarily complex. More importantly, it is not clear why the Lamb of God as the symbol of Christ merited a nimbus, but the eagle as a symbol of the resurrected Christ did not. If both creatures operated as symbols of Christ, then the original artist ought to have treated them equally in this respect.

¹² See e.g. Ohlgren, *Anglo-Saxon Textual Illustration*, figs. 5.2 and 5.27 (Boulogne, Bibliothèque Municipale, 11 (Boulogne Gospels, s. x), 2v and 107r), fig. 6.16 (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, M. 869 (Arenberg Gospels, s. xi), 126v), fig. 7.15 (Cambridge, Trinity College, B. 10. 4 (Trinity Gospels, s. xi), 16r), and fig. 9.1 (Cambridge, Pembroke College 301 (Gospel Book, s. xi), 1v).

¹³ See all the examples cited in n. 12.

in the form of a dove (John I. 32). Hence this interpretation identifies the bird on the coin as the dove of the Holy Spirit simply because of the close proximity between these two verses.¹⁴ However, there are two main weaknesses in this interpretation. First, the bird on the reverse is depicted shooting straight up into the sky with its neck strained forward and its legs held tightly against his body in order to minimize the drag, or so it seems. There is nothing about its posture that suggests descent, or preparation to descend, as one would naturally expect had this image been intended in reference to the descent of the Holy Spirit, whether as described at John I.29 in particular or in some broader sense. Second, there is no sign that the bird on the reverse possesses any peculiar sanctity.¹⁵ In particular, it seems inconsistent that the Lamb of God on the obverse should have been depicted with a nimbus, but that the dove of the Holy Spirit should have been left without the same on the reverse, if that is what this bird really is. Why does the animal symbolizing one person in the Trinity, Christ, merit a nimbus, while the bird symbolizing a second person in the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, does not? Contemporary art normally depicts a nimbus around the head of the dove as Holy Spirit, and the apparent application of a different standard of treatment to the two members of the Trinity in this case could have raised questions.¹⁶ Such a coin could even have been considered heretical or blasphemous.¹⁷ Certainly, there were some

¹⁴ Keynes, 'An Abbot, an Archbishop', p. 192; Keynes and Naismith, 'The *Agnus Dei* Pennies', p. 180.

¹⁵ The sole specimen from Hereford (moneyer Æthelwig) is unique in depicting two crosses in the reverse field, one either side of the bird's tail. They clearly were not part of the design as originally approved, and they seem to have a purely decorative function. For an illustration, see Keynes and Naismith, 'The *Agnus Dei* Pennies', p. 219, no. 7.

¹⁶ For depictions of a nimbus about the head of the dove of the Holy Spirit, see e.g. Raw, *Trinity and Incarnation*, figs. I b, XI b (see details, above n. 8), XIV b (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, 869 (Arenberg Gospels), 11v, depicting the Trinity with Mary), and XV b (London, British Library, Cotton Titus D. xxvii (Ælfwine Prayerbook, s. xi.), 75v, depicting the Trinity with Mary).

¹⁷ R. H. M. Dolley, 'A notable gift of Anglo-Saxon coins by the Pilgrim Trust', *BMQ* 20 (1956), 66–71, p. 70, wonders whether the *Agnus Dei* type was abandoned because it seemed 'not pious, but blasphemous', arguing that 'a generation accustomed to see the royal name and title surrounding the royal portrait might have regarded their circumscription of a type of Christ as a little presumptuous'. However, such was the context of this issue in 1009, and the apparent closeness of Æthelred to his ecclesiastical advisors otherwise, particularly Archbishop Wulfstan of York, that it is difficult to believe that he could really have advanced as far as he did in the production of this type had it presented any real potential for theological controversy. In contrast, I. Garipzanov, 'Religious symbols on early Christian Scandinavian coins (ca. 995–1050): from imitation to adaptation', *Viator* 42 (2011), 35–54, at pp. 36–7, suggests that part of the appeal of the *Agnus Dei* type to those who imitated it in Scandinavia only about a decade after its issue may have lain in its ability to evoke the new orthodoxy in the *filioque* controversy, the belief that the Holy Spirit proceeded from God the Son as well as God the

cases in contemporary art where the members of the Trinity were treated differently, and a nimbus attributed to only one or two of its members, but there were normally good artistic explanations why this should have been the case. For example, in some cases the addition of the nimbus to all the figures of the Trinity would have obscured some key details of the scene, perhaps the face of one of the other members of the Trinity,¹⁸ or, in the case of the dove of the Holy Spirit in particular, perhaps some item held in its beak.¹⁹ In other cases, it may not have been felt strictly necessary to depict the dove with a halo also, when it was already surrounded by a mandorla.²⁰ Finally, one should not forget the very different contexts between a coin intended for widespread general circulation and these other examples omitting the halo from the dove, whether an illuminated text intended for limited clerical use or a personal item of jewellery.²¹ One would like to think that greater care would have been taken to ensure that all the due formalities had been properly observed in the depiction of the Holy Spirit in the first case, not least in order to avoid any potential public scandal. Hence the depiction of the dove of the Holy Spirit without a halo was not necessarily without parallel, but it was relatively unusual, and seems somewhat incongruous in a context where one might have expected greater respect and care. The obvious solution to both of the above problems, therefore, is that the bird on the reverse of the *Agnus Dei* penny does not in fact represent the dove of the Holy Spirit. Alternative possibilities need to be more thoroughly investigated.

One may start once more with John the Evangelist's description of how the Baptist described Christ as the Lamb of God. Christians have traditionally

Father. However, this ignores the problem posed by the continued omission of the nimbus in the case of the alleged dove on the Scandinavian imitations of this type also.

¹⁸ See e.g. Raw, *Trinity and Incarnation*, fig. XV a (London, British Library, Harley 603 (Harley Psalter, s. xi), 1r) for a depiction of the Trinity where God the Father alone wears a nimbus, and the addition of the nimbus to either Christ or the dove of the Holy Spirit would have obscured his face.

¹⁹ E.g. the dove descending upon Christ in the depiction of his baptism in the Benedictional of St. Æthelwold (London, British Library, Add. 49598, 25r) bears a handle supporting two vials of chrism in its beak, in reference to the anointing of Christ to his dual roles as king and priest. The dove does not bear a halo, even though Christ, the Baptist, and six accompanying angels do. See R. Deshman, *The Benedictional of Æthelwold* (Princeton, 1995), pl. 19.

²⁰ See e.g. the dove descending upon the Apostles in the depiction of Pentecost in the Benedictional of St. Æthelwold (BL Add. 49598, 67v).

²¹ It is usually assumed that the nummular brooch from Bicester, Oxon, depicts the dove of the Holy Spirit, despite the fact that no signs of sanctity are associated with it, but, in the context of two similar brooches depicting the Lamb of God, this seems not unreasonable. See Keynes and Naismith, 'The *Agnus Dei* Pennies', pp. 203–6. One notes, however, that there is a greater consistency here, in that neither of the other brooches depicts a halo about the head of the Lamb of God either.

interpreted this in the light of a prophecy in the book of Isaiah that the servant of the Lord would be slaughtered like a lamb (Isaiah LIII.7).²² One notes next that the Evangelist also makes the Baptist identify himself as the fulfilment of a verse by prophet Isaiah (John I.23): ‘Ait ego vox clamantis in deserto dirigite viam Domini sicut dixit Esaias propheta.’²³ This is a reference to Isaiah XL.3: ‘Vox clamantis in deserto parate viam Domini rectas facite in solitudine semitas Dei nostri.’²⁴ It is obvious, therefore, that the book of Isaiah is critical to the Christian understanding of the Baptist’s mission, and it is worth exploring whether it may contribute to a better understanding of the coin type under discussion.²⁵ Turning to Isaiah XL, the opening chapter of the second half of the book which promises the restoration of Israel, one immediately notes the relevance of its opening verses to the theme of the forgiveness of sins as symbolized by the Lamb of God on the obverse (Isaiah XL.1–2): ‘Consolamini consolamini populus meus dicit Deus vester loquimini ad cor Hierusalem et avocate eam quoniam completa est malitia eius dimissa est iniquitas illius suscepit de manu Domini duplicia pro omnibus peccatis suis.’²⁶ As one reads on, it becomes clear that the message of this whole chapter is one of hope, that God is all-powerful and that he is coming to rescue his people. Of particular relevance again here are the final verses where it is noted that God strengthens the weak and, most importantly, causes them to rise on wings like eagles (Isaiah XL.29–31): ‘qui dat lasso virtutem et his qui non sunt fortitudinem et robur multiplicat deficient pueri et laborabunt et iuvenes in infirmitate cadent qui autem sperant in Domino mutabunt fortitudinem adsument pinnas sicut aquilae current et non laborabunt ambulabunt et non deficient.’²⁷ It is arguable, therefore, that the obverse of the *Agnus Dei* penny alludes to the forgiveness of sins as described at Isaiah XL.1–2, while the reverse alludes to the effects

²² On the significance of the phrase ‘Lamb of God’, and the variety of potential allusions, see D. B. Sandy, ‘John the Baptist’s “Lamb of God” Affirmation in Its Canonical and Apocalyptic Milieu’, *JETS* 34 (1991), 447–60.

²³ ‘He said: I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Isaias.’

²⁴ ‘The voice of one crying in the desert: Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the wilderness the paths of our God.’

²⁵ On the importance of the book of Isaiah in the early and medieval church, see J. F. A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 21–64.

²⁶ ‘Be comforted, be comforted, my people, saith your God. Speak ye to the heart of Jerusalem, and call to her: for her evil is come to an end, her iniquity is forgiven: she hath received of the hand of the Lord double for all her sins.’

²⁷ ‘It is he that giveth strength to the weary, and increaseth force and might to them that are not. Youths shall faint, and labour, and young men shall fall by infirmity. But they that hope in the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall take wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.’

of hope in the Lord subsequent to this forgiveness as described at Isaiah XL.29–31.

The ultimate test of this new interpretation lies in whether it makes sense in the context of 1009. Keynes persuasively connects the issuing of the *Agnus Dei* penny with the three-day program of public prayer and penance that Æthelred instituted before Michaelmas (29 September) in a year best identified as 1009.²⁸ If nothing else, these actions were both symptoms of the same feeling of despair, the same desperate desire for divine assistance provoked by the arrival at Sandwich of a large new Viking army under Thorkel the Tall sometime shortly after 1 August 1009. In a culture that had long interpreted natural and political disasters as divine punishment for sin, it is entirely understandable that Æthelred and his advisors should have wished to call upon the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world in the face of what seemed to be a renewed bout of divine punishment. But what exactly did Æthelred hope would happen once these sins had been forgiven? Indeed, what sign did he expect to see that these sins really had been forgiven? Certainly, peace was the ultimate objective, but in a situation where a fresh Viking army had already re-established itself in England, it was hardly to be expected that this could be obtained without any fighting. Furthermore, if military failure was a sign of divine disfavour, then the surest proof of divine favour was military success, and the Old Testament provided many examples of how God supported his people by granting them victory in battle. It is arguable, therefore, that the reverse of the *Agnus Dei* penny illustrates what Æthelred thought would be the result, and surest sign of, the divine forgiveness symbolized by the Lamb of God on the obverse, that God would give his men strength, that they would soar like eagles, and so finally rout the Viking invader. Certainly, Æthelred wanted peace, the gift of the Holy Spirit as prayed for at Mass and on other liturgical occasions.²⁹ However, he did not seek peace at any cost, but the peace of victory after he and his men had soared like eagles and driven the enemy from their lands forever. Hence, while the dove would undoubtedly have symbolized Æthelred's ultimate, long-term objective, the eagle best symbolized his immediate objective in 1009. Finally, one should note that, while the Bible contains a variety of other references to eagles, none concludes so powerful a description of divine for-

²⁸ Keynes, 'An Abbot, an Archbishop', pp. 198–201.

²⁹ M. Dolley, 'The nummular brooch from Sulgrave', *England before the Norman Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources presented to Dorothy Whitelock*, ed. P. Clemoes and K. Hughes (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 333–49, at 343–4, draws attention to a revival in the cult of the *Agnus Dei* during the reign of Æthelred, and to the fact that the last line of the traditional triple invocation of the *Agnus Dei* in the Mass was changing at about this time so that the final *miserere nobis* 'have mercy on us' was replaced by *dona nobis pacem* 'grant us peace'.

givenness as Isaiah XL, and none makes quite so much sense in the context of 1009 as does Isaiah XL.31.³⁰

The facts both that the *Agnus Dei* type was only produced at a relatively small number of mints, mostly the smaller and less significant mints, and that the small number of surviving specimens points to a very limited period of production, have occasioned much discussion as to whether this was a substantive type, that is, a type that had originally been intended to be kept in production for several years or more as was the norm at this period, but whose production had been prematurely curtailed for some reason, or a special issue of deliberately limited scale and duration. Keynes and Naismith fudge the issue somewhat in that they conclude that it was both a substantive type and a special issue, that is, that it displayed features of both, that its weight and other features identify it as the start of the new coinage best represented by the *Last Small Cross* type, while its imagery marks it out as a special issue.³¹ This still does not explain why the production of this type was so brutally curtailed relative to the production of other types. Keynes and Naismith rightly warn against any easy assumption that this type was cancelled because of its ‘unfamiliar, difficult or unorthodox design’, but do not offer any more positive suggestions in this respect.³²

One possibility that deserves more attention than it has received heretofore is that the type was abandoned when political developments rendered its message out of date and a potential embarrassment to the king.³³ If one interprets the bird on the reverse as the dove of the Holy Spirit, then, in so far as it could be read as an appeal to God for forgiveness and peace, the type becomes almost timeless, and it might well be argued that Æthelred could have continued with such an appeal long after 1009 if he had so wished. However, if one interprets the bird on the reverse as an eagle soaring in the manner that Æthelred had expected his forces to soar following the divine forgiveness symbolized by the Lamb, this type will have had a more limited lifespan. The moment that it became clear that the English forces were not in fact soaring like eagles, and that, or so it seemed, God had not forgiven them their sins, the type would have been rendered redundant, if not an embarrassment to a king seen to be presumptively claiming a divine forgiveness that he had not in fact obtained. If this was the case, then Æthelred probably discontinued his new type at the first

³⁰ For other references to eagles, see Exodus XIX.4, Leviticus XI.13, Deuteronomy XXXII.11, 2 Samuel I.23, Job IX.26 and XXXIX.27, Proverbs XXX.18, Jeremiah XLIX.16, Ezekiel X.14, Daniel IV.33, Habakkuk I.8, Matthew XXIV.28, Revelation IV.7 and XII.14.

³¹ Keynes and Naismith, ‘The *Agnus Dei* Pennies’, pp. 200–1.

³² Keynes and Naismith, ‘The *Agnus Dei* Pennies’, p. 196.

³³ S. Lyon, ‘Some Problems in Interpreting Anglo-Saxon Coinage’, *ASE* 5 (1976), 173–224, at 203, suggests that the type ‘was thought inappropriate because of renewed Viking assaults’.

serious reverse suffered by the English following the culmination of his campaign to win divine forgiveness, the three-day program of prayer and penance of 26–8 September. While little is known concerning the exact movements or whereabouts of Thorkell's army at this time, there can be no doubt that they continued their raids throughout the last months of 1009. Hence it is difficult to see how Æthelred could have continued to issue the *Agnus Dei* type much into the winter of 1009/10 without looking increasingly foolish. A sudden and unexpected victory might have resulted in a resumed and extended production of this type, had it occurred soon enough, but this was not to be. To summarize, it is arguable that the *Agnus Dei* type was intended as a substantive type, but that its continued production was predicated upon a military success that rapidly proved unattainable.

A final point is necessary. The extant works of Archbishop Wulfstan of York (1002–23) include a small collection of Latin excerpts from the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, together with English translations of the same, *De visione Isaie prophete quam vidit super Iudam et Ierusalem*, which seems to represent notes for the composition of a sermon rather than a finished work in itself, and probably dates to early in his career as archbishop.³⁴ Unfortunately, this collection does not include either Isaiah XL.1–2 or Isaiah XL.29–31. However, it highlights the fact that it was entirely natural at this period to look to the sufferings of the people of Israel as described in the Old Testament, particularly in the book of Isaiah, to discover both a parallel to and remedy for the sufferings of the English people. It is arguable, therefore, that the choice of the design for the *Agnus Dei* penny is the product not only of the same age, but of the same mentality also, that it represents a sermon in silver on Isaiah XL, but that no sooner had the words left the king's mouth than that he began to realize that he had spoken too soon.

In conclusion, the possibility that the bird on the reverse of the *Agnus Dei* penny is an eagle rather than a dove deserves greater attention than it has received heretofore. In the final analysis, however, it is impossible to be sure which of the two birds Æthelred intended to be depicted on the coin. Both identifications have their merits and weaknesses. In the case of the identification of this bird as the dove of the Holy Spirit, it is disconcerting both that it should have been depicted soaring aloft, rather than in descent upon its people, and without any signs of sanctity. However, in the case of the identification of this bird as an eagle representing a people restored by God's forgiveness, it is disconcerting that this seems to constitute an otherwise unrecorded iconographic motif, so that many of those at whom the coin's message was presum-

³⁴ *The Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. D. Bethurum (Oxford, 1957), pp. 211–20. See also J. T. Lionarons, *The Homiletic Writings of Archbishop Wulfstan* (Woodbridge, 2010), pp. 147–8.

The Agnus Dei penny of King Æthelred II

ably intended may well have failed to grasp it. This problem of identification is compounded by the fact that neither interpretation is far removed from the other, that the renewal represented by the soaring eagle represents but a step on the road to the peace represented by the dove of the Holy Spirit. Hence it is not impossible even that this very ambiguity – dove or eagle? – may have contributed in some small part to the decision to discontinue this type.