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Roman wealth, native ritual: coin hoards within and beyond Roman Britain

N. B. Aitchison

Coin hoards are an important element of the archaeological record of Roman Britain, with about 1,500 hoards recorded (Robertson 1974:12; Casey 1980:54). Hoards, of course, are confined neither to the Roman period nor to Britain, and the study of the deposition of prehistoric metalwork has recently benefitted from the application of models derived from anthropology (e.g. Kristiansen 1978, 1983; Bradley 1982, 1985:21-40: Barrett 1985). The study of coin hoards, however, is constrained by disciplinary boundaries. Numismatists alone possess the expertise with which to identify and date coins, yet this only constitutes a small part of the analysis and interpretation of a coin hoard. Other aspects, such as the study of the context and associations of a hoard, require archaeological knowledge, while the motive(s) for deposition are the preserve of neither discipline. The problem with numismatic studies is that numismatists are more inclined to seek a monetary interpretation, or draw upon monetary analogies, when, in some cases, the evidence may not justify this. For instance, numismatists often equate coins and coinage. However, a coin is simply an artefact which has a monetary value because it is of standard weight and bears an official stamp or design, while coinage refers to a monetary system of coins in circulation. Because their monetary value is officially sanctioned, coins, especially bronze ones, which pass beyond the sphere of control of the issuing authority may lose this value. However, as artefacts in their own right, or as bullion in the case of gold and silver coins, they may still be invested with some form of intrinsic significance or value. Such issues must be considered when dealing with coin hoards in areas peripheral to, or beyond, the Roman Empire.

The analysis and interpretation of Roman coin hoards: a critique

The traditional classification of coin finds is based upon quantitative and contextual factors and assumptions concerning the intentionality, or otherwise, of the deposit. For instance, Mattingly (1932:89) distinguishes between hoards, single coins found on archaeological sites, and 'stray' or 'isolated' finds. These distinctions are now entrenched within coin studies (cf. O'Neil 1936:64; Laing 1969:69; Crawford 1970:40; Kent 1974:196; Robertson 1974:15; 1978:186; Bruun 1978:114; Casey 1984:295, 297; 1986:60). This classification relies not upon empirical observation, such as coin density, but

World Archaeology Volume 20 No. 2 Hoards and Hoarding © Routledge 1988 0043–8243/88/2002/270 \$1.50/1 incorporates a large element of interpretation. Thus, both site finds and stray finds are single coins which are believed to have been lost accidentally (Macdonald 1903:286; Robertson 1974:15), the only distinction being that the former were lost within a recognisable archaeological context (e.g. a town or fort) and the latter were not. This ignores the point that a 'stray' find may mark the location of an undetected site (O'Neil 1936:70), or be the only coin recovered from a disturbed hoard. In contrast, coin hoards are believed to represent deliberate deposits, a 'mass of coinage, committed to the earth at one particular moment or, even if added to after its first interment, at any rate sealed at some definable date' (Mattingly 1932:89; cf. Robertson 1956, 1974, 1978; Collingwood and Richmond 1969:230–2; Laing 1969:52–68; Kent 1974; Casey 1980:51–60; 1986:51–67). A hoard therefore constitutes a 'closed group' of associated artefacts.

Macdonald (1903:284, 286, 297) states that coin finds occur singly or in hoards, but this is a purely quantitative distinction, with no unequivocal implications for the mechanisms or motives behind deposition. Similar conclusions have been reached regarding the traditional division between hoards and single finds of prehistoric metalwork (Fitzpatrick 1984:178–9; Barrett 1985:95). Likewise, single coin finds may represent deliberate deposits rather than accidental losses. However, this is difficult to demonstrate, except in the case of a number of coins which have been found singly, but in association with a specific feature, and do not appear to represent the disturbed remains of a hoard. Indeed, hoards and single finds are found in similar contexts (below). Rather than employing numerical and contextual assumptions in the interpretation of coin finds, archaeologists need to question the validity of the distinction between hoards and single coin finds. However, the term 'hoard', because of its common use, is retained here to denote a closed group of coins, while 'deposit' refers to coins (or a coin) which do not necessarily comprise a closed group and may have entered the archaeological record over a period of time.

The traditional interpretation of hoards is a product of the equation of coins with money. If it is assumed that coins represent units of monetary value, then the distinction between single coin finds and hoards is reinforced. Single coins, and those of low denomination in particular, represent accidental losses which, because of their low value, were not worth retrieving (O'Neil 1936:67–8; Robertson 1978:195; Reece 1981a:81). By contrast, coin hoards are concentrations of monetary wealth — savings (Macdonald 1903; Mattingly 1927:42–3, 185–6; 1932; Robertson 1956; 1974; Collingwood and Richmond 1969:230–2; Laing 1969:52–67; Kent 1974; Bruun 1978:114; Casey 1980:51–60; 1986:51–67). Hoards are believed to comprise currency which has been withdrawn, often rapidly and only temporarily, from circulation, with the intention of being retrieved, and their contents returned to the currency pool, whenever the circumstances which resulted in their deposition had passed.

Usually, these circumstances are interpreted as being some threat or disturbance, either internal or external. The motivation behind the deposition of coin hoards, therefore, is safe-keeping, in the absence of banks. As a result, hoards are assigned considerable historical significance as an index of unrest. However, a lack of correspondence between well-documented disturbances and increased coin hoarding has been noted both in Britain and on the continent (Mattingly 1927:44; Casey 1980:60; Reece 1981a:84–7). Literary sources are frequently cited to support the interpretation of

coin hoards as temporary deposits for safe-keeping during times of crisis. In particular, Samuel Pepys (eds. Latham and Matthews 1974:263–4, 472–5) relates how he buried his savings in the face of a potential threat from the Dutch fleet in 1667. The motivation behind the burial of Pepys' hoard is projected back some 1,500 years and used as a model for the deposition of coin hoards in Roman Britain (Macdonald 1903:292; Laing 1969:65; Kent 1974:188–9; Casey 1986:53–5). However, the society and economy of Restoration England were very different from those of Roman Britain, thus invalidating this analogy.

In the interpretation of coin hoards as monetary savings, the quality, and therefore value, of the coins is emphasised. It is asserted, for example, that the coins are usually of high denomination and valuable metal (Robertson 1956:265–7; Laing 1969:54, 60), principally gold *aurei* and silver *denarii*. In addition, although it is seldom demonstrated, many hoards are said to display a clear preference for older and heavier coins, because these contain more valuable metallic content than later issues, reflecting the progressive debasement of gold and silver coins during the Empire (Macdonald 1903:287; Robertson 1956:265, 267, 274; 1974:16–17; Laing 1969:53–4; Kent 1974:185; Bruun 1978:114; Casey 1980:53; 1986:56, 66).

However, the coins within some hoards raise suspicions about whether they were withdrawn from circulation for safe-keeping. For example, John Aubrey (1980:766-7) relates the discovery of both Greek and Roman coins contained within an urn in a barrow on Exmoor (Grinsell 1967:22), and a barrow at Leafield, Oxfordshire, produced a Celtic coin as well as Roman coins (ibid.:23). Robertson (1956:270-1; cf. Hill 1930; O'Neil 1936:71; Milne 1948) states that there are over a dozen Roman coin hoards in Britain which also contain Greek coins, and a similar number which include Celtic coins. Although some Greek coins circulated because of their similarity to Roman coins, this hardly explains hoards such as those from Fetter Lane, London (Ringrose 1911), and Jerbourg, Guernsey (Robinson 1937), which comprise solely Alexandrian tetradrachms and whose significance appears not to have been monetary. If Greek coins were not of monetary value in Roman Britain, then why are they associated with Roman coins which are believed to represent currency withdrawn from circulation? This query also applies to other incongruous coins found within Roman hoards. It cannot be inferred from these (pace Robertson 1957:271; 1974:18) that Celtic coins circulated as currency alongside Roman coins early in the Roman occupation. Indeed, there are at least two mid-thirdcentury hoards of Roman coins, Ashover, Derbyshire (Peck 1924), and Pitstone Common, Hertfordshire (Evans 1870), which also contain Celtic coins.

If the contents of hoards represent coins which are withdrawn from circulation and deposited immediately, then a direct relationship must exist between circulating currency and deposited coins. However, the assemblages from coin deposits rarely exhibit the features which one would expect of currency in circulation. Many hoards contain antique and exotic coins — Celtic, Greek state and eastern Roman provincial coins (Robertson 1956:270, 274; Laing 1969:56, 63; Casey 1986:66) — which could not have circulated as currency in Roman Britain. In addition, Roman coins were intermittently withdrawn from circulation for recoining, whereas hoard assemblages sometimes cover a wide date-range, straddling periods of recoinage. Also, coins of either exceptional quality or baseness appear to characterise many hoards, yet one would expect the former to have been withdrawn for recoinage, while no adequate financial motive for the deposition of

the latter would appear to exist. Further, the contents of a hoard may have been assembled over a period of time, or the accumulation of the majority of the coins may significantly pre-date the date of deposition, as in the case of the Falkirk, Stirlingshire, hoard (Macdonald 1934a, 1934b:32–40; Robertson 1978:196, 207–8). In such cases, analysis demonstrates that the contents of the hoard will not correspond with the composition of the currency in circulation at the time of deposition (Reece 1980, 1981b). In short, the contents of some hoards do not appear to directly reflect currency in circulation, particularly an unstable and constantly changing currency (Crawford 1970:40; Kent 1974:185, 196–7; Bruun 1978:114, 119; Reece 1979:212–13).

Other evidence suggests that hoarded coins were selected not merely on the basis of their intrinsic value. For example, the hoard from Thorngrafton, Northumberland, comprises three *aurei* and sixty *denarii*, the latter ranging from Nero to Hadrian (Bruce 1921:174), with the reverse of each being different (Robertson 1956:274; Laing 1969:56). This is only one of at least four hoards which demonstrate a similar form of selectivity amongst their contents (Robertson 1956:274). Also, the hoarding of coins of one emperor only, of which as many as thirty examples are known (ibid.:275), suggests that these hoards were deliberately selected or, alternatively, had not yet entered circulation. There are too many examples of this, and of the inclusion of rare and exotic coins in hoards, for all these hoards to be dismissed as having belonged to coin collectors in antiquity (pace ibid.: 274; Laing 1969:56). Although these are exceptional examples, the contents of most hoards exhibit varying degrees of selection, the criteria of which do not always appear to be monetary.

Coin hoards frequently contain other artefacts, such as gold, silver or bronze jewellery, and silver, bronze or pewter plate (Robertson 1956:265; 1974:25; Laing 1969:56; Casey 1986:56). The presence of such items may be attributed to safe-keeping along with monetary savings. However, a number of hoards contain artefacts of lead, iron and ivory, as well as glass vessels and clay figurines (Robertson 1974:26), which are almost certainly not of monetary value. Their inclusion is inconsistent with the interpretation of coin hoards solely as deposits of currency or valuables for safe-keeping.

Consideration of other types of coin deposit raises further doubts regarding the veracity of traditional interpretations of coin hoards. For instance, the 'savings' deposit is not the only interpretation attributed to Roman coin hoards. Although the contents of first- and second-century AD hoards are dominated by high denomination gold and silver coins, from about 260, hoards of low denomination bronze coins predominate (Macdonald 1903:297; Mattingly 1927:139, 186; 1932:93; O'Neil 1936:73; Robertson 1956:277–9; 1974:17). These coins are 'barbarous radiates' and are associated with an increase in hoarding (Casey 1986:62). The deposition of these hoards is attributed to economic factors. Inflation within the Roman Empire became pronounced from the 260s (Crawford 1975:571), with a particularly marked effect on the radiate, making it practically worthless (Greene 1986:59). Accordingly, large hoards of radiates are interpreted as originally having been buried for safe-keeping but not retrieved because inflation had rendered them valueless, or they were already worthless and were buried as a means of disposal (Mattingly 1932:91–3; O'Neil 1936:73; Collingwood and Richmond 1969:231; Casey 1980:53, 56–8; 1986:65–6; Reece 1981a:82, 86).

A fundamental contrast exists between the first- and second-century hoards of gold and

silver coins and the hoards of bronze coins of the later Empire. This contrast comprises not only the motivation behind deposition, but also the stage of completion of those processes which are represented in the archaeological record. In the interpretation of coin hoards as currency deposited for safe-keeping, it is assumed that the archaeological record attests an interrupted process. Hoards were buried with the intention of being retrieved once the threat had passed, but their owners were unable to do so. With the later hoards, however, the archaeological record is claimed to represent the entire process — the deliberate and permanent disposal of worthless coins.

There is a contradiction inherent within these two interpretations. For a start, the motivation attributed to the hoarding of bronze coins contrasts with the central tenet of the study of hoards, that coins of poor quality and/or low value drive issues of purer and more precious metal and/or higher denomination, where these are available, out of circulation and into hoards (O'Neil 1936:67; Laing 1969:53-4; Kent 1974:185; Bruun 1978:114; Casey 1980:53). Paradoxically, therefore, coin hoards are claimed to be both a precaution against the dangers of currency depreciation (Bruun 1978:114); and a means of disposing of coins made worthless by depreciation. A similar contradiction surrounds the interpretation of Republican denarii from hoards. Their presence is not so common after the reign of Hadrian, but they do occur in hoards of as late as the mid-third century (Mattingly 1927:185; Robertson 1956:272; 1974:19). The traditional interpretation is that these denarii were hoarded because of the purer quality of their silver (Robertson 1956:272). However, a seemingly contradictory interpretation is proposed in the case of the debased legionary denarii of Mark Antony (31 BC), which are also found in hoards as late as the mid-third century, such as that from St Mary Cray, Kent (Robertson 1935). These are claimed to have been circulated, and ultimately hoarded, because their poor quality meant that they were not worth recalling for recoining (Macdonald 1903:287; Mattingly 1927:138, 185; 1932:92). The paradox of the interpretations accorded to coin hoards whose contents are assumed to be of either high or low monetary value, is that the contents of both types of hoard often exhibit many of the same characteristics. These include complex and deliberate selection, association with other artefacts, placing within a receptacle, and physical context. In short, the same, or similar, structuring processes, and presumably motivation, may lie behind the deposition of some hoards of both bronze and gold/silver coins. The nature of that motivation may now be identified by examining a category of coin find which traditionally has been considered to be anomalous.

Coin deposits as votive offerings

As well as the traditional distinction between stray finds, site finds and hoards, it is necessary for archaeologists and numismatists to erect another category of coin find. This is the 'accumulation', and the example cited is usually that of Coventina's Well, Carrawburgh, Northumberland (Macdonald 1903:293; Robertson 1956:273, n.1; Laing 1969:57). The well, which was excavated in 1876 (Bruce 1877; Clayton 1880a, 1880b; see Allason-Jones and McKay 1985: x–xiii for an extensive bibliography), yielded large quantities of Roman artefacts, including c.16,000 coins.

The distinction which is made — though not always explicitly — between hoards and accumulations is that the former represent 'closed groups' of artefacts while the latter represent a succession of acts of deposition over a period of time. Thus, the coins from Coventina's Well may have been deposited from the reign of Hadrian (117–138) (Watkin 1876; Collingwood and Richmond 1969:159), while the latest coin, a post-393 bronze of Honorius (Kent 1952:10; Allason-Jones and McKay 1985:54), indicates that deposition continued until the late fourth, or into the fifth, century. These coins, and the other artefacts from Coventina's Well, have long been accepted as constituting votive offerings, deposited as part of the cult of the goddess Coventina (Watkin 1876; Clayton 1880b:31; Hall 1880:83; Macdonald 1903:293; Kent 1952:9–10; Robertson 1956:273, n.1; Ross 1967:29–31; 1968:263; Collingwood and Richmond 1969:150; Laing 1969:57; Allason-Jones and McKay 1985:6–11).

It was noted above that later hoards of small denomination coins are usually interpreted as having been deliberately discarded. However, all but 188 of the 13,490 coins recorded from Coventina's Well are low denomination bronze issues (ibid.:50, 52). Similarly, the coins from the temple at Lydney, Gloucestershire (Wheeler and Wheeler 1932), which include two hoards and would appear to be votive offerings, are predominantly the small bronze copies, 'minimi' and 'minimissimi' (Casey et al. 1932). Votive deposits, therefore, may comprise low denomination bronze coins. The only criterion by which such deposits appear to be distinguishable from abandoned ones of worthless coins is that of context. Thus, the coins from Coventina's Well are interpreted as a votive deposit because they were associated with altars (Allason-Jones and McKay 1985:14–19), because the well lies within the remains of a temple (ibid.:3) and because of the known religious significance of wells in Celtic and Roman Britain (Alcock 1966; Ross 1967, 1968). The contents of Coventina's Well are readily identifiable as a votive deposit, but it must be considered that other coin deposits may have a ritual motive behind their deposition, which is undetected simply because the deposit was made in a context which is not of obvious religious significance.

The emphasis on the interpretation of deposits of gold and silver coins is on currency. However, such deposits also occur beyond the frontiers of Roman Britain. Regardless of how Roman coins reached Ireland (Warner 1976; Mytum 1981), they did not circulate within a monetary economy. Coin deposits, therefore, were not savings withdrawn from circulating currency, deposited for safe-keeping during times of crisis. A number of similarities suggest that coin deposits in Roman Britain and in Ireland represent manifestations of similar practices.

One of the largest assemblages of Roman artefacts in Ireland is that associated with the great megalithic tomb of Newgrange, Co. Meath (Topp 1955; Carson and O'Kelly 1977). Excavations between 1962 and 1975 yielded nineteen coins, predominantly high denomination issues of the late Empire, and quantities of gold, silver and bronze jewellery. These do not constitute a hoard, intact or disturbed, but a group of single deposits around the entrance to the passage tomb and the monoliths outside it. The preponderance and quantity of *aurei* and *solidi*, the discovery of other artefacts there, and the fact that the coins were deposited singly, indicates that they represent not casual losses, but deliberate deposits. Moreover, their association with a tomb which features prominently within early Irish mythology suggests that they constitute votive offerings (ibid.:41–2, 48–9; O'Kelly 1982:42–7).

Newgrange is not the only funerary monument in Ireland with which deposits of Roman artefacts are associated. Several Roman 'toilet instruments' have been found at the nearby tomb of Knowth (Macalister 1943:147; Bateson 1973:67–9, 80). Although their date of deposition is uncertain, there are more securely dated parallels. Excavation of the Bronze Age cairn on Freestone Hill, Co. Kilkenny, produced a coin of Constantine dating to 337–40, two bronze toilet instruments, and Roman bracelets. The excellent condition of the coin suggests that it was deposited no later than the mid-fourth century (Raftery 1969:47) and although these finds do not comprise a hoard their deposition may be placed within the Iron Age.

As noted above, the association of prehistoric funerary monuments and Roman coin deposits is not confined to Ireland. Grinsell (1967:20–5) lists about thirty examples in England, Bateman (1861:43, 55, 61, 82, 122, 126) and Piggott (1962:55–6) note several others, while Robertson (1974:26) states that 'more than sixty' hoards are recorded from earlier burial mounds, hillforts or earthworks. Most examples were found during the nineteenth century and are poorly recorded, but more recent excavations verify the association. For instance, six late Imperial bronze coins came from the facade of the chambered tomb of West Kennet, Wiltshire (Piggott 1962:55–6), and six late-fourth-century bronze coins (Robertson 1970a) from around one of the chambers of the Giant's Caves, Luckington, Wiltshire (Corcoran 1970). Although these coins are very different from the high denomination gold issues from Newgrange, this presumably reflects differences in the circulation and availability of coins, rather than differences in the motive behind deposition.

Several accounts of coin finds from earlier burial mounds, quoted or cited by Grinsell (1967:20–5), describe features, such as the containment of coins within an urn or other receptacle and the tendency for coins of similar type to be found together, which are paralleled amongst coin hoards in general. However, some deposits do not appear to constitute closed groups. Indeed, Grinsell (ibid.:22-3) rejects two cases because the coins were scattered, rather than forming a single deposit. Several of the older accounts, though, state explicitly that the coins were found, not as a hoard, but throughout the barrow. At Saint's Hill, Parwich, Derbyshire, for example, 'about 80 small brass coins of the later Roman Emperors were found scattered about the barrow' (Bateman 1861:61) and at Steyning, Sussex, 'in different parts of the barrow, about 50 coins of small brass . . . [were found]' (Cartwright 1830:170). There are too many examples of this for them to be interpreted as disturbed hoards. The traditional interpretation of coin hoards buried within earlier funerary monuments is that, as savings, they could be retrieved more easily by being buried within a prominent landmark (Grinsell 1967:4; Laing 1969:55; Robertson 1970b:199; 1974:14, 26–7). However, this would have been of little help if the coins were scattered.

Alternatively, the prominence of prehistoric funerary monuments within the landscape may be related to a different type of significance. The mystical qualities invested in burial mounds portrayed in early Irish mythology, and their association with supernatural characters and deities (e.g. O'Kelly 1982:43–7) is believed to indicate their religious significance, possibly as the burial place of ancestors and as an avenue to the otherworld

(Ross 1967:40). In the archaeological record, this is supported, for example, by the construction of a late Romano-British temple on a Neolithic barrow, at Haddenham, Cambridgeshire (Evans 1985:88). Deposits of coins within funerary monuments may also constitute evidence of ritual activity. The discovery of deposits of Bronze Age and Iron Age metalwork within earlier burial mounds in both Britain (e.g. Grinsell 1967:2–3) and Ireland (e.g. Herity 1974:220, 271) suggests that such monuments had long been invested with religious significance, and that the deposition of Roman coins constitutes a specific manifestation of a long-established practice.

That the coins comprising 'accumulated' votive deposits were not derived *directly* from circulating currency is suggested by analysis of the coins from Coventina's Well (Allason-Jones 1985:67–75) and Traprain Law, East Lothian (Sekulla 1983; cf. Hill 1987). As a result, recent attempts to distinguish between Roman coins deposited in antiquity and modern losses (Bateson 1973:37–42; Casey 1984) are unacceptable. This is because they assume a uniformity of coinage in circulation, and the existence of a direct correlation between those coins which were deliberately deposited and those which were accidentally lost.

The problem with the study of coin deposits in Roman Britain is that all coins are equated with money. However, as discussed above, there is a wide range of evidence to suggest that not all coin deposits represent secreted or abandoned currency. Rather, it seems more realistic to attribute the deposition of some coins to religious motives. This corresponds with those coin 'accumulations', like Coventina's Well, which have long been interpreted as votive offerings. In fact, the coins from Coventina's Well do not represent a gradual accumulation, but attest peaks of deposition, including a hoard deposited in the late second century AD (Allason-Jones and McKay 1985:6-7, 68-9) and at least one pot-full of coins (Bruce 1877:363; Allason-Jones and McKay 1985:7). This parallels the discovery of many hoards within pots, while the personal adornments from Coventina's Well are reminiscent of the contents of many coin hoards (above). Like several hoards and coin deposits from barrows, Coventina's Well also yielded some Greek coins (Askew 1937; Allason-Jones and McKay 1985:54), indicating that coins which could not have circulated as currency were acceptable as votive deposits. In short, not only coin deposits from wells or burial mounds, but also some hoards buried in the ground, may represent manifestations of the same phenomenon — votive offerings.

Roman coins and native gifts

The extent to which the Roman economy was a monetary one, based on the use of coinage as a medium of exchange, is the subject of some debate (reviewed in Greene 1986:50–3). Notably, Crawford (1970) and Finley (1973) believe that monetary exchange was restricted to the cities of the Empire. Against this background, Hodder (1979) and Reece (1979) discuss the effects of the Roman occupation on the native British economy. Reece (1979) concludes that the economic impact of invasion did not amount to the introduction of a monetary exchange economy, largely on the grounds of the small quantities of low denomination bronze coinage available during the first and second centuries AD. However, he acknowledges that Roman coins had a limited role, though

essential from an Imperial perspective, as a medium of payment of taxes and of commerce with the army (ibid.:214). This need not imply the existence of a full monetary economy.

Hodder (1979) invokes the concept of the 'embedded economy' (Polanyi 1957; Dalton 1961, 1965), in which exchange is a facet of social institutions such as kinship, marriage, and ritual (Sahlins 1974:185-275). In short, 'the economy' as a discrete entity does not exist because economic processes are 'embedded' within social relations. This is in contrast to a market economy, in which bartering, buying, and selling are practised outwith the social sphere. Hodder (1979:190-2) seeks to demonstrate that there is insufficient evidence for the existence of a market economy in late Iron Age Britain, and, like Reece (1979:214-5), queries the function of the pre-Roman Celtic coins of southern England. These are of gold or silver, suggesting that their exchange was restricted to a social élite, rather than being a medium of exchange for goods, commodities and services (cf. Collis 1971; Haselgrove 1979). That Celtic and Roman coins sometimes occur within the same deposits (above) suggests that Roman coins may have fulfilled a similar function within society. This concurs with the archaeological evidence because Roman coins deposited during the first and second centuries AD are also dominated by gold and silver issues. Only by the mid-third century does this pattern change, when an increase in hoarding, and the hoarding of bronze coins, perhaps suggests a wider social involvement in both exchange and deposition.

It may seem strange to propose that prestige items such as coins, whose exchange confers status, are deliberately deposited without the intention of being retrieved at a later date. The solution lies in the concept of the gift (Mauss 1925; Sahlins 1974:149–83), because it is the giving, rather than the possession, of a gift which confers status. However, gifts are not alienated from the giver, but carry an obligation, so that receipt of a gift necessitates a reciprocal transaction. Gifts, therefore, always return, but may return in greater quantity in order to reverse a pre-existing relationship of social indebtedness. Thus, a competitive and inherently unstable means of creating social status is effected, in contrast to the stability of status established through genealogical ties with ancestors or gods.

However, anthropologists recognise a strategy amongst 'primitive' societies with embedded economies which ameliorates the social instability of gift-giving and reconciles it with the status derived from ancestral and divine links. That strategy is gifts to gods (Gregory 1980; 1982). Giving to gods creates or reinforces the relationship between giver and deity, and removes gifts from cycles of gift-giving. This increases the status of the giver by demonstrating his close relationship with the gods and his ability to discard, and effectively destroy, gifts — a form of conspicuous consumption. In turn, this makes it potentially more difficult for others within the gift-exchange cycle to place the giver in a socially indebted position, by reducing the volume of gifts in circulation (cf. Barrett 1985). The deposition of coins within earlier funerary monuments is particularly significant, therefore, because it demonstrates an explicit link between the status produced by the conspicuous consumption of coins and that derived from ancestral relationships.

The deposition of metalwork continues into, and throughout, the Roman period (Piggott 1955; Watkins 1966:7-10; Manning 1972), suggesting that cycles of gift

exchange operated in Roman Britain. The significance of Roman artefacts, whether coins or toilet instruments, is that, within native society, they were perceived to be exotic or prestige goods — trappings of Roman imperialism — the giving and deposition of which enhanced status. It would appear to be within a pre-existing system of social exchange, therefore, that Roman coins and artefacts circulated. Not only this, but the availability of large quantities of these, through the Roman military presence, may have fuelled cycles of gift exchange and thus led to an increase in hoarding. Artefactual deposition, therefore, may be a symptom of social instability rather than an indicator of military or civil crisis, as traditionally thought.

Conclusions

A case can be made against the traditional distinction between hoards and other categories of deliberate coin deposits, and against the interpretation of all coin hoards as either savings for safe-keeping or currency discarded as a result of inflation. The alternative interpretation links some coin hoards with coin 'accumulations', and both Iron Age and Romano-British metalwork deposits, in their interpretation as votive offerings. These coins appear to have circulated as gifts within an embedded economy, the origins of which lie in the Iron Age.

It may be proposed that two systems of coin circulation existed in Roman Britain. Firstly, the state conducted its economic policy through a monetary system. Possibly more widespread was an 'alternative economy' within which coins circulated and which cannot be distinguished from social and ritual practices of the Iron Age or of those lands beyond the Imperial frontiers. The existence of two systems of coin circulation necessitates the existence of two types of coin deposit — votive offerings, and monetary or savings hoards. The problem is therefore one of distinguishing between the two. In this, the evidence of contents and context must be paramount. However, this problem is exacerbated by the fact that the contexts of only a minority of hoards are recorded. Inevitably, a 'grey area' of coin deposits which are not of obvious monetary value or votive character will exist. One thing does seem certain, and that is that the social and economic contexts of coin deposits within and beyond Roman Britain are more complex than many archaeologists and numismatists alike have appreciated.

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Abstract

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Roman wealth, native ritual: coin hoards within and beyond Roman Britain

Coin deposits constitute one of the more striking, and yet common, elements of the archaeological record of Roman Britain. However, their study is based upon assumptions concerning the motives behind deposition and distinctions made between hoards and other categories of coin find. This paper has two aims. Firstly, it seeks to demonstrate the inadequacy of current interpretations of coin hoards. Secondly, it attempts to broaden the analysis of coin hoards by considering also votive deposits of coins in areas peripheral to and beyond the frontiers of Roman Britain. Several common features between coin deposits within and beyond the province are identified, and the implications of these for the motives behind deposition — and the nature of Romano-British society and economy — are then considered.