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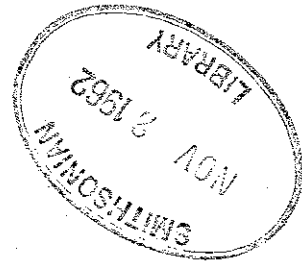
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THE ROMAN TEMPLE AT BREAN DOWN, SOMERSET, AND THE DATING OF 'MINIMISSIMI'

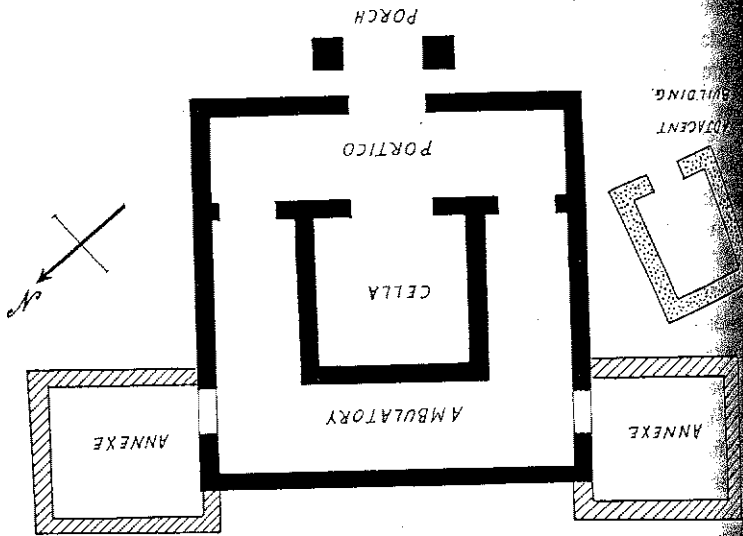


FIG. 1. The Roman temple at Brean Down (after A. M. Appsimon)

THE most site-finds, the 468 coins discovered at Brean Down are almost devoid of individual interest. Collectively, however, they are of great significance. Two fortunate combinations of circumstances—the juxtaposition of two buildings, one for structural reasons demonstrably later than the other, coupled with a scrupulous technique of excavation and record—enable a factual solution to be made of a vexed problem of Romano-British numismatics treated hitherto, necessarily, from purely theoretical premises. This problem is the dating of the tiny copies known since the *Lydney Report* of 1932¹ as 'minimissimi'.

A temple occupied the middle summit of Brean Down, the narrow

¹ R. E. M. and T. V. Wheeler, *Excavation . . . in Lydney Park, Glos. (Res. Rept. IX of the Soc. Antiq. Lond., 1932), 116-31 (Hoard II), 'Minimissimi' named, 125.*

and precipitous promontory enclosing Weston Bay on the south, and approachable in Roman times perhaps only by boat from Uphill. The site was opened in 1956-8 by Mr. A. M. ApSimon on behalf of the University of Bristol Spelaological Society¹ and the Weston super-Mare Borough Council. In plan, the temple embodies a square *cella*, surrounded by a portico and ambulatory, the outer walls being probably built solid to the eaves in this exposed situation. Some short while after its completion the plan was diversified by the addition of two square annexes, symmetrically sited to the rear (Fig. 1). Finally when the building had long become converted to secular uses and was in an advanced state of ruin, a separate rectangular structure was erected in the shadow of its south wall. This adjacent building, of distinctive alignment, is largely composed of materials from the south annexe and also includes Bath stone details from the temple proper; the workmanship is rude, but Roman.

It is not desirable to enter into the chronology of the site at length here. Sealed coins of c. 330-41, including two copies, suggest a building-date of c. 340-5. The series from the temple ends with eighteen coins, most of them but slightly worn, of the House of Valentinian I. The site was therefore probably deserted by c. 380. Although the stratification within the temple was found to be homogeneously confused, there is adequate reason to believe that the occupation under Valentinian was unconnected with the original sacred purpose of the site, which in all likelihood was terminated (if not violently) by the barbarian raids of 367-8, marked elsewhere along this coast of the Bristol Channel.² Between the original usage of the site and the ultimate slow devolution of squatting a period of iron smelting³ in one of the annexes intervened.

Bearing in mind the structural succession, the earliest series of coins to enter the adjacent building was presumably its thirty specimens of the House of Valentinian I. In contrast to those from the temple, these are markedly more worn, suggesting that a break in the occupation of the hill-top—to c. 390?—had occurred. A fair number of worn Theodosian coins from the adjacent building must carry their life well into the fifth century, perhaps to c. 425.

¹ In whose *Proceedings* the final report, containing a detailed account of the coins by myself, will appear. Mr. ApSimon kindly allows this note to appear in advance of his own publication.

² Best known at Kingsweston, near Avonmouth: G. C. Boon, 'The Roman Villa in Kingsweston Park', *Trans. Bristol and Glos. Archaeol. Soc.* lxxix (1950), 16-18.

³ For which the exposed situation was of course ideal, providing the draught necessary for the reduction of the ore. The industry was on a small scale.

The stage is now set for what follows. A feature of the Brean series is the large proportion of the barbarous imitations. Copies of exactly a half of the total; and of that half four-fifths are of the *Fel Temp Reparatio* (fallen horseman) type of 353-60. It is with this class that we are here concerned. It includes a few struck over *Volva Exerchus* (two standards, one standard); *Victoriae Ad Auggy* and, in one or two cases, on barbarous imitations of uncertain description. The main bulk is composed of copies ranging from 3 mm. to 3 mm. in diameter, and there is also a number of more or less plain minims—'fallen horseman derivatives'—from 6 mm. to 7 mm. across. In all, thirty-two specimens, or 17 per cent, are 3 mm. or less in diameter, and fall therefore within the Lydney category of 'minimissimi'.¹

Extravagant claims have been made as to the date of such coins. Since they are based on theory alone, it is hardly necessary to go into them here. Dates as late as the mid-sixth century have been put forward² and a shortage of bronze in sub-Roman times has been decried to account for the tiny module of the coins. This is entirely unwarranted archaeologically. It is unfortunate also that the internal evidence of the Lydney hoard, the evidence of its associations, and the fact of stray finds of 'minimissimi' elsewhere on the site, were not noted more strongly in the original report. As Kent has recently pointed out,³ nothing in the orthodox coins is later than 360, although the Lydney site in general—founded c. 364—abounded in coins of the House of Valentinian.

Turning now once more to Brean, we find that the copies can be divided as follows, as between the temple and the adjacent building:

	Temple	Adjacent building	Unstratified	Total
Overstrikes	8	1	..	9
6 mm.	1	..	..	1
5 mm.	5	1	1	7
4 mm.	5	..	..	5
3 mm.	1	..	..	1
2 mm.	6	4	..	10
Carried forward	6	..	..	6
	32	6	1	39

¹ *Lydney Class F.* 3-24 mm. (*Report*, 117, 125). This narrow usage has not been used to since.

² *V. Hill, BNJ* xxvi (1952), 18; retracted somewhat, *ibid.* 340-3.

³ Barbarous copies of Roman coins', *Limnes-Studien, Vorträge des 3. Internat. Kongresses* (Schr. d. Inst. f. Ur- u. Frühg. d. Schweiz 14) (Basel, 1959), 65.

	Temple	Adjacent building	Unstratified	Total
Brought forward	32	6	1	39
11½ mm.	3	..	..	3
11 mm.	12	..	1	13
10 mm.	16	1	..	17
9½ mm.	1	..	..	1
9 mm.	15	..	..	15
8½ mm.	1	..	..	1
8 mm.	8	..	..	8
7½ mm.	1	..	..	1
7 mm.	12	..	..	12
6 mm.	7	..	..	7
5½ mm.	1	..	..	1
5 mm.	11	..	..	11
4½ mm.	1	..	..	1
4 mm.	6	..	..	6
3½ mm.	2	..	..	2
3 mm.	6	..	..	6
minims: 6 mm.	1	..	..	1
5 mm.	2	1	..	3
4½ mm.	1	..	..	1
4 mm.	12	..	..	12
3½ mm.	6	..	..	6
3 mm.	15	..	..	15
2½ mm.	9	..	..	9
2 mm.	2	..	..	2
Totals:	183	8	2	193

Bearing in mind the chronological outline of the site, the inference to be drawn from these figures is obvious. Something over 95 per cent of the copies occurred in the general area of the temple, with the latest orthodox coins are of the House of Valentinian; in fact the 'minimissimi' occurred there. Only a trifle above 4 per cent of the copies were found in the later adjacent building where occupation went on from c. 390 to c. 425 at a rough, but reasonable, estimate. Moreover, this building produced a rather curious coin-series with a fair number of Constantinian and earlier coins, in not a few cases surprisingly little worn. This statement refers especially to nine *Fel Temp Reparatio* coins, only one of which exhibits the marks of wear to be expected in coins of that date after continuous circulation until the end of the century and beyond.¹ Now it so happens that evidence was found of a Roman disturbance of the temple-ruins: it may be, therefore, that some at least of the coins in question represent

¹ A hoard from Stretham, Cambs., shows a similar mixture. It is of Theodosian date: J. W. E. Pearce, *Proc. Cambridge Antiq. Soc.* xxxix (1940), 85-92.

remnants of treasure-seeking. If so, it may equally well be that the copies—only one less than 10 mm. across—were also pickings from the temple.

Be this as it may, an objective appraisal of the evidence leads to the belief that the manufacture of 'fallen horsemen', even in minimum quantities, had ceased by Theodosian times. Nor does it seem any great step to suggest that, if the bulk of the coins found in the temple refers to the period when the building was in sacred use, i.e. from 340/5 to 360/8, the bulk of the copies must also have been produced in that period. This is in keeping with Kent's thesis¹ that copies are contemporary with their prototypes, and is an unexpectedly clear demonstration of his theory, which depends, in part, on the observed fact that no 'fallen horseman' is known to occur as an overstrike upon a piece later—by some chance—than orthodox *AE3 Fel Temp Reparatio* of the same type: not even on the final Constantinian *Spes Republicae*.

With this understanding, then, we can approach one of the more secure finds of 'minimissimi', which included one coin no larger than 1.5 mm.: the Canterbury deposit,² where O'Neill was forced to argue the existence of a wooden floor, to prevent 'large' coins of the House of Valentinian from falling through to join the miscellaneous Constantinian, the minims and 'minimissimi', the 'blundered Valens', and the solitary *Salus Republicae* in the hypothetical 'assent' beneath. Had it been possible to view this find without mental reservations of the minimissimus-myth, a case to which there might be compared, rather than one to be compared with them, would have stood forth these twelve years. It is a striking illustration of the pervasiveness of the myth that it so affected the mind of a man not prepared, at that date, to subscribe to the received opinion of a 'dark-age' coinage.

Thus, in sum, it would seem that Pearce's interpretation of the famous rescript of 356, preserved in the Theodosian Code,³ after all the day in that battle long ago. The demonetization of certain issues of coin initiated an unprecedented burst of copying, designed to turn *vetitae* into coins *in usu publico constitutae* by means of striking and, secondly, to supply the needs of change in a frontier region, where an edict was published with no doubt greater ease and

¹ *ibid.* in note 7, 61-68.

² *ibid.* *Theod.* ix, 23. Text, conveniently: NC 1950, 266-7. See J. W. E. Pearce, *NC* 1948, 226-9.

³ *ibid.* 66-83.

rapidity than coins were supplied to back it. Whether 'minimisimi' or anything less than about 5 mm. across, could in fact have passed from hand to hand in general use is a problem upon which we have little evidence. On most ordinary sites, copies are rarely found smaller than 5 or 6 mm.¹ This may in some cases be the result of a poor technique of excavation but—*experto crede*—the little green specks easily enough spotted in the soil. And to suggest what part the coins could have played in the currency would be to enter the realm of speculation, and this is not intended to be a speculative paper. It is possible, indeed, that they were mainly intended as a kind of 'votive' currency: a suggestion which would explain their presence in large numbers at Brean and Lydney, but leave unexplained the presence at Canterbury or Great Staughton,² which are not supposed to be religious sites. Moreover, temples such as Pagans Hill (the nearest comparable shrine to Brean)³ or Fritford⁴ do not have their altars although they do have a large mass of worn-out and fragmented pieces. 'Minimisimi', on the other hand, may have been merely unaccounted for and not meant to pass current at all: *Rechenpfennige*. The coin, however, be compared with the so-called Vandalic bronze, not thought to emanate mainly from the mint of Rome in the latest imperial times.⁵ These *nummi*, at some 7,200 to the gold piece,⁶ were presumably rated artificially at an agreed number to a given large coin,⁷ as indeed the re-use of early imperial *aes*, with numbers engraved upon them,⁸ seems to show. It may be no accident, then, that at Brean nine earlier coins, including a 'Claudian copy' and *sestertii* of the period from Trajan to Commodus, were found, only one of them in a pre-destruction context (though possibly redeposited like some of the 'minimisimi' from the occupation-material of the temple). There is no corroborative sign, in pottery or in structure, that this portion of the hill-top was ever occupied in Roman times earlier than c. 340-5. This would not be the only occurrence of coins of this type in a late context.

Finally, two suggestions can be made. The first is that the use of the term 'minimisimus' should cease: it is imprecise and, in fact, has been abused; moreover, it suggests the existence of a shadowy 'denomination' for which there is no warrant at our present state of knowledge. Secondly, in view of the striking corroboration of Kent's recent thesis, attempts to discern copies with perhaps radiate obverses struck with 'fourth-century' reverses,¹ or any attempt to link various copies chronologically with the earliest Saxon issues of *attas*—in short, to suggest that copies of the type here discussed, or any other type, circulated beyond the limits of the monetary crisis which called them forth, seems ill advised in the extreme.

GEORGE C. BOON

¹ Cf. C. H. V. Sutherland, *Coinage and Currency in Roman Britain* (1936), 121, pl. 13-15.

¹ There are only three as low as 5 mm. among the 354 copies (plus 22 oversize) of this type in the Silchester collection at Reading Museum. There are in fact only 18 of 8 mm. and less (personal examination). An ordinary villa (see note 3 below) produced two of 6 mm. Pagans Hill temple (see note 3 below), one of 4 mm. Mills-Abone, one of 3-4 mm. (*Trans. Bristol and Glos. Archaeol. Soc.* lxxvi (1945), 123).

² *JRS* xlix (1959), 118.

³ *Proc. Som. Archaeol. Soc.* xcvi (1951), 123.

⁴ *Oxoniensia* iv (1939), 32, 52-53.

⁵ Carson, Hill, and Kent, *Late Roman Bronze Coinage* (1960), 43.

⁶ *Nov. Val.* 16, 1.

⁷ Cf. the residual currency, 'fous', mentioned *NC* 1926, 62.

⁸ W. Wroth, *BMC Vandalis, &c.* (1911), xviii.