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# Coins and History

by PATRICK BRUUN

A coin is a piece usually, and in antiquity always, of metal, issued (or pretending to be issued, in the case of forgeries) by the authority of a state or similar body of authority. At times the right to coin has been delegated to a single township or to a single individual on certain conditions. In order to serve as a legal medium of payment, the coin should inform the general public on whose authority the coin was struck. The right to coin was one of the prerogatives of kingship or of another autonomous political body. Coins have an obverse and a reverse. The obverse gives the necessary information as to the authority responsible for the issue, frequently by means of a picture (a portrait) and a legend.

The oldest coins which fulfilled these requirements were produced about 600 BC in Asia Minor and its Greek colonies, and in the kingdom of Lydia. A century later, coins were in common use in the Greek colonies in the Black Sea area, in Sicily, in southern Italy and in southern France. Almost all monetary systems were based on a weight unit. The coins could be multiples or parts of weight units. The Greek influence prevailed in the centuries before the Christian era in the Mediterranean area, excepting Rome (Italy), where, before the coins had been introduced, transactions were carried out with ingots of copper or bronze (*aes rude*), or cast blocks with marks of value (*aes signatum*). Cast pieces of bronze were issued about 270 BC, named *as*, whereas the weight unit was a *libra* (weight 275 or 327 gr.). The denarius was introduced as a coin 212/211 BC and soon became accepted as the chief coin unit. Gold coins were struck sparingly

till around the beginning of the Christian era. Under Augustus (27 BC - AD 14) regular striking of gold coins was introduced (an aureus equalling 25 denarii).

Coin, equivalent to a piece of metal made into money by official stamping, implies that it has been produced according to a plan of social consequences. In addition, this means that the coin is an official document, the historical value of which can be estimated by the historian. This aspect of a metal coin gains in importance, because coins, once in the ground, are extremely durable.

Because the major part of the European continent once belonged to the Roman Empire, or was a battleground for the Roman legions outside the Roman *limes*, protected by watchful Roman soldiers, it is quite natural that enormous quantities of Roman coins were lost wherever the legions moved. The study of Roman coins, and in particular the hoards which frequently mark the footsteps of the legionaries, has during recent decades developed its own techniques and methods.

Numismatics, the science which studies coins, is a comparatively young scholarly discipline, although the discovery of the Roman cities Pompeii and Herculaneum caused a boom in classical archaeology. That is particularly true of Pompeii, since Herculaneum was covered by much harder volcanic material and then later by a new town, modern Resina.

Occasional finds of fine objects of Roman art finally in the eighteenth century activated those with the means to carry out large excavations. The royal family of the Bourbons who owned the land became very active. I have seen drawings showing caravans

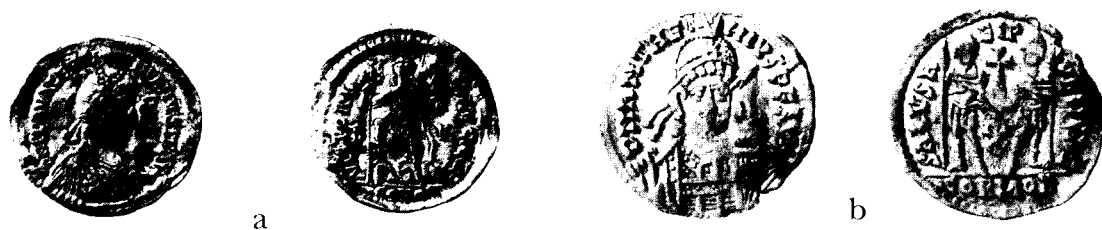


Fig. 1 a-b Two solidi found on Bornholm (now both in the Royal coin Collection, Copenhagen):  
 a) Valentinian III (425-55); reverse: emperor holding globe surmounted by Victory and trampling serpent under foot; from Almindingen. b) Anthemius (467-72); reverse: two emperors with globe surmounted by a cross, Christogram below; from Brændesgård.

of carriages loaded with statues (among them some of the most valuable statues in the Museo Nazionale of Naples). The central exhibits of this museum were part of the famous Farnese collections comprising some of the best sculptures, paintings and bronzes from both Pompeii and Herculaneum. Among the treasures is an exquisite collection of coins.

The recovery of the large coin hoards, which played an important part in the archaeological discoveries of the 18th century, gave scholars the opportunity to analyse the hoards and to reconstruct the coinage systems employing new and more advanced methods. An outstanding scholar in this field was the Austrian Joseph Hilarius Eckhel (1737-1798) who lent his services first to the Austrian imperial house and later on also to private collectors who wanted factual information to help arranging and displaying their treasures.

#### *Coins - a unique type of historical source*

Of the remnants of the past studied by historians, coins in a way constitute a unique group. The coins, and particularly those of high value, can be dated because they announce the ruler on whose authority they were struck. We get a formulation of his position within his society, his names and titles. These data may or may not be corroborated by other sources. I take an example which, *mutatis mutandis*, is valid for most rulers, because the sovereign power usually consists of many components. The Roman emperor had the title of *imperator*, denoting him as

supreme commander of the army; furthermore, in another sense his soldiers could on the occasion of a military victory acclaim him *imperator* - victorious general - and such intermittent acclamations would be accumulated and numbered. Then the emperor would, usually several times, hold the consulate, traditionally the highest administrative office within the state. These honours were all registered and appear in the emperor's titulature, e.g. IMP III and COS II, implying three acclamations as *imperator* and two consulates. All these offices are found in the official records, the Roman term for which was *Fasti*, which we find publicly inscribed, e. g. on the inner side of triumphal arches. Other sorts of honorary titles could be added by the Roman senate, e.g. *Germanicus* or *Parthicus*, which signified that the emperor had defeated the Germans or the Parthians.

In optimal circumstances the burial of a hoard of coins can be dated and referred to a certain historical context, and this is of great importance to the historian. The coins themselves transmit to us a number of data which are fundamental for their identification. This, however, is only one part of their historicity. The second level of interpretation concerns the moment when and the reason why the coin was deposited, or left or lost by the owner, and on this point the exact find context is decisive.

Legislation on hoards differs considerably between different societies. In some countries the law requires that the finds should be delivered, without any right to compensation, to

the proper authorities. At the other extreme, in Great Britain, for instance, a landowner is given the full commercial value for the find as compensation. This generous, but not unreasonable attitude should guarantee that professional scholars be given the opportunity to study the circumstances surrounding the burial of a hoard, and similarly the coins themselves, as well as other artefacts found in connection with it, objects which might otherwise have passed unnoticed.

Numismatic research in the light of coin hoards is today an important branch of the study of coins, seen in a historical perspective. This is natural, considering that our knowledge of the monetary systems of the ancient world to a large extent has to be based on the study of the coins themselves, since the ancient writers only exceptionally mention coins or the production of coins. One of the fundamental modern studies in this field is the Danish scholar Rudi Thomsen's *Early Roman Coinage I-III* under the collective heading *A Study of Chronology* (3 vols., 1957-61).

#### *The historical perspective*

Among the coinages of the Ancient World the Roman one is without parallels. It was of long duration and widely accepted, from the British Isles to India, and it influenced the coinages of posterity in decisive ways. Thus it is no small wonder that the Roman coins form a singularly important tool in the hands of the archaeologists in thousands of finds and through hundreds of thousands of coins.

Rudi Thomsen was referred to because his analysis of the Roman coinage constitutes an exemplary combination of a study of the coins against the background of the antiquarian tradition together with the evaluation of the coin hoards. Another numismatic luminary is the Austrian Robert Göbl, who in 1978 published *Antike Numismatik I-II*. In the first volume he considers all the technical details concerning the coin production, which the scholar has to take into account during the analysis (see vol. I, pp. 232-241, § 37). His field of study is broader than Thomsen's, because he pays much attention to the

western part of Asia, and particularly to the rulers, states and cities which borrowed the art of coining from the Greeks.

One of the prime tasks of numismatic research is to set the numismatic field in its wider economic-political context in a given period by examining all the sequences and series of coins. Consequently the scholar is forced to do his reconstructions from the coin material surviving, with a point of departure in the portrait, the name and the titles of the ruler, information which in many cases can be supplemented through sources of different kind. The location of the mint, if it is known, and the symbolism represented on the coin may give suggestions and clues. When, in some cases, the majority of the coins are of the same type, it can be of interest to know the internal sequence of the coins struck. Göbl (vol. I, p. 220, 'Stempelfolgen') refers to a method of reconstructing such a sequence. In the extreme case when the coins give no other clues as to their sequence, the scholar can be forced to base his work solely on the relative wear and tear of the dies. That is not a gratifying task.

Much effort has been made to establish how many coins can be struck from the same die (separately for reverse and for obverse dies), but so many different details have to be considered that no conclusions of general validity can be reached. Variables worthy of consideration are:

1) The metal and the alloy of both die and blank.

2) Whether the die was for an obverse or a reverse stamp. The upper die (normally the reverse) had to sustain the hardest blows and was therefore worn out sooner than the obverse die.

3) The type of legend employed (possibly engraved).

4) The pictures on both obverse and reverse. If the pictures abound in detail, and if they are in high relief, this may similarly affect the life span of the dies.

In this context Göbl (vol. I, p. 236 f.) refers to an experiment carried out by the British numismatist D. G. Sellwood. He employed hardened bronze dies (with 10 % tin,

corresponding to the alloy normally employed in preserved dies). He calculated that one obverse die would last as long as 3 reverse dies. The experiment was discontinued when the reverse die was worn out after 940 coins had been struck.

Other experiments have been made by heating the blank (to 700 centigrades). Then a hammer weighing almost 3 pounds (= 1,3 kilos) was used. Two hammer blows were necessary when the blank was heated, but four blows when it was not.

### *The classical pre-history of Europe*

Through a slight exaggeration you could claim that almost all of Europe had a common Greek and Roman past. This is valid also for those areas which were outside the Roman empire and its limes where goods were exchanged across the border. Coins and other valuables travelled far, and finds from Scandinavia is evidence of this. As far as coins are concerned, I propose to illustrate this in the light of a doctoral thesis *Late Roman and Byzantine solidi found in Sweden and Denmark* (New York 1967), written by the American scholar Joan Fagerlie. She had become intrigued by the frequent references in ancient sources to ravaging expeditions of Nordic peoples across the Roman limes. At the same time, confronted with the finds of Roman coins in Scandinavia, she decided to test these stories.

Fagerlie's basic material comprised 759 gold coins, which she had been able to study personally. In addition there were about 125 coins recorded in museum diaries, but to which she had not had access. Her classification of the coins was based on the origin of the coins: a) the Western Roman Empire, and b) the Eastern Roman Empire. The origin of the coins made it easy to arrange them in chronological order of the emperors issuing them. These coins which had been found in Sweden and in Denmark were issued during the period from the death of the emperor Theodosius I in 395 to the later part of the reign of the emperor Justinian (about 550), thus covering the epoch of the so-called Great Migrations. One momentous

outcome of these migrations was the fall of the Western Empire.

The threat of the Germanic tribes made itself felt soon after the death of Theodosius I and materialized in the course of the fifth century. The migrations had a tremendous impact both outside and within Roman territory. Some tribes hoped for sites to settle on Roman territory, but Germanic and other chieftains also engaged with their warriors to serve in the Roman army. The Burgundians settled in the region of Worms in 414, transferring their kingdom there. Vandals, Suebians and Alans crossed the Rhine, other tribes settled permanently in Spain, and the Franks in Gaul. The Roman provinces in the West were lost, Italy itself was threatened and finally taken over by Odovacar in 476. This did not, however, save Italy from further intrusions. On the contrary, in 493 the Ostrogoths, at the request of the emperor in Constantinople, invaded and took over Italy.

From the early fifth century the barbaric tribes invading Eastern Europe had come to regard the Roman Empire, in East and West, as a rewarding object of extortion. The Huns and their king Attila had demonstrated what could be gained, but after their defeat on the Catalaunian Plains (*Campus Mauriacus*) in 451, the Ostrogoths took over from Attila the domineering role among the tribes outside the limes. Some of them received permission to settle in Pannonia as Roman allies (*foederati*) with the right to annual subsidies. This was the alliance which prompted the emperor Zeno in Constantinople to persuade the Ostrogoths to take over Italy and their king Theoderic to replace Odovacar as viceroy over Italy. Consequently the Eastern Empire escaped further invasions, but the Western Empire was in effect lost, and at the same time the Empire was bled of its gold reserves. The first subsidies paid by Theodosius II comprised 350 Roman pounds (of 327, 45 gr.) of gold in 424.

Attila in 443 succeeded in extorting more than twice that amount, 700 pounds, and after having defeated the imperial armies, the ransom was raised to 6,000 pounds in gold, plus a promise of a further 2,100 pounds annually.

Fagerlie's account of the flow of gold paid to the Germanic and other tribes behind the limes aimed to elucidate the quantities of gold, and coined gold at that, which in the fifth century reached Europe beyond the imperial frontiers. This also explains the finds of Roman gold coins of this period in Denmark and Sweden. This flow of gold she refers to the century 450 to c. 550-560, i.e. towards the end of the reign of Justinian I (cf. Fagerlie p. 163). The date about 450 is suggested by the fact that the first case of gold coins found in Scandinavia and struck with identical dies can be referred to this time (cf. Fagerlie p. 112 f). The authoress notes that the earliest such coins with identical stamps were issued by Valentinian III (425-55) and Theodosius II (402-50). Seven and eight coins respectively were involved (*loc.cit.*).

Moving on to Libius Severus (461-65) and Leo I (457-74), Fagerlie identifies 16 and 33 coins respectively with identical stamps. This does not imply that these 16 and 33 coins are all struck with the same dies, but that each one of them would have been struck with the same die as at least one other of the coins.

In a summary (p. 112) Joan Fagerlie notes that coins with identical stamps occur in 2 cases for Maiorianus (457-61), 6 for Anthemius (467-72), 2 for Glycerius (473-74), 2 for Julius Nepos (474-75), 3 for Romulus Augustus (475-76), 13 for Zeno (474-91), 18 for Anastasius (491-518) (10 of which are Ostrogothic and 2 imitations of uncertain origin), and 2 for Justinian I (527-65). Of the Western emperors Honorius (393-423) is the only one not represented by any coins with identical stamps. As for the Eastern emperors, the same is valid for Arcadius (383-408), Marcianus (450-57), Leo II (473-74), Basiliscus/Marcus (475-76) and Justinus I (518-27). Altogether, then, the authoress accounts for 123 coins with a die-identity out of a total of 726 gold coins (33 coins were known only from catalogues and therefore impossible to submit to an identity test, cf. p. 113, n. 4).

The analysis of these coins permits some conclusions as to the export of Roman gold coins (cf. Fagerlie tables G and F, pp. 115 ff) and its frequency. In fact there clearly seems

to be a correlation to the known ransom payments to Attila and the Germanic tribes. Furthermore, Fagerlie convincingly argues that the occurrence of die-identical coins in a hoard (p. 112) could be an indicator of how much they had circulated before reaching Scandinavia. Another important aspect is that such gold coins found in Denmark and Sweden (mainly solidi) are of high purity. Therefore it is easy to assume that the pure gold weight was decisive for the value of the coin.

In order to arrive at a conclusion as to how the ransom money reached Scandinavia, it is important to establish whether each such sum of money was paid in portions or en bloc. The presence or the absence of coins struck with identical dies also resolves the problem as to whether the money had circulated freely in the market before arriving into Scandinavia, or, alternatively, it had been transported to Scandinavia straight after having been coined.

Joan Fagerlie concludes her analysis (p. 114f) with the remark that up to the year 476 most of the solidi were official issues of Theodosius II and Leo I, and the fact that a considerable part of them have identical stamps goes to show that they were designed for immediate cash delivery, though at times also supplemented with coins issued by the Western Empire. Incidentally, this is evidence that direct transactions between Constantinople and Italy took place. Fagerlie's tables also show (p. 116) that the Scandinavian finds comprised three different categories of coins: a) cash payment by the emperor, and particularly by Leo I; b) payment in coins struck in Italy from about 450 to the reign of Justinian I; and finally c) coins which had been in circulation before the payment, i.e. coins issued by Honorius (393-423), Arcadius (383-408) and early issues of Valentinian (364-75) and Theodosius I (379-95), and later Eastern Roman issues. This composition is important evidence of the character of the payment.

To complete the particulars of the coins struck with identical dies, their distribution in Scandinavia through circulation also gives us valuable information (Fagerlie pp. 125-

129). And the authoress furthermore comments in detail (p. 148) on the condition of the coins from "well preserved" to "worn" and "very worn", passing from Öland, Gotland, Bornholm, mainland Sweden to Denmark east of Öresund. Half of the coins are considered "worn" or "very worn". The wear is supposed to have occurred through circulation in Scandinavia.

*A survey of the finds on the islands*

Fagerlie's analysis of the gold coins is concluded with a survey of the hoards, defining a hoard as a find comprising at least 5 solidi. She accounts for 7 hoards from Öland, 10 from Gotland and 6 from Bornholm. The hoard material is particularly important for dating the feuds fought on and around the Baltic islands, particularly towards the end of the Period of Migrations. Archaeological expeditions on Öland, Gotland and Bornholm have revealed evidence of destruction, fires and abandonment of settlements during this period. The exact chronology of this development has mainly been established with reference to the coins.

1. Öland, Fagerlie Pl. XXIV-XXV:

The coins clearly show that the import of solidi to Öland ceased earlier than in the cases of Gotland and Bornholm. According to the statistics this would have been shortly after the reign of Leo I (457-74) (cf. Table C, p. 109). 80 coins struck by Leo are known from the Öland finds, but only 7 of his successor Zeno (1 of Basiliscus and 1 of Anastasius, 1 of Justinus and of Justinianus I). From the rest of Scandinavia 85 solidi of Zeno are known, but at that time the stream of solidi to Öland had largely dried up.

Fagerlie's analysis of the coins is logical and perspicacious and sums up the arguments in the conclusion that the import of solidi to Öland ceased shortly after AD 476. Subsequently the coins were buried and the surviving population, if there was any, did not receive new supplies. The year AD 475 is thus a *terminus post quem* for the catastrophe, although single coins (3 in number) from the sixth century later arrived in Öland, even though the community had apparently

ceased to exist.

2. Gotland, Fagerlie Pl. XXV-XXX, cf. p. 160:

After the destruction of the Öland community, the stream of gold from the Roman treasury appears to have been directed to Gotland. This continued into the reign of Justinian (527-65): 8 coins of Justinus I (518-27) and 14 of Justinian are known; however, 74 coins of Anastasius (491-518) have been found all over the island, whereas coins of Justinus I and Justinian have emerged exclusively in the southern and central parts of the island.

3. Bornholm, Fagerlie Pl. XXVII-XXXIII, cf. p. 161:

Five of the six hoards from Bornholm have a latest coin of Anastasius (491-518). Only a single coin, of Justinus I (518-27), is later.

To sum up: That the import of solidi to the Baltic began in the early 450's is proved by the fact that the earliest coins struck with identical dies appeared in the area at that time. The import culminated in the 460's, in the reign of Leo I and Libius Severus. During the reign of Zeno (474-91) coins of identical dies testify as to connections both to the Western and to the Eastern Roman Empire, but after Zeno the Eastern Empire was the only source of direct import.

Chronological correlations between the stream of Roman gold into non-Roman Europe and the movements of the Ostrogoths suggest that the latter were significant intermediaries in the export. In 454 the Goths had forced their way into Pannonia and became the allies of the Romans (*foederati*). In 461 the Ostrogoths revolted against the Romans, who had accumulated arrears in payments. Leo I ordered the mints to work under high pressure and paid an exceptionally high amount to his allies. This payment coincides with the biggest import of solidi to Scandinavia.

With this I conclude my survey of the stream of Roman gold coins flowing into Scandinavia, a vital feature, if not of any monetary economy of the far North in the early Medieval world (which in reality was non-existent), then certainly of the allure of gold (coined or not) so plentifully supplied by the late Roman emperors.

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