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Clipped Siliquae and the end of Roman Britain

By ANDREW BURNETT

A LARGE number of hoards of silver coins are known from late fourth-century Britain,¹ and every year still more come to light.² These hoards usually contain more or less the same sorts of coin and it may be helpful to give a summary of the main issues, as they are not presented very clearly in the standard reference book for the period, *RIC IX*.³

The earliest coins to be represented are the first issues of Constantius II's new coinage of silver siliquae, struck at the mint of Arles in the late 350's in the names of Constantius (PL. VI, 1) and Julian Caesar, and the succeeding massive issues from Arles, Trier and Lyon minted during the reign of Julian Augustus (360–363) (PL. VI, 2) in his name and, for the first year, in the name of Constantius as well. Only a few coins from the beginning of the reign of Valentinian I and Valens are found in British hoards, particularly the VOT V MVLT X and contemporary VRBS ROMA coins struck at Rome between 364 and 367. There was then effectively a ten-year gap in silver production, until the start of the enormous issues minted at Trier for just over a decade. First came VRBS ROMA, Roma seated to left on throne, in 375–377 for Valentinian I (at first), Valens (PL. VI, 3) and Gratian. In 377 this type was replaced by VRBS ROMA, Roma seated left on cuirass, for Valens (until his death in 378) and Gratian (PL. VI, 4), and VICTORIA AVGGG, Victory advancing left, for Valentinian II (PL. VI, 5). With the accession of Theodosius in 379, each of the three Augusti had a different type: VICTORIA AVGGG was continued for Valentinian II, while CONCORDIA AVGGG, Constantinopolis seated facing, was introduced for Theodosius (PL. VI, 6) and VIRTVS ROMANORVM, Roma seated facing, for Gratian. During the usurpation of Magnus Maximus (383–388) nearly all of the silver coinage was struck in his name with Gratian's VIRTVS ROMANORVM type (PL. VI, 7). From Maximus' death in 388 there was almost a cessation of minting at Trier, until the common VIRTVS ROMANORVM, Roma seated left on cuirass, minted in 392–394 in the names of Valentinian II, Theodosius, (particularly) Arcadius (PL. VI, 8) and Eugenius. The last coins to be found plentifully in British hoards have the same type, but were minted at Milan in the names of Arcadius and Honorius (PL. VI, 9) after 395.

¹ Recent bibliographies and discussions of these hoards are given by R. A. G. Carson, *The British Museum Yearbook* i (1976), 67–82, S. Archer in P. J. Casey (ed.), *The End of Roman Britain* (1979), 29–64 and C. E. King, *British Numismatic Journal* (1981), 5–31.

² For more recent hoards, see A. M. Burnett (ed.), *Coin Hoards from Roman Britain Vol. II* (1981) for the Barton (*recte* Barrow) upon Humber hoard, and *Vol IV* (1983, forthcoming) for the hoards from Bromham, Barton upon Humber (*addenda*), Hovingham Park, Otterbourne II, Osbournby, Freckenham and Compton Downs. Part of the hoard from Thetford was published in *Norfolk Archaeology* (1978), 134, but another 27 coins (of the same period) have subsequently been found.

³ I follow the articles of J. W. E. Pearce, *Numismatic Chronicle* (1932), 245 (*Urbs Roma* at Trier); (1935), 137 (Trier, 378–83); (1937), 1 (Eugenius); (1944), 45 (Valentinian II and Eugenius). The Bromham hoard has recently confirmed the date of 375 for the VRBS ROMA (throne) type. Pearce suggested a date of 377 for the start of Valentinian II's VICTORIA AVGGG type: that he did not coin between 375 and 377 is confirmed by the East Harptree hoard, although it is possible that the type did not begin until 379 when different types were introduced for all three emperors.

These Milan issues have been dated by Ulrich-Bansa⁴ to 395–405, but they must have been struck by 402/3, when the Imperial court moved from Milan to Ravenna, taking the mint with it. The Milan mint was active throughout this period, since coins refer to Honorius' arrival in 395,⁵ his consulships of 396 and 398,⁶ Arcadius' *quindecennalia* of 397/8⁷ and Honorius' *decennalia* of 402/3.⁸ If it were right to date all the gold and silver issues referring to Honorius' VOT V MVLX to his *quinquennalia* of 397/8,⁹ then the presence of siliquae with this type together with only a very few of the common VIRTVS ROMANORVM pieces in the N. Mendip and Barton upon Humber hoards would suggest that the bulk of the issue was produced in 398–402. Unfortunately, it seems equally possible that Honorius received these *vota* before 397, and his VOT V MVLX siliquae probably form a pair with Arcadius' VOT X MVLX XV, which should precede Arcadius' *quindecennalia* of 397/8. Consequently it does not seem possible to tie down the issue of VIRTVS ROMANORVM siliquae more precisely than 395–402.

A few hoards contain only some of the earlier issues, so their deposition can be dated easily by the latest coins they contain.¹⁰ But most of the hoards contain the whole range of issues, and this causes a problem. While we can be sure that they were deposited after 395, there is no very obvious *terminus ante quem* to help fix the exact date of deposition, or, more generally, the date until which silver coins continued to circulate in Britain.

One can, however, distinguish three different sorts of these late hoards. The first group consists of hoards which have only a very few (up to about 5 per cent) of the Milan VIRTVS ROMANORVM coins of Arcadius and Honorius, usually in about the same proportion for each emperor.¹¹ The second group consists of hoards where the 'Milan element' forms a greater part of the hoard (from 5 per cent to a maximum of about 50 per cent), and where coins of the western emperor Honorius outnumber those of his brother by a factor of 2.¹² It seems reasonable to conclude that a greater proportion of the 'Milan element' is an indication of a relatively later deposition. The third group consists of hoards where many of the coins may have had their edges clipped off; sometimes the whole of the legend has been cut away and only the imperial portrait left (PL. VI, 10–11). Clipped coins are known in extremely rare instances in earlier hoards,¹³ but significant numbers of them occur only in hoards where the Honorian 'Milan element' outnumbers the Arcadian.

The first group of hoards was clearly deposited before the Milan coinage had finished, and so can be dated to before 402, but no more precisely in view of the uncertainty as to the exact date at which the Milan VIRTVS ROMANORVM siliquae were minted. In this first group the number of coins minted for Arcadius and Honorius was about the same, but as the issue progressed the numbers of coins struck for Honorius increased until they outnumbered those of his brother by about 2:1. Pearce¹⁴ once suggested that this stage was reached in about 410, because this proportion of the two emperors was reached in the Coleraine find which had coins of Constantine III (407–411). But this is surely too late, and 402/3 must be the latest date at which this proportion was reached, since this is the date by which minting ceased.

⁴ O. Ulrich-Bansa, *Moneta Mediolanensis* (1949), 187.

⁵ *idem* no. 86.

⁶ R. A. G. Carson, *Principal Coins of the Romans III*, 1503 and 1505.

⁷ *idem*, 1573.

⁸ Ulrich-Bansa, *op. cit.* (note 4), nos. 80–4 (all with Honorius' *vota*).

⁹ So Ulrich-Bansa, *op. cit.* (note 4), no. 79, R. A. G. Carson, *op. cit.* (note 6), 1503.

¹⁰ e.g. Southsea (363), Bromham (375) or Thetford (388).

¹¹ Sometimes even Arcadius predominates: N. Mendip, Osbournby.

¹² e.g. Terling.

¹³ For light clipping in the Shapwick hoard of 389, see J. W. E. Pearce, *Numismatic Chronicle* (1938), 57. There is also a very lightly clipped coin in the recent Newton Mills, Bath hoard of 388.

¹⁴ *Numismatic Chronicle* (1933), 180.

If the beginning of the second group of hoards must then precede 402/3, its end and the start of the third group (and hence the date of clipping) are not so clear. It has been pointed out¹⁵ that there are several hoards where Honorius is twice as common as Arcadius and which have no clipped coins, and in some of these the 'Milan element' represents up to 25 per cent (or perhaps even more)¹⁶ of the whole hoard. The Terling hoard is of key significance in this context since it also contained gold. Most of the 26 recorded solidi were Milan VICTORIA AVGGG coins of Arcadius and Honorius, minted at the same time as the Milan VIRTUS ROMANORVM siliquae. There were also, however, two solidi of the same type, one of Arcadius and one of Honorius, minted at Rome. The minting at Rome of gold medallions and solidi is connected with Honorius' visit to the city in 404,¹⁷ and so, since the Terling hoard contained virtually no clipped coins, 404 seems to emerge as a *terminus post quem* for clipping.

There is, however, one problem in dating the Terling hoard. It also contained a curious coin of Honorius, an VRBS ROMA of the Trier mint (PL. VI, 12). Two other specimens of this coin are known, one from the St. Pancras Window Box hoard (from the same obverse die as the Terling piece) (PL. VI, 13) and one from Coleraine (PL. VI, 14).¹⁸ These coins are quite unlike the coinage of Trier of 392-4, and a later date has been suggested for them, in the fifth century or specifically about 420. If this is right, then the presence of such a coin in the Terling hoard would effectively push the date of clipping beyond 420. I do not think, however, that Terling should be dated so late, as the solidi do not include any Ravenna VICTORIA AVGGG pieces (about 405) or coins of Constantine III (407-411), both of which have been found elsewhere in Britain.¹⁹ But if we are to retain the date of about 404 for Terling, then there is no alternative to dismissing the Honorian Trier VRBS ROMA pieces as imitations (that is to say ancient counterfeits), combining an obverse of Honorius with the reverse of an earlier coin, and hence of no chronological importance. This is not as implausible as it may at first seem. In the first place, there are a number of imitations of siliquae in hoards, and they sometimes combine elements from two or even three different prototypes.²⁰ Some systematic groups of imitations are known only from British hoards, for instance the group of MVG imitations, which are based on coins of Lyon, but which are found only in Britain and are presumably of British origin.²¹ Secondly, the Honorian coins themselves do not inspire much confidence. Only three pieces are known, and all are from British hoards. None was known to either Pearce or Baron von Koblitz²² from France or Germany, where the coins are supposed to have been made, and none have turned up since. There is an obverse die-link between two of them, and die-linking is a feature of some imitations like the MVG group. Moreover the Coleraine piece looks different from the other two, and has a weak style. Finally, Pearce had

¹⁵ R. A. G. Carson, *op. cit.* (note 1), 79.

¹⁶ If Icklingham III is not part of Icklingham I, then the proportion would rise to 50 per cent.

¹⁷ J. P. C. Kent, *Roman Coins* (1978), 58.

¹⁸ For brief discussions of these pieces, see J. W. E. Pearce, *Numismatic Chronicle* (1933), 180; R. A. G. Carson, *Numismatic Chronicle* (1959), 15 and note 1; S. Archer, *op. cit.* (note 1), 32; J. P. C. Kent in P. J. Casey (ed.), *The End of Roman Britain* (1979), 21.

¹⁹ Ravenna solidi are known from Richborough (*Richborough IV*, 317 no 33373: this piece and another in the name of Arcadius are now in the British Museum) and Maiden Castle (R. E. M. Wheeler, *Maiden Castle*, 334); solidi of Constantine III from Eye (*Numismatic Chronicle* (1891), 10) and Great Stanmore (*Numismatic Chronicle* (1915), 511-2).

²⁰ e.g. Bromham 413: an obverse of Valens with a reverse combining elements of Arles (the eagle) and Lyon (the mint-mark) siliquae of Julian.

²¹ For the group of quite good style with mint-marks AQPS, LVGPS, MVG and MDG., see *Numismatic Chronicle* (1944), pl. v nos. 1-5 and 7-9. Further examples are known from Hovingham Park (no. 23) and Freckenham (no. 206), both from the same reverse die as pl. v, 4-5; the Freckenham piece has the same obverse die as pl. v. 7. Freckenham 205 is from the same dies as pl. V. 9. Another piece, Osbournby 292, belongs to the same group, but shares no dies.

²² See the articles by Pearce listed in note 3; H. von Koblitz, *Trierer Zeitschrift* (1928), 24-54.

another, fourth piece which was certainly imitative, with reverse legend VRBZ (*sic*) ROMA and mint-mark ·TRPS.²³ Unfortunately, this coin was not illustrated and was not among the coins he bequeathed to the British Museum, so we can only guess about its style.

There are then some features of these Honorian coins which justify us in regarding them as British imitations, and so in disregarding them as a criterion for dating the practice of clipping. Terling had virtually no clipped coins, and its 'Milan element' was about 15 per cent of the total hoard. Since the 'Milan element' of unclipped hoards can reach about 25 per cent, we should look for a date a little after 404 for clipping, and indeed a date in the reign of Constantine III is suggested by the Coleraine hoard, which had two coins of that emperor in fresh condition together with many clipped coins. It seems probable, then, that clipping took place during the reign of Constantine III.

If clipping began then, how long did it last? Since the proportion of clipped coins in hoards may vary greatly, from about 10 to 100 per cent, one is intuitively drawn to the ideas that clipping was a fairly long drawn out process and that the more clipped coins there are in a hoard, the later the date of that hoard's deposition. But the relationship between clipping and the lateness of a hoard, as indicated by the proportion of the 'Milan element' it contains, does not seem to be so simple: heavy clipping may occur in hoards with only a small²⁴ or with a large proportion of Milan coins;²⁵ conversely, hoards with either a small²⁶ or a larger 'Milan element'²⁷ may be clipped to only a small extent (FIG. 1).

This unexpected pattern can be explained if heavily clipped hoards are interpreted as hoards of coins drawn out of circulation at a single moment (currency-hoards), and lightly clipped hoards as hoards put together over a number of years (savings-hoards). The savings-hoards would have been collected to a greater or lesser extent before clipping began, and a greater or smaller proportion of clipped coins would have been subsequently added to them. Two examples can be cited. The Palmer's Green, Lakenheath, hoard²⁸ had many siliquae down to 392, but only one of the plentiful VIRTVS ROMANORVM Trier issues of 392–4. Nevertheless it had a few Milan pieces and a few clipped pieces, and it seems plausible to think that the hoard was mostly collected by 392, and that the few clipped pieces were subsequently added. More clear is the case of the Otterbourne II hoard.²⁹ By chance, we have some 'stratigraphy' for this hoard, since its container was hit by the plough and the coins at the top of the pot (those added last) were scattered away from the nucleus which remained in the undamaged lower part of the pot. As most of the scattered coins were clipped and most of those in the nucleus were not, it is clear that the clipped coins had been added after the rest of the hoard had been put together.

If it is correct to interpret hoards with 90–100 per cent clipped coins as currency-hoards, and those with less than 50 per cent as savings-hoards (see FIG. 1), then the absence of any transitional period between a currency of unclipped coins and a currency of completely clipped coins would indicate that clipping took place rapidly, once it started. That it did take place suddenly and dramatically is also suggested by the analogy of late medieval and early modern England, where clipping was a perennial problem. It has been observed that there 'clipping of coin was endemic, but appears to have flared up at intervals and then progressively and rapidly destroyed the acceptability of the currency.'³⁰

²³ *Numismatic Chronicle* (1932), 266; cf. *Numismatic Chronicle* (1933), 180.

²⁴ Icklingham II, Colerne.

²⁵ Whorlton, Compton Downs and 'Fleetwood'.

²⁶ Otterbourne I, N. Mendip, Barton upon Humber.

²⁷ Shapwick, Icklingham III, Terling.

²⁸ Unpublished.

²⁹ See note 2.

³⁰ Sir John Craig, *The Mint* (1953), cxvi.

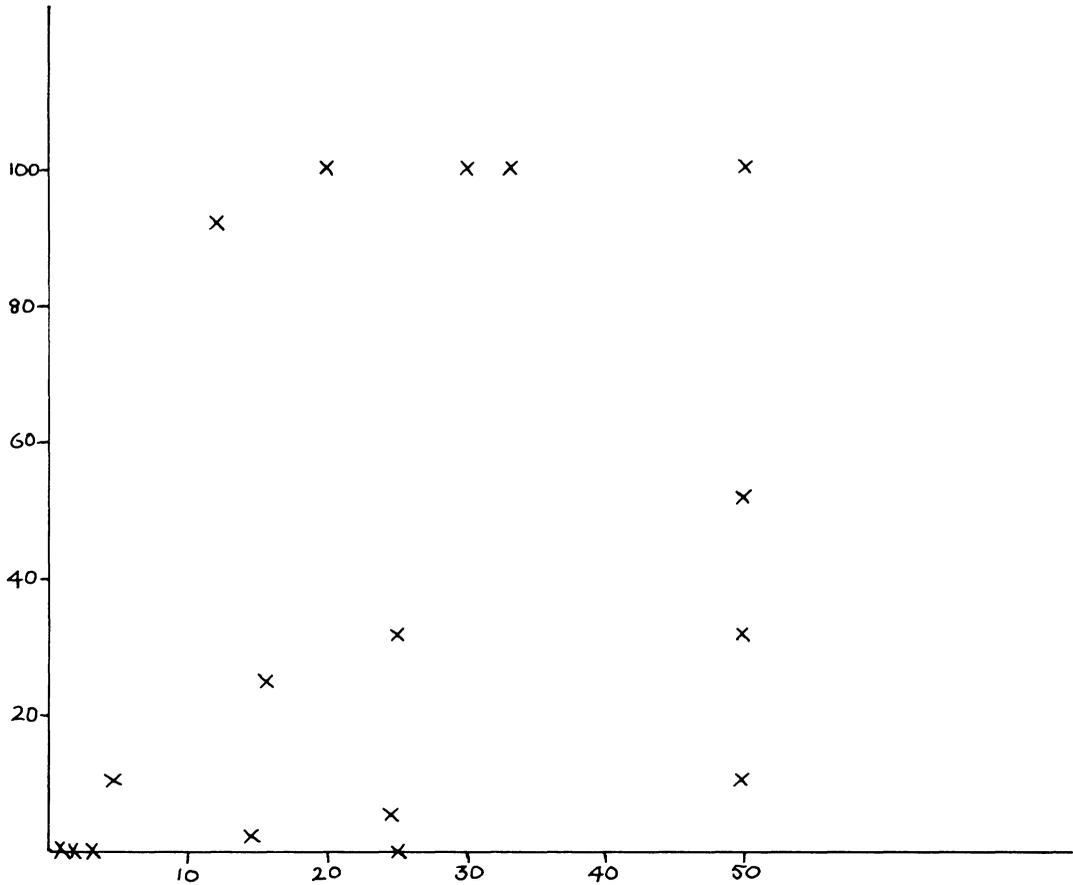


FIG. 1. Proportions of 'Milan element' and clipped coins in hoards.

The acceptability of the currency was destroyed because, if clipping took place on a large scale, it quickly reduced the intrinsic value of the coins to such an extent that they became unacceptable both to the government and to the public. Consequently the most stringent penalties were enacted against clipping, and when it did get out of control, it could be remedied only by strong government intervention and the removal of the clipped coins from circulation, either by their compulsory exchange and confiscation³¹ or by a complete demonetization of the currency and subsequent recoinage (as happened seven times in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries).³²

The situation in the late Roman empire had some similarities. It seems that clipping was also endemic there, since the malpractice was banned under Roman law during the fourth and fifth centuries. The death penalty was stipulated in 317 for anyone '*qui mensuram circuli exteriorem adraserit, ut ponderis minuat quantitatem*'; this provision was re-enacted in 343, and incorporated into the Theodosian code, published in 438, in the chapter partially entitled *SI*

³¹ C. E. Challis, *The Tudor Coinage* (1978), 58-60.

³² Craig, *op. cit.* (note 30), 27.

*QVIS SOLIDI CIRCVLVM EXTERIOREM INCIDERIT.*³³ It is, of course, true that these enactments relate specifically to gold coins, but there is no reason to suppose that the same provisions were not also applied to silver. The effectiveness of the enforcement of these laws can be seen in the fact that hardly a clipped coin can be found in a context earlier than that of the latest British hoards.³⁴

Yet in Britain alone of the Empire clipping took place on a very extensive scale. The implication is that clipping was a post-Roman phenomenon, when Britain was no longer part of the Empire and so there was no strong central authority to enforce the laws against it, or to take remedial action. As the practice is to be dated to the reign of Constantine III, it does not seem unreasonable to see it as a tangible instance of what Zosimus, in a famous passage,³⁵ says took place in 409: the Britons ceased to obey Roman laws. The result was the end of the coin-using economy in Britain, for clipping brought the collapse of the silver coinage, and it is doubtful whether the bronze could have survived without its support. Thus, in this one aspect at least, Roman Britain suddenly ended in 409.

Dept. of Coins and Medals, British Museum

³³ The relevant passages are *CTH.* 9. 21. 5 and 9. 22. For a discussion of the correct wording of the passages, see P. Grierson in C. H. V. Sutherland and R. A. G. Carson (eds.), *Essays in Roman Coinage presented to Harold Mattingly* (1956), 256–61.

³⁴ See note 13.

³⁵ VI. 3.

PLATE VI



Clipped siliquae (p. 163).