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Interpreting Roman hoards

Richard Reece

One of the main problems which faces anyone who sets out to discuss Roman hoards is the sheer number of such finds, their geographical distribution, and the amount of extra knowledge, separate from the groups of objects, which help, or hinder, our interpretation. Thus to do the subject justice it would be necessary to consider every possible class of object, found in groups, over an enormous area of uniformity which we call the Roman empire. Since, in the time, and with the energy, available this is clearly impossible I shall take Britain and northwest Europe as samples of the whole, and I shall then concentrate on groups of objects which custom dictates are hoards, though it is worth clearing the ground by asking how our usage of such terms is formed and to what extent it is limited.

We can only know about Roman hoards either by discovering them or by reading about them in contemporary sources, but since we have only the material against which to check the written sources I shall ignore them. Either they correspond with reality (i.e. material) in which case they are unnecessary, or they do not, in which case they are either wrong or a nuisance. I shall of course desert this hard line when I want to interpret any hoard, but this is not to negate my beliefs, simply to underline the difference between the facts, the material found, and the interpretation of the facts. The former pursuit is based solely on the material directed by positivist scientific methods; the latter is in the realm of ideas where, since no one has yet suggested any methodology, anything goes. I like the two pursuits to be congruent, the ideas should respect the facts. Historical and other written sources will be useful in discussing what hoards were, in terms of intent and belief, why they were deposited, and why they might not have been recovered. They will be as much, or as little use, as modern anthropological or sociological analogies, and many other possible sources of inspiration, and there is no need for them to be historically 'correct'. Thus a twelfth-century fantasy with no roots in fifth-century reality can be more use in leading an archaeologist to a good interpretation of a collection of fifth-century material than a seventh- or eighth-century history by a careful scholar. Put more clearly, there is no necessary connection between a written source's historical reliability and its archaeological usefulness in the realm of interpretation and ideas.

With this preamble it will not seem too severe to say that no hoard can ever have within it any ideas of why it was buried or why it was not recovered. It may be that the archaeological circumstances in which the hoard is found will give some strong suggestions on these points, or it may be that some of the items in the hoard, such as

coins or silver plate, are inscribed, and from these leads a plausible explanation of the hoard may be made. But in these cases it is the circumstances, or the scripts, which lead to interpretation and not the material items of the hoard. Thus a temple of Mars, so distinguished by an inscription, reveals a cache of figurines of a rider on horseback; the inscription and the form of the temple, together with what we know of the cult of Mars from Roman writers, lead us to call this a votive deposit, which we assume that no one would ever have tried to 'recover' or put back into general commerce, so we see it as a very different entity from the typical hoard of small bronze coins. A hoard of small bone onions would pose rather more difficult problems of interpretation.

We are therefore dealing with a period of material culture which Jarrett (1983:22) has so rightly labelled 'text-hindered'. Hoards of figurines have already been mentioned; hoards of bone onions have been invented, but objects in almost any material can make up hoards or caches of the Roman period. The most obvious hoards, perhaps the most numerous, are hoards of coins; ironwork in buried groups has long been recognized, but has only recently been brought together by Manning (1972). Silver plate and jewellery form an important aspect of hoards from the public point of view, and these types of hoard have been summarized by Kent and Painter (1977) and Johns and Potter (1983). Lower down the scale are hoards of bronze vessels (Kennett 1969) and pewter (Peel 1967; Wedlake 1958) while pottery is seldom described as hoarded. Caches of both pottery and animal bones are usually described as 'rubbish', discarded surplus, or refuse. Thus a group of fine pottery in the ditch of the ?fort at Cirencester, Gloucestershire, is taken to be not a purposeful hoarding of fine vessels, but the final disposal of army surplus (Wacher and McWhirr 1982:133–42). From the same site in Cirencester come caches of animal bones, that is, pits filled with nothing but animal bone, but these are taken to contain refuse from a meat market (Wacher 1962:9). Groups of buried wooden objects are rare, but this is presumably because wood decomposes easily rather than any reluctance on the part of devotees to honour the gods in wood. Groups of objects in many different wells and pits at the fort of Newstead (Curle 1911), in the Scottish borders, are taken to be evidence of rubbish survival rather than wooden offerings. Other organic materials share the same fate. It might be objected that no one would bury groups of organic objects even as votive deposits because they would be known to be subject to decay. The platters in cemeteries containing the remains of chickens (e.g. Clarke 1979: 239 ff.) warn that this argument is not sound, for it would be difficult to bury a fully articulated bird skeleton totally stripped of flesh, and the assumption should probably be that food was buried.

While the listing of different types of material hoard may be found useful, the failure to distinguish between hoards buried for the good of the burier, and hoards buried for the good of a third party, such as the gods, may be found irritating. There is clearly a difference between a hoard of silver coins buried by a soldier going into battle who hopes to return next week to collect them, and the presentation in the earth to Cernunnos of a cooked chicken. This is true only when we know, or think we know, the circumstances and hence the purpose of the 'hoard', and it is part of my thesis that such knowledge is rare and accidental, and therefore an impediment to classification. Perhaps, at this stage, it would help to look at a small number of types of hoard in order to set out some positive ideas for discussion.

Hoard of gold, or silver, or jewellery, or a mixture of any of these materials, form a very clear end of the spectrum of value. Whatever the motive of the depositor the objects deposited would maintain their value in any society, or sequence of societies, known to us in western Europe. No one has yet produced an occasion on which gold or silver or the commonly called precious stones appear to have been devalued, and, where we know of the attitude of society from written sources, such as the Roman empire, there seems to be a fairly constant level of value attached to the precious metals. This makes bullion a likely object for deposition, and that deposition may be no more than safe keeping. In fact if there are no literary interferences, or archaeological distractions, hoards of gold or silver objects and jewellery are invariably interpreted as valuables buried by the owner with the intent to recover them. The Mildenhall treasure in Britain (Painter 1977) and the Kaiseraugst treasure in Switzerland (Cahn and Kaufmann-Heinimann 1984) are good examples of this type. The only interpretations so far advanced have come from a conjunction of either names scratched on the vessels, correlated with historically recorded persons, or, in the case of Kaiseraugst, from the date of the coins which form part of the hoard, matched with the pitifully few historically attested events of the time. For Britain, the Thetford treasure (Johns and Potter 1983) is a good example of a group of pagan objects (see cover of this issue), while the Water Newton treasure (Painter 1976) is a rare example of a group of Christian objects. It must again be emphasized that the adjectives pagan and Christian come directly from inscriptions and commonly recognized letter symbols such as the chi-rho. In the case of Thetford, interpretation comes from the name of the deity Faunus; the Water Newton interpretation depends directly on the presence of the Greek letters chi and rho forming the first two letters of the name of Christ in Greek, together with the letters alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. Without these features, and associated inscriptions, it would have been academically impossible to suggest that the treasure was of Christian origin, especially since some objects such as the silver and gilded leaves are so well known as objects from pagan contexts. At this time in the fourth century AD even when the identification of figures and scenes engraved on silver, or in any other form of art, is crystal clear this will not give unequivocal attribution either to pagan or Christian origins for there were many scenes and persons common to both. I mention this to avoid any suggestion that the interpretations Christian, or pagan, might be made without written sources simply by the correlation of certain uninterpreted scenes with one type of hoard or the other.

These finds have been described as hoards because it is assumed that they were buried by devotees who intended to recover them rather than by devotees giving something for ever to the gods. Cult deposits can however be precious, or perhaps we should say that deposits of precious objects can be interpreted as cultic. The structure interpreted by analogy as a temple on Hayling Island, Hampshire (Downey, King and Soffe 1980), contained a number of coin finds, some of silver and gold, and it is accepted that these were found because they were offered to the gods and never recovered. In dealing with the coins from the temple at Uley, Gloucestershire, I referred to the large number of coins of the period 350 to 360 as a possible scattered hoard (Reece 1980) because they were found all over the site and in many different deposits. Because their original context is unknown it is impossible to judge whether this is the offering of a devotee to the god, in this case probably safely Mercury, at a peak period of popularity of the shrine, or

(completely different) whether 'Covdob the Briton chose the temporarily deserted site to bury his rapidly-becoming-worthless hoard of copied coins' (Reece 1980:126). Uley (Ellison 1980) is also the site of the finding of a cache of rolled lead sheets a few inches square. If they had not been unrolled and read, or if others were not known, they would have seemed to be a clearly associated group of objects only dispersed by the clearing out or destruction of the temple. As clear, simple, curses they are not described as a hoard because we know the process by which they came together.

Turning to objects made of iron which are found together in groups the subject is only slightly less confused. The find which caught the public imagination was the great cache of ten tons of nails and nine wheel-tyres, together with one door-pivot binding, found buried and sealed in a pit in the fortress at Inchtuthil, Perthshire. The find, which is referred to in the published report as a hoard (Manning 1985), has always been interpreted as current stock and the produce of careful demolition concealed in a pit to prevent finding and use by anti-Roman natives after the Roman withdrawal. As Manning's survey of other ironwork hoards show (Manning 1972) interpretation is usually not such a simple matter. The hoards which he lists continue from the late Iron Age in Britain up to the later fourth century. The earlier hoards include objects known as currency bars, long strips of iron of dimensions similar to sword blades, and this immediately takes us back into the realm of economic value rather than the military expediency of Inchtuthil. The description of these bars as currency bars depends on the usual admixture of one literary reference with rather circular reasoning to the effect that the hoards would not have been buried if they were not valuable, therefore the bars represent value. Later hoards contain numbers of iron tools, occasionally armour, and sometimes vessels such as cauldrons. Some are associated with deposits in water, though whether those found in wells should be classed as water deposits rather than hoards in convenient holes is impossible to decide. The most remarkable feature of these finds which only emerged with Manning's study is a factor which has not so far been mentioned, that of distribution. Ironwork hoards are seen to be distributed in the earlier period from the region of Hadrian's Wall north to Inchtuthil and in the area of Britain south of a line from the Severn to the Wash; Iron Age hoards follow the southern distribution with outliers on Anglesey and just south of the Humber; and the later hoards, again with one or two exceptions, fall south of the Severn-Wash line. This brings out a completely new facet of the subject, for, while one hoard can be examined and explained quite convincingly in isolation, its interpretation might need to change in the light of other, similar hoards. Thus, while the Inchtuthil hoard can be convincingly explained on the model of demolition and practical concealment, the hoard does fit into a pattern of deposits in north Britain and the south, but absent in between. Such non-random spacing invites comment, especially as, at present, it fails to fit in with any other known patterns or habits, recorded or observed. It allows reasonable talk of ritual, if, of course, talk about ritual can ever be rational or reasonable.

I have left coin hoards to the end because, although they cannot be used to demonstrate many of the points made, they are by far the most common type of Roman hoard and I have had more to do with them than other types of hoard. The problems of differentiating between a votive deposit and a hoard which the depositor intends to recover have been mentioned and this can be dealt with briefly here. Good examples of

votive deposits are known principally from water contexts (Coventina's Well and Bath), and again, the reasoning may in some cases be circular. The finds from Coventina's Well, at Carrawburgh on Hadrian's Wall, have been known for some time although they have only been recently published in detail (Allason-Jones and McKay 1985). In number the most common finds from the well are coins, but there were many other types of object including the skull of a mature female human and two incense burners, one bearing the name *Covetina* (sic) which relates them to the other inscriptions and carved stones. After some discussion McKay prefers to regard a major portion of the coins as a hoard deposited presumably at one moment, but as no direct information on the original disposition of the find is available it is impossible to decide between this interpretation and the alternative of a period of intense coin deposition in the well, followed by a slacker period of devotion. The recent excavation of the shrine of the temple of *Sulis Minerva* at Bath, Somerset, has not yet been fully published, but Walker's study of the coins from the spring will be a major addition to the study of coin finds, perhaps more to ritual deposits rather than instant hoards (forthcoming, 1988). The general point to emerge from these details is the difficulty of deciding between periods of intense deposition of coins, one by one in a shrine or pool (as, in modern terms, a fountain), and the instant deposition of a hoard of variegated coins as a single offering to the gods. In the case of Roman coins we have a sequence of artifacts which can be dated sometimes to a matter of months and related to a unique point of manufacture; with this knowledge we could distinguish between a group of one thousand objects all made in the same place on the same day, and another group of a thousand objects of equal value, use, meaning and appearance whose manufacture was spread over several years. When the objects were all minted in Rome the chances of one thousand coins all struck in the same day from the same dies turning up in a deposit in Britain as a result of a series of events or devotions is negligible and we could take this as evidence of the deposition of a hoard or group of coins at one moment. Unfortunately, this has never yet been found for the groups of coins known, even from 'ritual' deposits, are the material which would be collected together in a bag or purse or money-box over a short period of time. Such groups could be collected over time and deposited instantly, or deposited through time as they came to hand.

The extreme identifiability of Roman coins, the way that they can be placed in such a certain sequence, and the way that they can be traced back to a point of origin, means that more ideas can probably be tested on hoards of Roman coins than on any other type of hoard. Text-books always divide coin hoards into at least savings hoards and disaster hoards and often attempt a much finer sub-division, yet detailed study of the make-up of many different hoards reveals a remarkable similarity and no evidence for clear subdivision (Reece 1987: ch. 4). All the evidence to date suggests that the majority of coin hoards are 'the contents of a man's pocket or purse at a given time, frozen (as it were) into immobility for our leisurely inspection' (Robertson 1956:268 ff.). This means that any one hoard, divorced from the legends of the coins which form it, and divorced from the archaeological information which, occasionally, surrounds its finding, can give little or no information on the process of formation and deposition. A coin hoard as such cannot inform us whether it was never recovered for dramatic reasons linked to great historical events, or silly events linked to no more than domestic dramas. Thus, the

hoard will be the same whether its owners died 'at the cross-roads, their hearts torn from their twitching bodies to provide a warm snack for raiding Saxon pirates' or whether they returned home after placing the pot a definite number of paces from the blasted oak and then had all memories erased by 'a jar of potent mead and an evening spent on bets as to how far a pet hedgehog could crawl'. These alternatives I have described as the dilemma of 'Hearts and Hedgehogs' (Reece, replaced 1987), but they have been rejected as unworthy of serious publication. The censors have missed the point — that it is only by considering silly examples which are totally consistent with the evidence that we can really understand just how limited our evidence is, and how mute.

If we move on to coin legends and details of hoards, then some excellent attempts at interpretation have been made. First place must go to the superb work of Bastien and Metzger (1977) in their description and discussion of the hoard of coins and metalwork found at Beaurains, near Arras in northern France, and often known as the Arras Hoard. Many of the coins in the hoard were of gold and had been struck from the same dies, so that it is most unlikely that they had been in circulation since they had been minted. However, these were not just the usual gold denominations, but often multiples of normal coins struck for special occasions and anniversaries, and while the later ones were struck at western mints appropriate to the western find-spot, the earlier coins were struck in the east. Such large gold coins were usually handed out by high officials, or the emperor himself, and from a detailed discussion of all these points Bastien was able to suggest the career structure of the recipient, who may (or may not) have been the depositor, rising through time in the imperial service, transferring from one part of the empire to another with his imperial master, and perhaps reaching the peak of his career with the reconquest of Britain in 296. Bastien is even able to contrast a small hoard of second-century denarii of silver, out of place in a hoard of the early 300s, with a similar hoard in the burial of the Frankish king Childeric, and so even more out of place in the later fifth century. He sees these two hoards of second-century silver coins as German: Childeric's hoard had been passed down in the Germanic family since the formation of the hoard in Free Germany in the second century from Roman coins which crossed the frontier in normal trade, while the Arras denarii had been captured back in Roman victories over the Germans in the late 290s and handed out to high officials as a share of booty. What matters here is not the detailed interpretation, though I have given that in outline to suggest how much can be gained from a hoard, but the intricate detail into which it is necessary to go in order to extract such information. And all this comes from written sources, legends on coin, mint-marks, and historical sources. The hoard itself as such cannot even tell us who buried it, for it could have been stolen from its owner, who could even have sat in judgement on the thief and sentenced him to death, so alienating himself for ever from his hoard; nor can it give us any idea of the circumstances, in human and conceptual terms, surrounding the burial.

This detailed scholarship is a far cry from earlier attempts to plot the distribution of coin hoards on a map, to join up the points, and then to use the line as a putative route for barbarian invasions into the Roman empire in the third century. On this type of study I have tried to set out some basic rules and guidelines, and where these, or similar points, have been respected, historical interpretations might be drawn from find-spots and distribution maps (Reece 1981). It is an interesting comment on archaeological method

in Britain that the idea of calibrating Roman coin hoards, or of testing whether times of stress lead to greater failure to recover coin hoards, only happened in 1974 when John Kent examined hoards in Britain buried during the Civil War of 1643–9 and in the century before, and half century after (Kent 1974).¹ The result of this study was a clear demonstration that in this one instance, when both military conditions and the number of unrecovered coin hoards were partly available, the six years of stress did produce a rise in the level of unrecovered hoards. This brings in what should perhaps be a final negative point, for the stress on unrecovered coin hoards points out that this material must surely be the only archaeological material where failures only are available for study. Since it was the intention in most cases to recover hoards we cannot know anything directly about those which were successful; it is as if we had to study the Roman pottery industry from waster heaps — a very specialized form of hoard — alone.

As this is intended to be a discussion of selected points giving rise to ideas on hoarding and burial of goods in the Roman period I will end by suggesting some avenues for the further study of coin deposits. Kent (1974) and Robertson (1974) have both discussed aspects of coin hoards, and this discussion has been furthered by Casey (1986). For those who want to use these finds as examples of well-dated artefacts, in some cases well published in their geographical contexts, there is no simple empire-wide guide. For Britain, Professor Anne Robertson is bringing her lifetime's study to completion and it is to be hoped that this will soon be published. For France, a new *Corpus des trésors monétaires antiques de la France* has now reached volume 4, and this provides an excellent cover at a high standard (Paris, Société de Numismatique). For Germany, the volumes of *Die Fundmünzen der römischen Zeit in Deutschland* are more than half way in their great coverage of every coin and coin-hoard found in Germany, and similar volumes are available for Luxembourg and parts of Austria. Yugoslavia and surrounding areas are served by Mirnik's volume of coin hoards in Yugoslavia (1981) and the work of Kos on monetary circulation in Slovenia and the south-eastern Alps (1986). There are of course many other such studies, but this is not the place for an attempt at an exhaustive list, rather a suggestion of what is available.

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Note

- 1 Wilson (1968: fig. 2) had earlier demonstrated for the Viking Age in England that there existed a relationship between increased stress and failure to recover coin hoards during the period 830 to 940, peaking 869–78 with the activities of the 'Great Army' of Danes (ed.).

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Abstract

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Interpreting Roman hoards

Groups of objects found together in Roman contexts provide a range of opportunities for interpretation not available in earlier periods. The objects can often be well dated and put in a definite sequence and similar groups may well be available for comparison over the whole area of the Roman empire. When the comparative material provided by the written sources is added the opportunities for interpretation multiply, but the problems which arise become more intense and certainty is harder to achieve. Groups of objects of many, or most, materials have been found in the Roman period, but only some groups are referred to as hoards, bringing to the fore the problems of definition which, at this period, may realistically hinge in some cases on the motive of the hoarder. A summary of different materials is attempted and a very general survey of coin hoards attempts to show the possibilities of study and the range of material.