

FLAME Regional Bias Series: Britain

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Any survey of coin finds from the late antique and early medieval world will be dominated by published records from Britain. That should not be read as signifying that Britain was uniquely rich in circulating specie. Broadly speaking, it is a result of a legal climate in Britain that is permissive towards using metal detectors to find ancient items, and also of there being strong programmes to record and publish those finds, alongside others made in archaeological settings.

Coin Finds and the Law

Britain does not have a single law regarding finds of archaeological material. Scotland has a wider definition of treasure, requiring all finds (including coins) to be submitted to a central expert committee for consideration; museums are given the opportunity to bid for these items, at current market prices. The price is then given to the finder, or the object is returned if no museum bids. There is no organized database giving information about Scottish finds. Finds from archaeological contexts are not subject to the reward scheme.

England and Wales operate a similar system for handling finds designated as treasure, but the category of treasure is narrower. Crucially, individual coins are exempt: a find must consist of at least two precious-metal coins, or ten base-metal coins, to be counted as treasure. Only hoards that meet this criterion are legally required to be reported to the authorities. Individual finds of coins can be kept or sold legally, and the state has no claim on them.

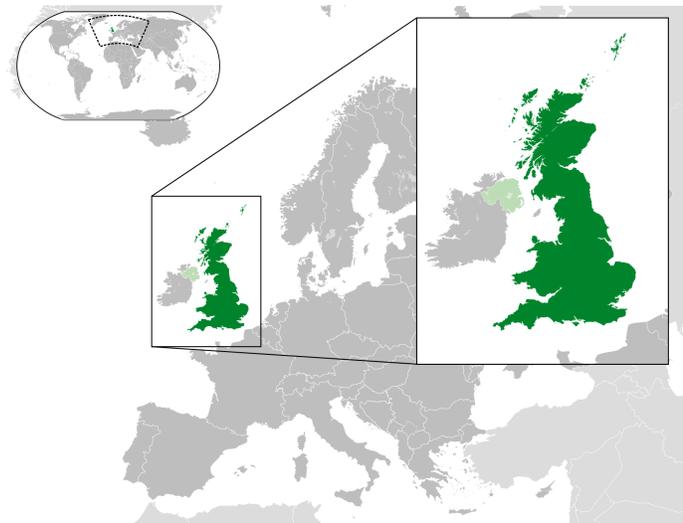


FIGURE 1

Metal Detector Users and Coin Finds

The large majority of coin finds from England and Wales are uncovered by amateur metal detector users, as depicted on the BBC comedy *Detectorists*. It has been estimated that there are about 20,000 metal detector users active (as of 2017), with debate over what proportion of them report finds to the authorities. Illegally dispersed hoards are sold via certain dealers or directly by finders through ebay; some are also simply kept by finders. In 2017 and 2020, metal detectors were convicted and jailed for failing to report important early medieval finds (hoards of Merovingian and ninth-century coins, respectively), and it is believed that the harsh sentences handed down, especially in the 2020 case, have encouraged a number of undeclared finds to be made known.

Some detectorists operate individually; many are part of a club which will focus on a particular area and occasionally hold 'rallies' where many detectorists will come together to scour a particular field for finds. Most detector users will have a portfolio of productive sites that they keep a closely guarded secret: even when finds are reported, they will often not disclose the exact location, or report it only on condition it is not made public.

In all cases (save for those operating illegally, known colloquially as 'nighthawks'), metal detector users are required to obtain the permission of the landowner before searching any piece of property. Many landowners will give permission in return for an arrangement to share the proceeds of any finds. Others will refuse altogether. Detectorists are also banned from operating on scheduled sites (meaning those with known archaeological importance, such as the early medieval burial ground of Sutton Hoo), unless as part of a controlled archaeological excavation, where metal detectors are sometimes used to search for small finds in excavated soil. Military-owned land is also off limits, as are nature reserves and parks. For practical reasons hills and forests are generally avoided, as well as urban areas (with certain important exceptions, such as the Thames foreshore in central London). Large areas are therefore excluded from (legal) metal detecting activity, while even within permitted areas, finds tend to cluster within reach of substantial towns and major roads leading out from them. These modern geographical limits need to be accounted for in any assessment of late antique and early medieval coin distribution.

Coin Find Databases

Initiatives to record coins focus on the large number of individual coins – single finds – uncovered by amateur metal detector users. Foremost among these programmes is the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS): a service created in 1997 to document finds made by metal detector users in England and Wales. It is run from the British Museum and consists of thirty-six ‘finds liaison officers’ responsible for particular geographical districts, whose job is to communicate with detectorists in the area and record their finds on a central database. This database is freely accessible. As of January 2021, the database as a whole contains over 1.5 million entries, including just under 5,000 coins classed as ‘early medieval’ (here meaning 410–1066) and about 279,000 classed as ‘Roman’ (from the invasion of AD 43 to the end of central Roman rule in Britain c. 410).

The PAS is supplemented for the early medieval period by the Corpus of Early Medieval Coin Finds (EMC): a slightly older database established in 1996 that is concerned specifically with this chronological period. As of January 2021, it contained approximately 65,000 entries, although a high proportion of these are coins published in a separate series, the Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles, that focuses on major private and public collections. The number of coins on EMC that have a known find spot is rather fewer: about 10,000. This category overlaps partially with the PAS for the same period, meaning that it is not possible simply to add totals from the two sources together to ascertain the number of finds from a given period.

It should be noted that both the main databases have historically focused on single finds – that is, coins found in isolation and not thought to have formed part of a hoard. As a result of a targeted project on Roman coin hoards from Britain, PAS now includes data on all Roman-period hoards, and new hoards of early medieval coins are also now added. EMC does not include hoards, although some of the SCBI coins included in it have a hoard provenance. The Fitzwilliam Museum maintains a bibliographical guide to early medieval coin hoards found before 2008/9 (<https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/dept/coins/projects/hoards/index.html>), and new hoards are also published in an annual section of the Numismatic Chronicle. A blind spot in the current climate is coins found in archaeological excavations. These may take a long time to reach publication, or only ever be published in summary form within ‘grey literature’ that is not easily accessible. Some excavation finds are included on EMC and PAS, but not systematically in either case. It should be noted that this is a much larger problem for studies of later Roman coins: very few early medieval coins are found in excavations.

Britain and the Economic World of the Mediterranean

Britain was a relatively late addition to the Roman world, although it had a well-developed monetary economy before being conquered, similar to that of Pre-Roman Gaul, and also trade with the Roman Empire. From the first century onwards Britain was more closely involved with these networks, and the Roman state became an important force in the province's economy, above all in the form of a large-scale military presence. Soldiers, officials and other visitors from all over the empire could be found in Britain: one second-century inscription from South Shields (Tyne and Wear) was erected by a Palmyrene man in memory of his British wife. That said, the province remained on the fringe of the Roman world in many respects. This liminal position became more precarious in the later fourth century. Roman coins and other trappings of Roman life such as large villas and towns contracted in many areas. After a spate of rebellions at the beginning of the fifth century, Britain was effectively removed from central Roman rule. Thereafter its connection with Mediterranean trade and political structures was much weaker. A steady yet small trickle of coins continued to enter the island, and ceramic evidence points to an important connection between western Britain and the eastern Mediterranean in the fifth and sixth centuries. In subsequent times Britain's trading connections were more strongly aligned with Francia, Ireland and Scandinavia than the Mediterranean. Luxury goods still arrived from Mediterranean sources, and travellers from Britain moved in the opposite direction, especially to Rome on pilgrimage. In general, and with some interesting exceptions, late antique and early medieval Britain was not closely entwined in Mediterranean trading networks. It instead reflects the emergence of a separate sphere of long-distance exchange in Northern Europe.

Summary

Like other parts of the area considered by FLAME, Britain has extensive excavation finds, typically published on a site-by-site basis. But what is distinct and unusual in England and Wales is the very large published body of finds (hoards and single coins) made by metal detector users. These reflect modern legal and administrative arrangements, not necessarily a uniquely rich monetary economy in centuries past. Were the same regulations in place in France, Italy or Turkey, it is likely that Britain would look far less unusual.

Illustrations

Figure 1: File:England, Scotland and Wales within the UK and Europe.svg. (2021, May 27). Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository. Retrieved 20:28, August 31, 2021 from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?>

[title=File:England,_Scotland_and_Wales_within_the_UK_and_Europe.svg&oldid=565276254.](#)