

FLAME Regional Bias Series: Iberian Peninsula

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[WORKING PAPER]

Geography

The Iberian Peninsula is a clear geographic unit, located in southwestern Europe south of the Pyrenees mountain range. It consists of the continental European territories of the modern nation-states of Spain and Portugal, as well as the micro-state of Andorra and the British dependency of Gibraltar. The Balearic Islands in the Mediterranean Sea are also included as a portion of European Spain, and the Canary Islands in the Atlantic, northwest of Africa, facing the coast of Morocco. Portugal also includes the Atlantic archipelagos of Madeira and the Azores.

Coinage

In 325 CE, at the beginning of the time range considered here, the entire Iberian Peninsula was part of the Roman Empire and used the coinage standard throughout the empire, involving gold, bronze, and some silver in a large and changing variety of denominations.

After 409 CE, with the first wave of barbarian incomers, the peninsula began to slip out of imperial control, with first the Suevians (in the northwest) and later the Visigoths (in the rest of the peninsula as well as southern Gaul) establishing autonomous kingdoms.



Both the Suevians and the Visigoths produced coinage starting in the fifth century, at first imitative of Roman coinage but later developing original types. The coins produced in the Suevian kingdom were mostly gold solidi and tremisses ($\frac{1}{3}$ solidi); a few silver coins were also made around 450. From the 550s to the 620s there was also a Byzantine presence in southeastern Spain with a local gold and probably also bronze coinage. In 585 the Visigoths absorbed the Suevian kingdom and later, around 620–625, the Byzantine province of Spania, unifying almost all of the peninsula under their rule and monetary system. Up to the middle of the sixth century the Visigoths minted gold solidi and tremisses as well as tiny silver fractions. By the last third of the sixth century the tremissis became the only denomination in gold, which much have circulated in a very different economic sphere from the bronze issues. These last issues have been under investigation only relatively recently and have been the object of controversy when it comes to determining their issuing authority.¹ In general it is accepted that they were produced locally, and the south of the peninsula, particularly in the city of Seville and its surroundings, is one of the places where they are best documented.

Visigothic coinage continued only a short time after 711, when the Umayyad governor of Tangier (Ṭāriq ibn Ziyād), expanding from the Caliphate's territories in North Africa, began the conquest of the Iberian Peninsula. Within a few years almost all of the peninsula was annexed to the Caliphate, and practically from the beginning its monetary standard replaced the previous Visigothic coinage. Arab al-Andalus at first used gold dinars (with $\frac{1}{2}$ and $\frac{1}{3}$ fractions) and copper fulūs, but by the 720s silver dirhams predominated.

Legal Aspects

Discussing finds in Spain and Portugal necessarily requires discussing their laws on historical patrimony. In the Iberian Peninsula, as in most countries, the modern reporting of coin finds is subject to very significant problems. In both Spain and Portugal, all finds of archaeological materials (including ancient and medieval coins) are

¹ The evidence regarding local production within the Visigothic kingdom was first set out in detail by M. Crusafont, *El sistema monetario visigodo: cobre y oro* (Barcelona: Asociación Numismática Española, 1994). A more recent discussion of the expanding body of evidence is R. Pliego, "The Circulation of Copper Coins in the Iberian Peninsula during the Visigothic Period: New Approaches," *Journal of Archaeological Numismatics* 5-6 (2015-16): 125-60. Doubts about the attribution of these coins have been expressed by some scholars, including J. Vico, M. C. Cores, and G. Cores, *Corpus nummorum visigothorum, ca. 575-714: Leovigildus-Achila* (Madrid: J. Vico, 2006), pp. 111-16; and F. Retamero, "Monedas oscuras," *Gaceta Numismática* 157 (2005): 3-4.

considered to be public property and must be reported to the relevant authorities. In mainland Portugal the national government has authority over them; in Spain the autonomous communities do. In both countries, use of a metal detector to find antiquities is only legal in the context of archaeological activity carried out with permission of the relevant authority for material cultural heritage. Classification of their unauthorized use as a “very serious offense” in the majority of current laws, however, has not restrained their use, which is most frequent in areas where a higher concentration of finds coincides with depressed economies, as in the south of the peninsula. Compared to northern Europe, compliance with the laws on reporting of coin finds is relatively poor. In regard to compensation, the administration is rarely up to standard when dealing with the cash “reward” which the majority of the heritage laws propose for casual finders or owners of the land where these finds occur. Many of these coin finds end up entering the numismatic market, mostly in foreign countries where laws are more lax in this regard. Sometimes the coins are sold directly by the finders through online sale platforms. In general, it can be said that the majority of finds escape the control of the relevant authorities. Only thorough searching allows numismatic researchers access to even a minimal part of the information on these finds, although this process is not exempt from criticism on the part of other researchers in the humanities.

Reporting and Recovery Biases

The principal problem is that there is no comprehensive published compilation of coin finds for either Spain or Portugal, nor is there a national database comparable to those in some northern European countries, and although the platform monedaiberica.org is laying solid foundations in this regard, only very recently is this work being done on Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Hundreds of reports of finds in Spain were summarized by Felipe Mateu y Llopis in a series of articles between 1942 and 1986, although the quality of the information that he was able to obtain was often very low. More limited summaries of finds for particular topics or localities also exist for both Spain and Portugal.

While the Roman coin hoards of the period that concerns us are compiled comprehensively in Coin Hoards of the Roman Empire (CHRE) project, the larger picture of finds from the post-Roman period presents various particularities. In general, hoards usually show considerable non-randomness compared to single finds, for reasons both known (date of deposition, location) and unknown (the individual history of the accumulation of coins), so they can create noticeable statistical bias in a data set.

In particular, we have to deal with the fact that we know of no hoards of Suevian coins and the main attempt at compiling the single finds, as with those of the Visigothic period, was published half a century ago by X. Barral, *La circulation des monnaies suèves et visigothiques* (München, 1976). Many of the finds he listed have incomplete descriptions, which is compounded by the coins rarely being illustrated; in addition, there is a relatively high number of modern falsifications among them. With regard to the single finds of Visigothic coins in this work, the territory of present-day Portugal seems to be overrepresented, unlike what occurs with hoards. In this connection, a significant part of the known corpus of Visigothic tremisses comes from hoards buried in southern Spain in the first half of the seventh century, so that the mints of southern Spain are strongly overrepresented. The result is not only that one hoard can have the same impact on the data as hundreds or thousands of single finds, but more importantly that hoards and single finds display a rather distorted picture of Visigothic monetary reality. An approach that does not take this into account raises prospects of interpretations based on false appearances and some such works are making their way into the scientific literature. Our challenge with FLAME is not only the compilation of these finds in the most efficient manner but also fundamentally to show some interpretive paradigms more in accord with what the actual circulation must have been in this period.

Known finds in the Iberian Peninsula of some other coinages are also dominated by hoards, such as Late Roman gold coins and Umayyad silver coins. These were entirely or mostly produced outside the region, so their composition by mints shows less statistical bias than seen with Visigothic gold, but because hoards are more often deposited in times of conflict, chronologically they best represent the coins circulating just before the collapse of Roman administration in 409 (for Roman gold) and just before the factional and ethnic conflicts among the Arab and Berber forces in the 740s (for Umayyad silver).

There are other coinages for which no large hoard is known. This has a contrary effect: because they are only known from a handful of isolated finds or excavation finds, there is no hoard bias, but they cannot easily be compared to the coinages for which hoards constitute most of the evidence. This is true for Suevian coins and for the Spanish Byzantine gold coins, for example, which were probably relatively small coinage series anyway, but seem even smaller due to the chance lack of any hoard.

In recent decades there has been a substantial increase in scientific archaeological excavations and in the publication of the results. A few precious-metal coin hoards have been found in excavations in Spain and Portugal, but a very large majority of

excavation finds are base-metal coins. Thus, reported coin finds are likely to become increasingly biased toward base-metal coins found in archaeological excavations.