

A Hoard of Late Roman Coins from Shapwick Heath, Somerset

BY H. ST. GEORGE GRAY, F.S.A.

(a) INTRODUCTION

LARGE hoards of Roman coins have been discovered in Somerset, and the county is particularly famous for the number of 'finds' of late silver coins known as *siliquae*.¹ These were minted in the second half and at the close of the fourth century; and they were buried or lost at dates near and even after the end of the century.

Professor F. Haverfield stated in the *Victoria County History*² that the occurrence of such hoards in Somerset is not clear, but although they are not in general common in England, they are more plentiful here than in other parts of the Roman Empire.² At the time he wrote he knew of only one such hoard in Berkshire and another in Worcestershire, two in Hampshire, two in Norfolk; none in Warwickshire, Northants or Derbyshire, nor in Devon or Cornwall. But the list of such hoards in Britain has been greatly enlarged by Mr. B. H. St. J. O'Neil in his paper on 'A Hoard of late Roman Coins from Northamptonshire; its Parallels and Significance', published in the *Archæological Journal*, vol. xc (1933), pp. 282-305, where a map is given showing the distribution of Theodosian coin hoards.

The preponderance of these late hoards in Somerset seems to point rather to some special fortune or misfortune in this territory about the beginning of the fifth century; or that in

¹ A *siliqua* weighs approximately $\frac{1}{144}$ th of a Roman pound. These hoards are found generally in a good state of preservation.

² *Somerset*, vol. i, 354; *Arch. Journ.*, xc, 304.

the disturbed conditions about the time of the withdrawal of the legions, refugees sought a brief safety in and around the marshes of the Tone and Parret, just as in turn, at a later period, the Saxons under Alfred made camps of refuge in the neighbourhood during the Danish invasions. Possibly the abundance of game in the low-lying land made the district particularly suitable for such a purpose.

Haverfield listed a short account of most of the Somerset hoards of this period,³ and they are briefly repeated here and some additions are given :—

(1) *Between Bath and Bristol.* A late fourth century hoard was found in 1839 in making the Great Western Railway.

(2) *Vicinity of Bristol or North Mendip.* 2,000 *siliquae* were discovered c. 1866, exact locality unknown.⁴ They extended from Constantius II to Honorius, and were acquired for the cabinet of the late Sir John Evans.

(3) *Parish of East Harptree.* A hoard consisting of about 1,500 *siliquae*, one half being of Julian, was found in 1887, and were deposited in a pewter vessel provided with a handle, 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. in height.⁵ The coins extend from Constantius II only to Gratian, but also include a coin of Constantine I and four of Constans. The hoard is exhibited in East Harptree Church.

(4) *Wookey Hole.* Just before 1859 a crock was found at the entrance to the caves containing a hoard of mixed silver and copper coins of the period (Constantius II to Gratian).

(5) *Uphill.* A large number of coins, mostly of Valentinian and Gratian, was found here in a cave in 1846.

(6) *Near Edington and Chilton.* In the marshes, Mr. W. Stradling, in 1838, discovered two leather purses ; one contained the smallest silver coins of the late Empire ; the other the smallest copper coins of the same period.

(7) *Neighbourhood of the Burtle potteries.* A hoard of over thirty *siliquae* were found in a pot some years ago in this area.⁶ They came into the collection of the late T. Floyd Norris, but there are no precise particulars of the 'find' available. (The writer examined these coins in 1914 ; nearly half of them were of Arcadius).

³ *V.C.H.Som.*, i, 355-6.

⁴ *Num. Chron.*, 1915, pp. 433ff. ; *Antiquity*, Mar. 1937, p. 41.

⁵ Figured in *Proc. Soc. Antiq.*, 2 ser., xii, 56, where handle is not seen. Fuller account in *Num. Chron.*, 1888, p. 23.

⁶ *Proc. Soc. Ant. Lond.* 2 ser., xxvi, 142.



SHAPWICK HEATH, SOMERSET, 1936

View showing the position in which the Hoard was found

The exact place is indicated by the white spot below the spade held by the middle man

From a Photograph by Dr. A. Bulleid, F.S.A.

(8) *Charlton Mackrell*. Forty *siliquae* of the same period were found in 1846 near a Roman villa.

(9) *North Curry*. A pottery vessel was found in 1748 containing about 150 *siliquae* of the same period.⁷ Some of these are in the Taunton Museum.

(10) *Holway, Taunton*. A large hoard of *siliquae* was discovered in 1821; they are said to have been found in a red Samian pot; they range from Constans to Honorius, and many of them are in the Somerset County Museum.⁸

(11) *Milverton*. Forty-five coins of the same period were found in a pottery vessel in 1847.

(12) *Camerton*. Twenty-six silver coins of the late Roman empire, including Arcadius and Honorius, were found between two tiles.⁹

(b) DISCOVERY OF THE SHAPWICK HOARD

On 18 May 1936 James Crane, of Meare, while digging peat for Percy S. Mullins, peat merchant, on Shapwick Heath, in the parish of Shapwick, discovered the undermentioned Roman objects 2 ft. below the present surface.¹⁰ The peat digging ran north and south, and the hoard was found at a point 166 yds. due south of Decoy Pool Drove and 1,200 yds. due east of the main Shapwick to Westhay road.¹¹ A white spot below the spade in Plate V indicates the exact position of the discovery.

The objects discovered consist of a handled cup of pewter in which a small earthenware beaker stood in an upright position. This pot was found to contain 120 silver coins (*siliquae*), and over the mouth a wad of dried grass was placed. Above this the treasure was covered by a pewter saucer and a small platter of the same material. There was dried grass wrapping in

⁷ H. St. George Gray, 'Roman Coins found at North Curry', *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, lii, 132-5.

⁸ *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, xxiv, 104; *V.C.H.Som.*, i, 356, 363.

⁹ *V.C.H.Som.*, i, 292 n.

¹⁰ This was the maximum depth of the depression in which the hoard was lying.

¹¹ The hoard was found just over $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile s.e. of the spot where the prehistoric boat, Shapwick, was discovered (*Proc.*, lii, ii, 51-4), and rather over a mile w.s.w. of the place of discovery of the La Tène II scabbard of bronze (*Antiq. Journ.*, x, 154-5; *Proc. Som. A.S.*, lxxv, p. lxvii).

contact with these vessels, and within a short distance the remains of a leather sandal (or sandals) were picked up.

The coins were found to be in an excellent state of preservation; few of them were clipped and those few very slightly.

On 22 May an inquest was held by the coroner for S.E. Somerset, Mr. C. Leslie Rutter, in the Church Room at Meare, where the writer gave evidence as to the significance of the discovery.¹² The finding at this enquiry was that the coins being silver were Treasure Trove, and by direction of H.M. Treasury they were sent to the Coin Department of the British Museum for examination, record and valuation. Forty-one of the coins were acquired for the National Collection and the remaining seventy-nine coins, together with the pewter and pottery, were purchased by the Somerset County Museum, Taunton Castle.

(b) SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE COINS

The coins, extending from Constantius II to Honorius, have been fully described by Miss Anne S. Robertson in the *Numismatic Chronicle*, 5 ser., vol. xvi, no. 63 (1936), pp. 245–250, where an illustration is given of the earthenware beaker only.

Here we purpose giving only a table of the names of the emperors and the number of coins of each; and some extracts from Miss Robertson's report.

She says 'The earlier coins are more worn than the later, but even the latest, *i.e.* those with the **VIRTVS ROMANORVM** type, minted at Milan (including the clipped coin of Honorius) show slight traces of wear. This fact, combined with the large numbers of coins of Arcadius and Honorius of that type and mint (27), as compared with one of Theodosius, suggests that

¹² Immediately on hearing of the discovery Dr. A. Bulleid, F.S.A., visited the place and marked the position (given above) on the 6-in. Ordnance Sheet (Som. LI, N.E.), and had communicated with one of the Somerset coroners at Wedmore. The writer visited Meare on the following day to examine the coins, etc., at P. S. Mullins' home (Westfield House, Meare).

We take this opportunity of thanking Dr. Bulleid for the interest he took in this matter. Our thanks are also due to Dr. H. Godwin for his report on Bog-Stratigraphy, Shapwick Heath, which forms an appendix to this paper.

the hoard was buried some years after the death of Theodosius in A.D. 395. Moreover, in the *VIRTUS ROMANORVM* type, Honorius outnumbers Arcadius by 20 to 7, a proportion exactly corresponding to that of the South Ferriby hoard. A pre-

Emperor	Date of Reign	No. found	
		British Mus.	Taunton Mus.
Constantius II ..	337-361	1	2
Julian II ..	355-363	3	1
Valentinian I ..	364-375	1	2
Valens ..	364-378	5	12
Gratian ..	367-383	7	4
Valentinian II ..	375-392	4	9
Theodosius I ..	379-395	6	5
Arcadius ..	383-408	4	12
Magnus Maximus ..	383-388	3	12
Flavius Victor ..	died 388	1	—
Eugenius ..	392-394	3	2
Honorius ..	395-423	3	18
		41	79

ponderance of Honorius over Arcadius by 2 to 1 or more occurs also in the hoards from Coleraine, Sproxton, and Terling, and has been shown by Mr. J. W. E. Pearce to be a characteristic of hoards buried *c.* A.D. 407-411.¹³ The date of the burial of the Shapwick hoard must be at least as late, probably *c.* A.D. 410.'

(c) DESCRIPTION OF THE VESSELS

Roman pewter has rarely been found in Somerset, nor is it common from Britain generally.

A plain dish and a bowl with octagonal flange were found in 1928 on Meare Heath about a mile E.N.E. of the Shapwick hoard (Taunton Museum)¹⁴; and seven pieces of pewter were

¹³ Cf. 'The Coleraine Hoard', by Harold Mattingly and J. W. E. Pearce, in *Antiquity*, Mar. 1937, pp. 39-45.

¹⁴ These are described in *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, lxxv, 105-6, and the bowl is figured in Pl. xii of the same volume.

discovered in a well at the Brislington Roman villa (Bristol Museum).¹⁵

The three pieces of pewter and the pottery vessel from the Shapwick hoard may be described as follows; all of them are figured in Plate VI.

(1) Beaker, or cup, of pewter set on a hollow pedestal base; the total height of the vessel is $3\frac{1}{8}$ in.; and the internal height of the cup is $3\frac{3}{8}$ in. The rim is everted, the upper margin sloping outwards slightly; the maximum diameter is $4\frac{9}{16}$ in. The form of the handle is seen in the photograph. There is evidence of the former presence of another handle not exactly opposite the existing one; three blobs of solder (one seen in the photograph) serve to prove this. The only ornament consists of double incised lines encircling the cup on the exterior $\frac{3}{4}$ in. below the rim, and a band of double lines close to the rim on the inner side of the vessel.

(2) Plain saucer of pewter, somewhat battered and cracked, 5 in. in diameter; height originally $1\frac{1}{4}$ in.; ring foot, $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. in diameter.

(3) Small circular plate, or platter, of pewter, diameter 5 in., with a thickened moulded edge; central dot surrounded by two concentric rings (diameter of greater, 1 in.); slight ring foot, diameter 2 in.; somewhat battered.

Several small bowls, saucers and plates were found with the pewter vessels at Appleshaw, Hants.¹⁶

(4) Vase, or beaker, lathe-turned, with bulbous body and everted rim (rounded); there is a distinct cordon at the bottom of the neck, and the body is separated by a groove from the small base which is strongly incurved and nearly a pedestal. The little pot is of a soft buff clay with chocolate-brown coating, dark in places. Probably made in the late fourth century.

¹⁵ *V.C.H.Som.*, i, 305; *Trans. Bris. and Glos. Arch. Soc.*, xxiv, plate facing p. 291.

¹⁶ *Archæologia*, lvi, 12.



SHAPWICK HEATH, SOMERSET. 1936

Beaker, Plate and Saucer (all of Pewter), and the small Pot in which the Late Roman Coins were deposited

From a Photograph by Mr. H. St. George Gray, F.S.A.

PRELIMINARY NOTES ON BOG-STRATIGRAPHY, SHAPWICK HEATH,
ON SITE OF LATE ROMAN COIN HOARD

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Shapwick Heath appears to be a very large raised-bog (= Hochmoor), and the site of the hoard is within about 100 yds. of the bog-edge though well within the steeply-sloping margin (Rand), now thickly overgrown with brambles and willow-herb after tree-felling. Throughout the deep peat cuttings of the bog a two-fold division of the peat is recognizable, and is of course well known to the peat-cutters. There is an upper layer of relatively undecomposed, light fresh sphagnum peat, seldom much more than 1 metre in thickness, and this passes over, sometimes with transitional banding, into a dark, chocolate-coloured peat, which is that most valuable for burning. This lower peat is very highly humified, and though it contains visible remains of *Calluna* (ling), *Eriophorum* (cotton-grass), *Scirpus caespitosus* (deer-grass) and *Myrica* (sweet-gale), no sphagnum is visible to the naked eye, though it was possibly the chief peat-former. A similar two-fold division of the peat is found in the raised bogs all over North-western Europe, and is generally held to indicate two periods of differing climate.

The following section was obtained by boring within 3 ft. laterally of the hoard site :

F	cms. 0-15	Raw humus of the wood-floor, tree-roots, fern leaves, wood mosses, etc.
E	15-30	Light brown fresh <i>Molinia</i> peat.
	35-135	Black fibrous <i>Molinia</i> peat with twigs of <i>Myrica</i> and occasional <i>Calluna</i> and <i>Eriophorum</i> .
	135-140	Fresh sphagnum peat.
D	140-375	Dark brown <i>Calluna-Eriophorum</i> peat, highly humified.
C	375-380	Brush-wood peat.
B	380-525	Grey-black <i>Phragmites</i> peat with roots of <i>Carex</i> , fruits and rhizomes of <i>Cladium</i> and seeds of <i>Menyanthes</i> .
A	525-550	Soft blue clay.

Thus a depth of over 17 ft. of peat was proved, the lower part of it (B) having formed under shallow fresh-water conditions, with reed-swamp of the sword-sedge or common reed and such plants as the bog-bean. As this dried out, probably by continued peat growth, brush-wood covered it, and on the drier surface a sphagnum bog arose. This is also quite typical of the structure of raised bogs. At this site the upper sphagnum peat (layer E) has an undue proportion of *Molinia* (purple heath-grass) in comparison with positions nearer the bog-centre, but there is no doubt of its stratigraphical identity.

The level of the base of the pewter cup containing the pottery beaker and hoard may be referred to this section at 60 cms., with a possible error of plus or minus 10 cms. The hoard was presumably buried (though not deeply, considering former conditions), so that the late Roman surface was certainly well above the top of the old dark peat, and probably more than a metre up in the fresh sphagnum peat.

The reference of this discovery and of the Neolithic B pottery (see pp. 160-2) to specific horizons in a raised bog is a result of great climatological interest, and it is much to be hoped that future finds in the bog will have the surface position and depth accurately recorded, notified and investigated. A body of most valuable scientific information would result.