



THE
COLKIRK HOARD
OF ROMAN SILVER SILIQUA



INTRODUCTION

From the final years of the 4th & 5th century AD, a remarkable phenomenon unparalleled anywhere else in the Roman empire began to occur in Britain.

Running across a swathe of the country extending from Yorkshire in the north, down to Norfolk in the east and then as far as Wiltshire in the west, people began to bury hoards. These varied wildly in size, materials and content. While some consisted of small groups of siliquae (late Roman silver coins), others were decidedly more extensive. Sets of silver tableware and large mixed deposits of high-status jewellery occurring alongside hundreds or thousands of silver and gold coins are all represented within the corpus of hoards secreted away during this period.

It is only too evident that these deposits were never recovered by those who buried them – surfacing many centuries

later when inadvertently dragged up by ploughshares or recovered by metal detectorists.

Some interesting regional trends are visible. For example, hoards of silver tableware and objects tend to cluster in East Anglia, while deposits of solely gold or silver coins have their focus in the southwest. Finds such as those from Stanchester, Hoxne, Mildenhall, Water Newton, Patching, East Harptree and Gussage All Saints evoke familiar images of glittering treasure – coins, jewellery, lavish dinner services and bullion. Many have now been acquired for public benefit by institutions, and indeed the Hoxne and Mildenhall treasures (to name two of the most famous) can be seen on display in the British Museum.

This booklet presents one of the smaller (yet, as we shall see, just as important) coin hoards dating to this period.



*Walter Andrew 2007
"The Stanchester Hoard"*

DISCOVERING THE COLKIRK HOARD

The hoard was initially discovered by an experienced metal detectorist in the civil parish of Colkirk, near Fakenham, Norfolk, at the beginning of 2020. Over the next three years, diligent searching resulted in the accumulation of around 430 late Roman silver coins.



While some of these were preserved extremely well, others had been broken or fragmented by agricultural activity. In addition to damaging some coins, this modern practice had also served to disperse coins from the hoard over a relatively large area – broadly up to that encompassed by half a standard-sized football pitch. Despite the latter, most of the coins were recovered in a roughly circular area of approximately 3m diameter, representing the ‘core’ of the deposit.

As per the 1996 Treasure Act, the hoard was processed by the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) and duly offered to local museums. However, none wished to purchase it, with all the coins being returned to the finder after official disclaiming. Following this, Silbury Coins was privileged to be able to acquire a large part of the hoard directly from the finder/landowner.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Given that the Colkirk hoard was recovered entirely from ploughsoil, its own archaeological context is lacking.

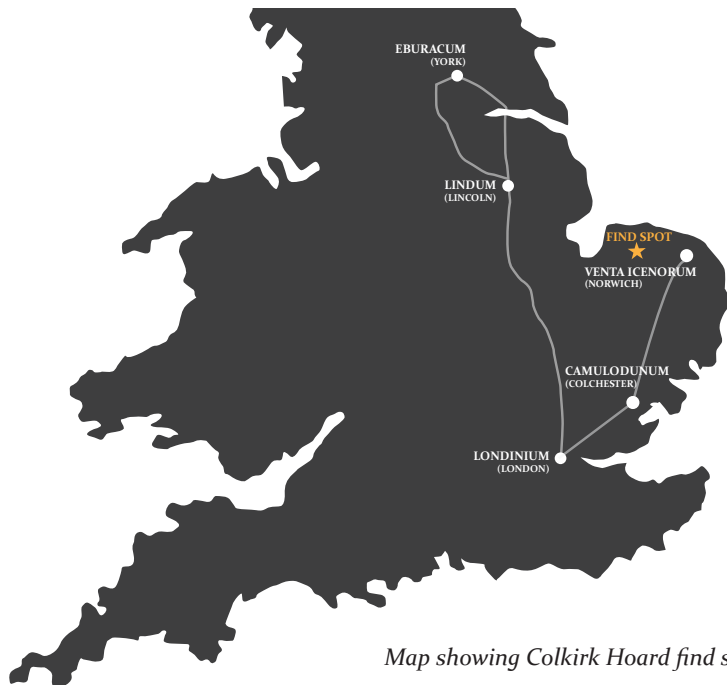
The dispersed extent of the hoard combined with the lack of preserved organics or mineralised material adhering to the coins is perhaps suggestive that it was deposited in some kind of textile bag rather than a ceramic or metal vessel, though this is largely speculative. Machining of the topsoil and subsoil by the landowner in 2021 focused on stripping an area around the immediate concentration of coins, though this resulted in the observance of no archaeological features whatsoever.

The underlying archaeology had either long been destroyed by agriculture, never existed in the first place or alternatively was too ephemeral to see with the naked eye. However, this absence of features was made up for by the discovery of other Roman artefactual material, including pottery sherds, quern fragments and approximately 100 further bronze coins of 1st to early 4th century date.



These finds indicate that the hoard was most likely buried close to areas of contemporary human habitation, its traces preserved only by a dense scatter of lost or discarded finds. While the latter objects were located close to the hoard's nucleus, numerous other metal small-finds of Roman date including finger rings and brooches have been recorded from the wider area via the Norfolk Historic Environment Record. Such objects are characteristic of concentrated rural occupation, perhaps unsurprising given Colkirk's location close to the Roman road running between the major settlements known at Toftrees and Billingford.

Despite the evident focus of activity during the Roman period, other finds signify that occupation of the area evidently did not end after burial of the hoard in the early 5th century. This is attested to by the discovery of numerous copper alloy cruciform brooches, girdle hangers and wrist-clasps representing the grave goods from Early Anglo-Saxon inhumation burials in close proximity to the hoard site. These culturally distinctive items indicate the continuity of human activity at the site during the later 5th and 6th centuries, though certainly do not directly relate to the hoard or its burial.



Map showing Colkirk Hoard find spot

LATE ROMAN COINAGE IN BRITAIN



There was a trimetallic coinage comprising bronze, silver and gold circulated in Britain during the later 4th century. However, the bronze issues, small denominations that modern numismatists term nummi (singular Nummus or AE3/Follis), predominate. This is likely because they represented a useful 'token' coinage if nothing else, highly suitable for use in daily transactions but quite rarely ending up in hoards themselves due to their obviously low value.

The supply of Roman coinage to Britannia was reduced substantially after AD 402, and almost totally after the death of the emperor Arcadius in AD 408.

While coin finds dating after AD 408 are encountered in the province, they are extremely rare by comparison – often found on a scattered singular basis with a few concentrated in hoards. These finds attest to a degree of continued contact, human movement and trade between Britain and the Continent after the 'official' Roman withdrawal from Britain in AD 410. However, in stark contrast to before, coinage was not literally 'flowing' across the Channel from the principal late Roman European mints at Treveri (Trier, Germany), Lugdunum (Lyon, France) and Mediolanum (Milan, Italy).

Towards the end of the 5th century, coinage (particularly that of precious metal) began to circulate for longer and longer as the supply became less and less – a trend which we can see quite clearly when analysing coins found in hoards.

For example, the famous Stanchester hoard of silver & gold coins, found by a schoolboy in 2000, was deposited shortly after AD 408 - but almost half of the coins within it were over twenty years old when it was buried.

A more extreme example of this practice, the Patching (West Sussex) hoard of coins and jewellery was deposited sometime after 461-465 but contained clipped siliquae that were almost a century old by the time they were buried.

As we shall see, this cessation in production and importation of coinage to Britain marked a significant change in which the province, standing at a crossroads on its relationship with the Roman empire, navigated itself both culturally and economically in the years after its schism with the Imperial administration.



The Stanchester Hoard

COINS IN THE COLKIRK HOARD

EMPERORS PRESENT

No fewer than thirteen emperors who ruled over the later Roman Empire are represented in the Colkirk hoard, dating from the mid-4th to early 5th centuries AD. Over a third of these (153 coins) derive from the reigns of the two latest emperors contained within it – Arcadius and Honorius.

	<i>Number of Coins Present</i>
Constantius II (AD 337-361)	10
Julian (AD 360-363)	35
Jovian (AD 363 - AD 364)	2
Valentinian I (AD 364-375)	6
Valens (AD 364-378)	31
Gratian (AD 367-383)	25
Valentinian II (AD 375-392)	26
Theodosius I 'The Great' (AD 379-395)	34
Magnus Maximus (AD 383-388)	46
Flavius Victor (c.AD 383-388)	4
Eugenius (AD 392-394)	16
Arcadius (AD 383-408)	80
Honorius (AD 393-423)	73
Uncertain	44
Total	430

DENOMINATIONS AND IMITATIONS

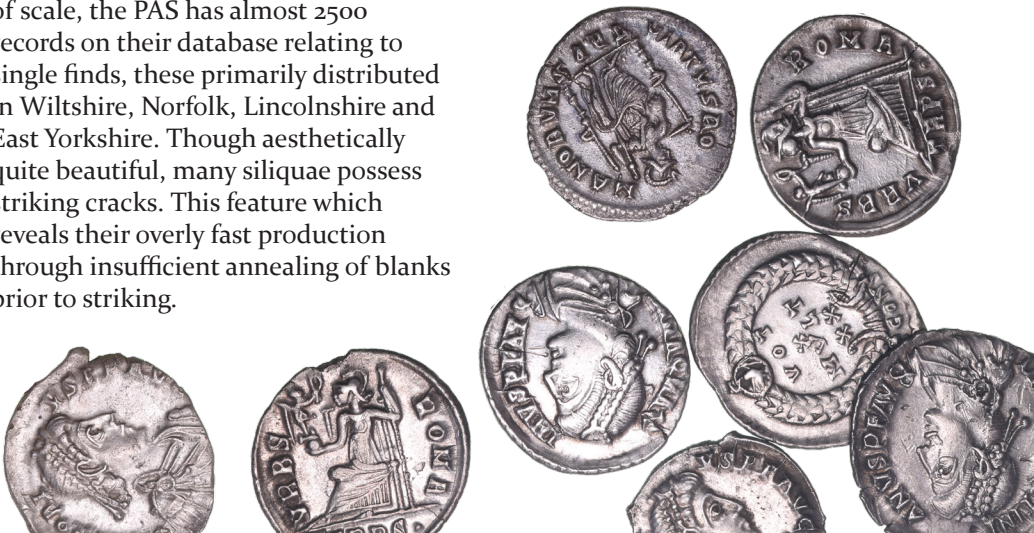
The Colkirk hoard contained three denominations of late Roman silver coin, although virtually the entire hoard comprised of siliquae (sing. siliqua).

This is not an ancient name for the coin, but rather one which has been ascribed in the modern era based on information in ancient writings. The 6th and early 7th century scholar Isidore of Seville tells us that the siliqua was a unit of measurement used in the late Roman Empire, weighing approximately 2g and being equivalent in value to 1/24 of a gold solidus. This name was thus applied to the small silver coins struck across the late Empire from the early decades of the 4th century.

While perhaps not as commonly found in Britain as denarii of the 1st and 2nd centuries, siliquae are still relatively plentiful as site finds. To give a measure of scale, the PAS has almost 2500 records on their database relating to single finds, these primarily distributed in Wiltshire, Norfolk, Lincolnshire and East Yorkshire. Though aesthetically quite beautiful, many siliquae possess striking cracks. This feature which reveals their overly fast production through insufficient annealing of blanks prior to striking.

In addition to this, many of those that made their way to Britain circulated for very long periods of time and were frequently clipped down. Only a very few heavily clipped coins were present in the Colkirk deposit, with most being either slightly clipped or having full, unmodified flans. This feature suggests deposition of the group early in the 5th century, before the practice could impact more severely on the body of money present in general circulation.

Dramatically less common than clipped siliquae in British contexts are contemporary copies, these often being of variable metal (some are even plated with base-metal cores) and questionable style. However, they can be very convincing to the untrained eye, perhaps even virtually indistinguishable to someone in the late 4th century.



By contrast, miliarenses are a very different kettle of fish. Large and impressive pieces of around 24mm diameter, these represent the pinnacle of late Roman die-cutting, second in quality only to some of the extremely rare silver and gold medallions of special issue which are occasionally found.

Only one fragmentary miliarsense was present in the Colkirk hoard, this paucity not being unusual in late Roman coin hoards of precious metal. Siliquae virtually always predominate within these finds, miliarenses usually comprising less than 1% of the overall assemblages. Such a pattern is visible in most British finds, including the large hoards from Hoxne and Bishop's Cannings.



Typically weighing in between c. 4.3 and 4.9g, one could make the argument that miliarenses represented a sort of 'double siliqua' – though the impressive artistry and reverse designs has led some to theorise that these were probably intended as presentation pieces for members of the military rather than general circulation. Indeed, many miliarenses display an image of the Emperor in military dress – accompanied by the inscription VIRTUS EXERCITVS – 'to the courage of the army' How better to ensure the motivation and continued loyalty of soldiers than by the distribution of silver bonuses and rewards to supplement their monthly salaries at impressive, lavish ceremonies? Certainly, in light of this fact it is undoubtedly tempting to consider whether many of the British late Roman hoards which contain these coins were deposits made by members of the military or those affiliated with its administration.



The third denomination present within the Colkirk deposit is extremely unusual, with only a very few examples known to exist. Weighing in at just 1.63g with a full flan, it is noticeably lighter than unclipped contemporary siliquae (usually circa 2-2.2g).

This aspect, and the unusual reverse design, have led to the suggestion that this coin and others like it represent an unusual fractional $\frac{1}{3}$ miliarensis struck in commemoration of some special event.

This is lost to history, though given that these $\frac{1}{3}$ miliarenses are only known for the emperors Theodosius I, Gratian and Valentinian II (who only overlapped from AD 379-383), it must have taken place within a relatively brief window.

MINTS

Like many other empires, states and general issuers of money throughout history – the Romans invested a huge amount of importance into quality control. Although for much of Rome's earlier history, Imperial coinage (as opposed to provincial) had been issued mostly from the central mint at Rome, by the time of the late empire money was being made at a variety of different regional mints. Such a complex system required careful management, and a standardised system of symbols was devised which enabled the source of coins to be determined accurately. Numismatists refer to these symbols as 'mint marks'.



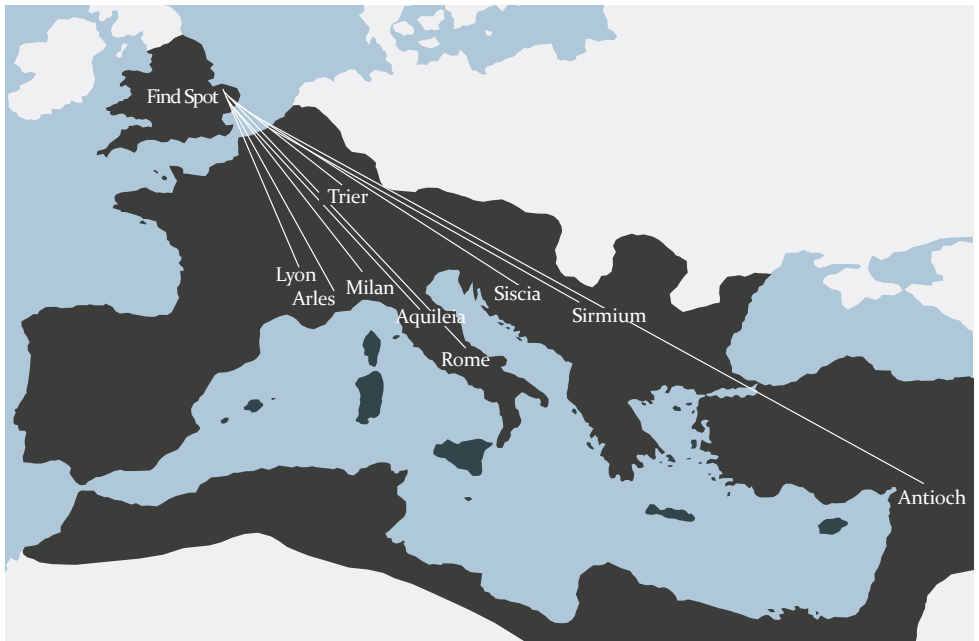
In the 4th century, mint marks on Roman coins usually consist of a series of letters sited under the exurgal line of its reverse face. These usually identify the mint itself, while further marks in the reverse fields indicate the specific officina (workshop) responsible for striking said coins. The symbols displayed upon each coin enabled it to be traced back to a manufacturing point, which was not only critical for keeping track of bullion use, checking quotas and tracking the number of pieces issued – but also played a key role in ensuring the coin was of good quality.

These letter-combinations are abbreviations often 3-5 letters long. Typically, they include anywhere between one and four letters denoting the mint signature, usually combined variously with the letters 'M/PS' or 'P'. Historically, these were variously interpreted as standing for Moneta/Pecunia Sacra (sacred money/coin) or just Pecunia (money). Use of the former reveals the importance placed upon good coining by the Roman state, affording it a semi-religious status. Under the above interpretation – the mint mark 'MDPS' on a siliqua of Honorius would inform us that the coin was minted at Mediolanum – modern Milan, the expanded reading of this being Mediolanum Pecunia(rum) Sacra –literally, 'sacred money of Mediolanum'.

However, a more likely alternative has been suggested more recently. On silver coins, the abbreviation 'PS' is probably intended to signify the word *pulsulatum* – indicating that the coin was manufactured from pure silver. Nevertheless, both interpretations attest to the same end-goal, the desire to keep the process of moneying wholly accountable to its administrators and fully traceable back to its point of origin.

Mints Present

Trier	159
Lyon	23
Arles/Constantia	23
Antioch	4
Rome	7
Aquileia	7
Milan	147
Siscia	1
Sirmium	1
Unknown	59



REVERSE TYPES

Although one could say that Roman coinage (and indeed, ancient coinage in general) is largely defined by its variability – this statement doesn't quite hold true for the 4th century. By this period, reverse designs on coins of gold, silver and bronze had contracted heavily, depicting a smaller number of selected 'themes'.

This contrasts starkly with the days of the 1st or 2nd century, when there are quite literally hundreds of reverse designs for the denarii of Hadrian, Trajan or Antoninus Pius to name but a few. Below, we present and analyse reverse designs present on the siliquae and miliarensis fragment found in the Colkirk hoard.



Votive/Vows for service

These issues refer to the vows made by emperors either in undertaking or continuing their service to the empire every five years or so, as well as celebrating their anniversaries of rule.

Personification of Rome

Roma seated on a throne in military dress with a spear in one hand, usually a globe in the other.





Personification of Victory

Depicted winged and wearing a long, flowing mantle – she holds a laurel wreath and palm frond. These two accessories symbolise triumph, and are synonymous with her role.

The Emperor in military attire (miliarensis)

Emperor standing dressed as a soldier, holding a small military standard known as a labarum in his right hand. His left-hand rests on a shield which sits on the ground.





Phoenix on globe (1/3 miliarensis)

Depictions of phoenixes, mythical symbols of eternal rebirth and rejuvenation, had appeared on Roman Imperial and Provincial coinage since the 2nd century AD.

However, their employment as an artistic motif became increasingly common in the 4th century, especially on bronze coinage struck in the second half of the century (e.g. the 'FEL TEMP REPARATIO' nummi of Constans and Constantius II, which depict a phoenix upon a rocky mound or globe). Such designs clearly herald a desire to emphasise the rejuvenation of the empire, perhaps with the intent to draw attention away from socio-political developments which were already beginning to significantly undermine its overall stability.

Employment of the 'phoenix on globe' reverse for the solitary 1/3 miliarensis within the Colkirk hoard therefore fits within the above framework very well. The phoenix, a legendary firebird which will forever be reborn from ashes, clearly is intended to represent the eternal constancy of the empire, while its standing upon a globe is an obvious nod to the wide-ranging territories it controlled even at this time of flux and uncertainty. The inscription surrounding this design only reinforces the latter - 'PERPETVETAS' - everlasting, perpetual. With benefit of hindsight the type is somewhat ironic, given that over the next century the Western Roman empire would effectively cease to exist as a formal polity, its territories largely coming under the control of various incoming Germanic groups during the 5th century despite a degree of cultural and administrative continuation.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this booklet we have looked at the circumstances of the Colkirk hoard's discovery, explored its geographical/historical contexts and dug-into the general phenomenon of hoarding in late Roman Britain. However – we have yet to tackle the ultimate question itself: why was this specific hoard buried in the first place?

By the time the Colkirk hoard and other deposits of coins or metalwork were being placed into the ground from at least the first decade of the 5th century onwards, dramatic societal change was looming ominously on the horizon for Roman Britain. Although it is commonly perceived that late Roman coin hoards were buried to deal with an immediate, physical threat of violence, this does not detract from the fact that strange times were indeed occurring. These were likely heavily amplified given Britain's totally separated position from the continent, a far-flung outpost of the Roman world on the northern edge of the empire. The decline of urban centres, rumbles of trouble from abroad and large-scale abandonment of rural estates likely did nothing to ease anxiety on the fronts of social order and economic security.

The total absence of new coinage reaching the province after c. AD 408 almost certainly presaged a total collapse of the monetary system. As such, it seems reasonable to suggest that some sort of barter economy based on goods exchange emerged in its place, introducing 'the Dark Ages'.

We will likely never know the exact reason for why around 1600 years ago, a person or group of people decided to bury over 400 silver coins just off a Roman road linking two major settlements in provincial East Anglia. We will always find it difficult to interpret the rituals, quirks and apparently nonsensical undertakings by long-dead members of extinct societies – simply because we are not them. From the comfort of our centrally-heated houses, relatively secure jobs and with food or drink always within reach – it is very easy to forget the real, daily pressures faced by the inhabitants of 4th and 5th century Roman Britain.

Our thanks go to the unfortunate Roman who buried his pot, the landowner, finder and Silbury team who have all worked hard to get this exciting find to this point, now we can share this hoard and it's story with the world.



Honorius AD 393-423



BACKGROUND TO SILBURY COINS

Silbury Coins is a well-known and respected name in the numismatic world. Director John Philpotts has been handling coins and antiquities for 30 years. With a great team around him, Silbury Coins provides a professional service, whilst still retaining the personal touch. Driven by a passion for hands-on history ever since being given his first Roman coin by his father at the age of 6 John remains just as passionate today, as does his father who regularly attends numismatic events with the company. When buying from Silbury Coins you will be dealing with expert numismatists and receive all the benefits of their years of knowledge and experience.

As members of the BNTA we adhere to their strict code of conduct as a start but we like to take it further than that. As well as offering nothing but genuine, correctly described stock we ensure that our prices are fair both to the buyer & seller. Dealing with Silbury Coins you will find honesty and integrity is of foremost importance in their day to day business. If you choose to deal with us then you will be treated as we would want to be treated ourselves.

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The best place to browse our stock is on our website.

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We are always looking to replenish our stock, if you would like to sell single coins or a collection/hoard then get in touch.

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