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COIN HOARDS AND THE TREASURE PROCESS AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Abstract

The Department of Coins and Medals in the British Museum deals with a high volume of coin hoards of each year, some of which are very large (for example the Roman hoards from Frome, Somerset and Beau Street, Bath). The introduction of the Treasure Act (1996) and the success of the Portable Antiquities Scheme have played a part in the increasing volume of finds being reported and the development of an efficient system for administering this work. This paper outlines our approach to dealing with these finds, from discovery and conservation to cataloguing. It discusses how this approach has developed and the challenges and opportunities it presents. In particular, there has been progress in approaches to the retrieval and conservation of coin hoards, and in the successful acquisition of coin hoards by local museums.

Keywords

Coin hoard, Roman archaeology, Numismatics museum

* Many individuals are directly involved in the Treasure process at the British Museum, in particular: Richard Abdy, Sam Moorhead, Andrew Brown, Barrie Cook, Gareth Williams, Tom Williams, Ashvini Sivakumar and Henry Flynn in the Department of Coins and Medals, Duncan Hook, Pippa Pearce, Hayley Bullock and their team in the Department of Conservation and Scientific Research, Ian Richardson and the Assistant Treasure Registrars in the Department of Learning and National Partnerships and curators in the Department of Britain, Europe and Prehistory. I would like to thank Sam Moorhead for his comments on the text.

The Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum handles the majority of coin hoards found in England that are submitted for consideration as Treasure under the Treasure Act. The volume of finds has increased year on year, with a sharp increase following revision to the legislation in 1996. For 2017, for example, some 106 Iron Age and Roman coin hoards have been recorded at the time of writing. These vary in size and degree of preservation a great deal, creating an unpredictable workload and it is not always possible to process larger cases within the optimum time frame of three months¹. This article provides a brief summary of the Museum's role in the process and the way this has developed in recent years.

BACKGROUND TO THE TREASURE ACT

Until 1997, the medieval law of Treasure Trove applied in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This stipulated that finds of precious metal objects which had been hidden with the intention of recovery and of which the owners were unknown would be deemed to be the property of the Crown and had to be reported to HM Coroner. In 1997, this law was replaced by the Treasure Act 1996, which defined and extended the criteria for a find to be considered Treasure and in most cases removed the need to establish that the find was hidden with the intention of recovery (DCMS 2002, 5). There is a legal obligation to report finds of Treasure that meet the definition of Treasure under the Act. This has since been subject to revision but in the case of coins, the following definition now applies:

- Finds of two or more coins at least 300 years old, containing at least 10% gold or silver by weight and of the same find
- Finds of ten or more coins at least 300 years old, containing less than 10% gold or silver by weight and of the same find
- Cases that would have been considered as Treasure Trove (precious metal single coins or precious metal coins less than 300 years old, where in both cases there is strong evidence that they were hidden with the intention of recovery)².
- Objects found in association with objects that qualify as Treasure (for example hoard containers or single coins buried with hoards of precious metal artefacts)

¹ This is acknowledged in the Treasure Act 1996 paragraph 58.

² Recent examples include the Hackney hoard of 80 US gold 20-dollar pieces dating to 1913 buried in a garden in Hackney, London (PAS database: PAS-867115) and the "Piano hoard" of 913 British gold coins dating to 1915 found inside a piano in Shropshire (PAS database: HESH-F5F412).

The Act has had a significant impact on the way the Treasure process is now administered, from discovery to eventual acquisition or disclaim; perhaps the most significant change is the recognition of the rights of the landowner as well as the finder. Usually, each receives 50% of the market value if the Treasure is acquired by a museum. It is not the purpose of this article to cover this process in detail. Instead I wish to focus on the way this process affects work on coin hoards at the British Museum.

The most significant impact of the Treasure Act 1996 on the volume of coin hoards reported is the inclusion of the category of hoards of base metal coins for the first time. This means that the most common types of coin hoards, late third century radiate and fourth century nummus hoards, are now included as potential Treasure. A further important change lies in the criterion that the coins be 'of the same find'. By removing the onus to prove that they were buried with the intention of recovery, deposits made in the same place at temple sites or other *loci* of ritualized deposition may now be considered as Treasure (for example, the Roman riverine deposits at Piercebridge, Darlington currently being studied by Philippa Walton (see Walton 2008 for more details)).

THE PORTABLE ANTIQUITIES SCHEME

Although the Treasure Act is enshrined in law and the British Museum's Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) is a voluntary service for the reporting of archaeological objects found by the public, the existence of a network of Finds Liaison Officers in England and Wales has had a significant impact on the reporting of Treasure cases. Finds Liaison Officers act as points of contact for finders and tend to co-ordinate over 90% of Treasure cases in their areas. They also provide advice on the Treasure Act and encourage best practice by local metal-detector users. In recent discoveries of coin hoards (for example see Sam Moorhead on the Frome hoard in this volume) this local presence has proved invaluable. Prompt reporting of a discovery that has been left in situ can allow the location to be accurately recorded and the site to be investigated by archaeologists and protected from further interference until it is removed in a controlled manner. In some cases PAS staff carry out this work, in others they work with local archaeologists from the local authority, commercial units or universities. This is particularly important in the case of finds made on metal detecting rallies, where a discovery may be witnessed by many people and involve more than one finder.

The individual acting as the point of contact for Treasure cases (usually the Finds Liaison Officer (FLO) but local museums and archaeological services also carry out this role), helps the finder complete the necessary paperwork to report the find to the

coroner. An initial record of the find is made on the PAS database (finds.org.uk); the details are not made public at this stage but the record is used in the administration of the case. A report must be prepared on potential Treasure for the coroner summarizing the circumstances of discovery, the contents of the find and advising on whether it can be said to meet the criteria of the Treasure Act. In some cases this is prepared by the FLO (or an archaeologist for cases found on excavation) and then checked and approved by the British Museum curator. Alternatively, and particularly in the case of larger finds, the items are brought to the British Museum for further cleaning and or identification prior to preparation of this report. All finds to be considered under the Treasure process are eventually brought to the British Museum or National Museums and Galleries of Wales or the National Museums of Northern Ireland. The British Museum administers the Treasure Act on behalf of the UK Government³.

Local and national museums are given the opportunity of acquiring all or part of the find. If there is no interested party the case may be disclaimed and returned to the finder. If a museum wishes to acquire the find, an inquest may be held by the coroner and, once the find is declared Treasure, the find is valued by independent experts and any reward offered to the finder and or landowner is agreed by the Treasure Valuation Committee. The process has had great success in encouraging local acquisition of coin hoards in recent years, despite the financial challenges facing the museum sector⁴.

PROCESSING LARGE COIN HOARDS

If coin hoards arriving at the British Museum require cleaning or stabilization they are taken to the Department of Conservation and Scientific Research to be worked on by conservators. Any cleaning will be carried out to the level necessary for the contents to be identified and recorded but not to display standards or in such a manner as to enhance the financial value of the find. In the (ideal) event that a container has been lifted from the ground with its contents intact, investigation and micro-excavation will be carried in the laboratory to ensure that the maximum amount of information is recovered. This may include X-radiography to determine the position of items within the container (demonstrated with spectacular effect in the work carried out on the Beau Street hoard by Southampton University (Ghey 2014; Abdy and Anthony forthcoming)) and sampling of organic remains preserved alongside the

³ Scotland has different Treasure Trove legislation and their scheme is administered separately from the Treasure Trove Unit at the National Museums of Scotland.

⁴ Recent examples include the acquisition of the Wold Newton hoard by the Yorkshire Museum, York and the Boldre hoard by St Barbe Museum and Art Gallery, Lymington, Hampshire.

artefacts. Increasingly, the excavation of hoards in layers has allowed the presence of any internal stratigraphy in the deposit to be observed.

For example, the contents of the 2009 Shrewsbury hoard of 18 radiates and 9297 nummi were removed from the pot in eight layers of approximately 1000 coins by Ellen Van Bork, Pippa Pearce and colleagues (PAS database: HESH-658701 and Ghey 2009). The contents of these layers were then sorted by reverse type and then compared, along with a group of coins found scattered outside the pot. Despite prior disturbance of the context and damage to the pot, the contents were still found to preserve some internal stratigraphy, with coins from AD 317 to 330 spread throughout the pot but coins of AD 330–335 restricted to the upper three layers and external spread, suggesting that they had been added to the pot at a later date. The layers were then combined for cataloguing; this decision weighed up ease of cataloguing against the potential of retrieving additional meaningful information by keeping the coins in separate layers. (The work on the Frome hoard has adopted a different approach; here there was judged to be the potential for further spatial differentiation due to the size of the hoard and the patterning observed in the distribution of the coins of Carausius (Moorhead *ibid.*)).

Curators at the British Museum prepare a summary of the contents of the hoard for the coroner (by emperor for early Roman hoards and by mint, issuing period and / or reverse type for fourth century hoards) and then wherever possible prepare a complete catalogue of the contents. Associated artefacts such as containers and jewellery are studied by colleagues in the Department of Britain, Europe and Prehistory, although local experts may also be consulted, particularly in the case of ceramics. For Roman coin hoards, these documents have until recently been published in the series *Coin Hoards from Roman Britain* (CHRB – see Carson and Burnett 1979 and following 13 volumes) but it is now planned to make them available online, due to the sheer volume of cases. Medieval hoards are published in the series *English Medieval Coin Hoards* (Archibald and Cook 2001; other volumes are in preparation). For smaller cases, details are uploaded onto the PAS database record and made public once the Treasure process has been completed. A summary of the contents of reported Iron Age, Roman and Medieval coin hoards for that year is also published annually in the *British Numismatic Journal*.

The Department of Coins and Medals holds details of coin hoards dating back until at least the 1960s and a recent AHRC-funded British Museum and Leicester University research project has created PAS database records (prefixed by IARCH-) with summary details for these cases. A photographic record is made of smaller hoards or selected coins from larger hoards. Until recently, all Iron Age coin hoards were recorded separately on the Celtic Coin Index (CCI) held at the Institute of Archaeology in Oxford, but details are now also recorded on the PAS database. The CCI records information at the level of the individual coin, including coins in trade

and has been an invaluable resource for reconstructing older and unreported Iron Age hoards (de Jersey 2014).

FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

The last two decades have seen substantial changes in the volume and treatment of coin hoards at the British Museum. This is in large part due to the success of the PAS in raising awareness among finders of the importance of reporting archaeological material and establishing good relationships at the local level, as well as changes to the legal definition of Treasure. There is a high level of public interest in archaeology and certain discoveries have attracted considerable media coverage. A team led by the Treasure Registrar at the British Museum is dedicated to the smooth administration of the Treasure process, which is supported at the level of government and enforced locally through the authority of the Coroner. There is always more work to be done in promoting best practice but, anecdotally, there does seem to be greater awareness of the importance of the archaeological context of finds. Findspot recording has improved greatly with the availability of GPS and it is not uncommon to receive individually plotted coins, allowing a more detailed understanding of the spatial distribution of potential dispersed hoards or separate individual deposits.

This awareness of archaeological context has also brought a new maturity to study of coin finds in the museum and academic context. The availability of large amounts of data on single finds⁵ has enabled new syntheses on the background distribution of British coinage (Walton 2012) and artefacts (Brindle 2014), which have in turn been compared with patterns in the hoard record (Bland et al. forthcoming). The emphasis has shifted from the purely numismatic contents of the hoard to the hoard as an archaeological artefact and what this can tell us about the past. It is now more common for a complete hoard to be acquired by a local museum and valued for its contribution to the history of the area, rather than being split up for acquisition of selected coins and sale of the unwanted remainder. Recent funding bids surrounding the acquisition and conservation of large coin hoards have included innovative methods of analysis, display and outreach (for example, the Heritage Lottery Fund allowed the Roman Baths to create a Beau Street hoard roadshow, touring a 3D printed replica of a coin bag to local community centres . They also used the hoard in schools sessions on mathematics and numeracy as well as inspiring art projects for vulnerable adults in partnership with a local charitable trust). It must be hoped that this appetite for information continues in an increasingly constrained funding climate.

⁵ Researchers can search for single finds in any part of England and Wales on the PAS database.

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