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GROOT, T. DE & J.W. DE KORT, *VEILIG NAAR
DE OVERKANT. ONDERZOEK NAAR EEN MUNTUVONDST
UIT DE ROMEINSE TIJD IN HET DAL VAN DE AA
BIJ BERLICUM (GEMEENTE SINT-MICHELSGESTEL)*,
RAPPORTAGE ARCHEOLOGISCHE MONUMENTENZORG
NO. 267, CULTURAL HERITAGE AGENCY,
AMERSFOORT, 2021 184

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Reviews

Groot, T. de & J.W. de Kort, *Veilig naar de overkant. Onderzoek naar een muntvondst uit de Romeinse tijd in het dal van de Aa bij Berlicum (gemeente Sint-Michielsgestel), Rapportage Archeologische Monumentenzorg no. 267, Cultural Heritage Agency, Amersfoort, 2021, 160 p., ISBN EAN: 978-90-76046-69-3.*

“How are ‘sacrificial landscapes’ situated and structured, and what is the timespan in which it is used?”¹ This challenging yet fundamentally important question is the driving force behind this outstandingly complete and solid contribution to Roman archaeology and coin hoard studies. This study demonstrates the importance of archaeological contexts when interpreting the practical use and significance of coinage, in this case in votive offerings at sacred water-crossings. Accordingly, it contributes to our understanding of the wide range of functions coins had in ancient times.

This Dutch study presents research into a hoard of 109 Roman coins, which two brothers found by chance during metal detecting in the valley of the river Aa near Berlicum, in the Dutch province of North-Brabant. The brothers reported their find to the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency, as they were obliged to do under Dutch law.² It was quickly concluded that field survey was required, especially because limited data has been published on the archaeological contexts of these type of coin hoards. The on-site investigation proved not only necessary but also rewarding, leading to important insights and potentially a wealth of new information on possible interpretations of Roman coin hoards in the Netherlands. In this review, I focus primarily on the numismatic analysis (Claes) and the general archaeological investigation by the authors (de Groot, de Kort), but the study is clearly a team effort, and all sixteen contributing authors are to be commended for their excellent work.³

The authors comprehensively present the context of the site’s local history, landscape and archaeology. Having consulted an 1832 topographical map, the authors discovered there used to be a path crossing the river next to the find spot which has long since disappeared. This provided an intriguing insight: could the site have been a water-crossing in Roman times? Remarkably, the authors explain, initial soil samples indicated a high concentration of Roman metal, although no Roman settlements are known near the site. The absence of a container and the puzzling fact that the coins were geographically spread in a 50x50m radius within several iron soil layers, led the authors to question the origin of this coin hoard. Their preliminary

¹ With this research question the authors tie in their research with a broader academic framework: the Dutch Archaeology Research Agenda. This agenda comprises key research questions dealing with challenges and opportunities in Dutch archaeology. The Dutch Archaeology Research Agenda, <https://noaa.cultureelerfgoed.nl/>. Accessed 22 November 2021.

² BLAND 2020, has additionally argued that “...a long history of recording coin finds, together with a more liberal tradition towards amateurs, including those who use metal detectors...” explains the high density of coin hoards in the Netherlands.

³ O. Brinkkemper, L.M.G.F.E. Claes, J. van Doesburg, L. van Eijk, T. de Groot, H. Huisman, I. Joosten, J.W. de Kort, D. Ngan-Tillard, B. van Os, S.W.L. Palstra, T. Reimann, E. Rensink, A.J. Versendaal, J. Wallinga and Z. Zhou

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conclusion was that the coins had not been deposited in one instance, but over a longer period. This type of atypical hoards, which are not treasure or emergency hoards, are rare in the Netherlands, making this coin hoard and its context very significant.

Acting on the archaeological expectancy of the area, the team made 27 drills in several locations at the site and dug a trial trench (30 metres long, 2 metres wide). The documented soil profiles and samples proved to be informative. Firstly, the analysis of soil profiles and OSL dating indicated the coins had originally been deposited in a shallow seep. Secondly, chemical analysis demonstrated no movement of the coins caused by erosion, meaning that they had been found in their original positions. Thirdly, micromorphological analysis demonstrated only a minor likelihood of movement caused by water runoff in the soil. However, the fact that the coins were found in the higher parts of the site make this unlikely. This led the authors to conclude this was not a one-off deposition, later displaced by soil or water movement. Clearly, “A safe crossing” is not an isolated numismatic study. On the contrary, using an interdisciplinary approach, the authors effectively employ a rich variety of techniques to transparently explore all possible outcomes in offering explanations for the hoard.

The Berlicum coins and other objects are accessible online through the Portable Antiquities of the Netherlands (PAN) database.⁴ The database documents and publishes ancient metal soil finds in the Netherlands, linking them to their geographical location data. The coins are also accessible in the Numismatic Information System (NUMIS), which records all numismatic finds in the Netherlands.⁵ Internationally too, the Berlicum hoard is connected to Coin Hoards of the Roman Empire Project (CHRE), allowing comparative analysis against coin hoards and monetary systems in the Roman Empire.⁶

Liesbeth Claes provides a clear overview of the 109 coins found in the Berlicum hoard, supported by a thorough explanation of her methodology. The entire hoard consists of four silver and 105 bronze coins. The four silver coins, all denarii, include one Republican minted in 90 BCE and three imperials, two minted under Vespasian, and one under Trajan. The condition of the 105 bronze coins is much worse than that of the silver ones. About one fourth are worn and illegible, Claes posits that these could be either asses or dupondii. The legible bronzes are mostly asses (39), as well as several dupondii and sestertii. Claes dates the bronzes between Vespasian (69–79 CE) and Marcus Aurelius (161–180 CE). The latest coin in the hoard is dated 162–163 CE. This date is often associated with local and general disturbances in the Roman empire, namely the Chauci raids into the region and the onset of the Antonine Plague. Claes, however, proceeds cautiously in her analysis, taking care not to jump

to conclusions: she does not take for granted that this by definition proves the coins were deposited in the 160s CE. Connecting her analysis to earlier work on the methodology of coin hoard studies, she emphasises that votive deposits, such as the Berlicum hoard, cannot be definitively dated, as the latest coin (172–163 CE) only indicates the last dedication, but offers inconclusive evidence as to the period in which the sacred site was used.⁷

Examining the images and motifs on the coins, Claes is able to divide the coins roughly into three categories: martial-themed types (13 coins), types stressing abundance and conformity (*Abundantia*, *Moneta*, *Aequitas*) (9 coins), and types depicting religious rituals (6 coins). She notes that the themed coins might have been picked intentionally, stressing that several studies demonstrate that this was not uncommon in Roman times (p. 71). All three themes can be related to the military and were also found in comparable coin hoards. However, the military predominance in the Berlicum hoard is remarkable as no Roman military settlements are known in the region. However, the authors offer a compelling explanation, connecting the prevalence of martial coin types to the historical sacred votive context (the sacred economy) of the region. Since the Bronze and Iron Age, local communities had dedicated martial objects, such as weapons or equipment, at sacred water sites. This practice persisted and transformed into the dedication of martial-themed coins.⁸ Dedicators made these offerings within the ritual framework of reciprocity, consisting of a ritual contract between dedicator and deity. The dedicator was a traveller who wanted to safely reach the other side of the water and thanked the local deity once they had done so. Although Claes points out that the site can as yet not be connected to the Roman military, one could argue that the traveller’s presumed deliberate coin image selection does suggest a strong connection between the traveller and Roman military. After all, the *Abundantia*, *Moneta* and *Aequitas* themes are inherently connected to payments of soldiers. As Claes stresses, further research into deliberate theme selection of votive hoards could enhance our interpretation of the Berlicum hoard, as well as our general understanding of the functions of coins in ritual contexts.

The authors skilfully explore possible interpretations of the coin hoard, offering the reader a well-structured demonstration of why archaeological contexts are crucial when interpreting coins and their functions. In a schematic overview, nine explanation models are presented for coin finds. The models are tested using several categories: the number of coins, the intention of the coin deposit, the chronological lifespan, association with other non-coin material found at the site, the geographical spread, the context of the archaeology and landscape, and the composition of the hoard. The schematic overview subsequently presents nine models: 1) a one-off votive deposit of a single coin, 2) a one-off votive deposit of more than one coin, 3) continuous votive deposits, 4) treasure hoards, 5) emergency hoards,

⁴ Portable Antiquities of the Netherlands (PAN), <https://portable-antiquities.nl/pan/#ensemble/public/53>. Accessed 16 November 2021. PAN is an online database that documents and publishes archaeological finds in the Netherlands.

⁵ Numismatic Information System (NUMIS), <https://www.dnb.nl/en/payments/special-money-the-national-numismatic-collection/>. Accessed 16 November 2021. The database is hosted by the Dutch Numismatic Collection (NNC) of De Nederlandsche Bank (DNB).

⁶ Coin Hoards of the Roman Empire Project, <https://chre.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/hoard/17468>. Accessed 16 November 2021.

⁷ AARTS 2000.

⁸ This is a plausible explanation, with which the authors again closely tie in their research with national research programmes, in this case the Dutch “Anchoring Innovation” project of the National Research School in Classical Studies (OIKOS), <https://www.rug.nl/research/research-let/onderzoekscholen/oikos/>. Accessed 22 November 2021.

6) single coin losses, 7) multiple coin losses over time, 8) a multiple coins loss in one instance, and finally 9) dump hoards. The authors convincingly conclude that the Berlicum hoard evidently fits in model 3: continuous votive deposits. The predominance of martial themes, combined with the context of the landscape, which the authors importantly describe as a typical location for sacral offerings, the archaeological context of the site, and the composition of the coin hoard, lead the authors to conclude that these coins were dedicated for ritual purposes, without any intention of retrieving them.

The comparative research of coin depositions in Roman times is excellently presented, even though the authors are hampered by a lack of coin hoard publications, and some that exclude archaeological contexts. The authors present six comparable publications of predominantly bronze votive hoards associated with water, found in the southern Netherlands. The ritual significance of water is a crucial element in the hypothesis of the authors, who argue that water crossings had an important sacral position within ancient rituals. So, too, did the Berlicum site, although the authors cautiously refrain from overstressing the significance of the site; it was a “passage offering”, a sacred location people encountered during travels, not a destination of ritual.

“A safe crossing” is an important contribution to Roman coin hoard studies. Firstly, because from beginning to end, the numismatic analysis of the coin hoard is intertwined and enriched by an interdisciplinary approach. It takes into account not just the archaeological context, but also that of the landscape, the local history, and scholarly debate. Incorporating this archaeological context has proved to be a unique and rewarding opportunity, which rarely occurs with chance finds. Furthermore, this extensive interdisciplinary research was produced over an admirably brief timespan – the brothers found the coins in November 2017, and the study was published in March 2021. The study therefore deserves great praise, and it should serve as a solid foundation and a reference work for future coin hoard studies. More broadly, the contextual approach of the study adds to our understanding of the wide range of functions coinage had in the ancient world. More than just a means to settle day-to-day transactions, Roman bronze coins were used in ritual contexts.⁹ The preference for martial imagery and motifs evidences that the votive value of the coins transcended their intrinsic value, accentuating the ritual contract of reciprocity between dedicator and local deity.

The impressive high-quality image on the book cover shows the team of archaeologists at the excavation trench. In fact, the whole book is enriched by images of the different phases of the research, offering a pleasant and interesting sneak peek into the whole process as it unfolded. Although the study gives little cause for critical comment, a nit-picking reader might wonder why the coin images (pp. 67-71) are presented in non-chronological order (for example Trajan, Vespasian, Hadrian, Antonius Pius). However, this minor flaw is fully compensated by the amazing Asterix-like picture

⁹ In Roman times, bronze coin hoards provide evidence that this phenomenon occurred throughout the empire. See recently: BLAND/CHADWICK/GHEY/HASELGROVE 2020 (Britain), LEATHERBURY 2019 (eastern Roman empire).

accompanying the conclusion on page 89. It shows an artist's rendering of the study's conclusion: a traveller on a wagon pulled by two oxen crossing the river Aa at Berlicum as the trader, upon safely reaching the other side, flips a coin into the water, thanking the local deity for the *safe crossing*.

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