INSTITUTE OF ARCHEOLOGY
AND ART HISTORY OF ROMANIAN
ACADEMY CLUJ-NAPOCA

UNIVERSITATEA TEHNICĂ
DIN CLUJ-NAPOCA

JAHA
JOURNAL OF ANCIENT HISTORY
AND ARCHAEOLOGY

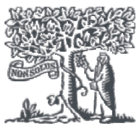
editura
MEGA

Journal
of Ancient History and Archaeology

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.14795/j.v13i1

ISSN 2360 266x

ISSN–L 2360 266x



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Design & layout: Petru Ureche

Editura Mega | www.edituramega.ro
e-mail: mega@edituramega.ro

Studies

NUMISMATICS

COINS IN THE WRONG PLACE? CURIOUS DEPOSITIONS, HIDDEN HOARDS, AND ACCIDENTAL AFTERLIVES[1]

Abstract: This article examines an unusual instance of a Roman coin found inside a modern reproduction of an ancient bust. To contextualize this anomaly, the paper surveys comparative cases of coins and coin-like objects in incongruous contexts: coins concealed in religious sculpture, purposeful "prank" burials, anachronistic intrusions in stratified contexts, and mixed assemblages formed through collecting practices. These examples serve to illustrate the diverse mechanisms that generate "misplaced" finds—safeguarding, deception, memorabilia transfer, arbitrary deposition, and refuse disposal—and to underscore the value of object biographies attentive to context, documentation, and reception.

Keywords: *coin, archaeology, ritual, deposition, hoard, object biography, afterlife.*

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While working on the provenance records of the early imperial coins from the collection of the Institute of Classical Archaeology, University of Tübingen, the author of these lines encountered a highly unusual finding. In the "Remarks" column, the inventory book of the coin collection records the following note for an Augustan Nemausus as (RIC I^2 158, Tübingen Inv. I 51/23a): "This specimen fell on 26 May 1893 out of the bronze head of the 'Bias' in the Tübingen archaeological collection!" The portrait of Bias in question is a 15 cm-high bronze head that entered the Tübingen collection in 1893 (Fig. 1). Produced by casting, the object is a reduced-scale modern reproduction of the head of the so-called Bias of Priene. The original ancient bust—a 174 cm-high marble portrait herm, discovered in 1774 at Tivoli in the "Villa of Cassius" and now preserved in the Museo Pio-Clementino (Inv. 279)—bears the inscription ΒΙΑΣ ΠΡΗΝΕΥΣ (sic) and thus identifies the figure represented. Bias was a well-known philosopher and eloquent orator from sixth-century BCE Priene in Asia Minor. Owing to the many sayings attributed to him in anecdotal contexts—the maxim "Most people are bad" was even affixed to the Vatican bust—he was already regarded in antiquity as one of the so-called Seven Sages. The intensive reception of Bias in antiquity continued into the modern era. The Renaissance rediscovery of antiquity led, among other things, to fantasy coinages bearing the likeness of

[1] An earlier version of this article was published as "Krmnicek, S. 2023. Nur antike Münzen im Kopf. Dazu Funde, die auf den ersten Blick keinen Sinn ergeben, *Geldgeschichtliche Nachrichten* 327, 164–167." The present contribution is a substantially revised and expanded English version, with additional case studies and updated bibliography.

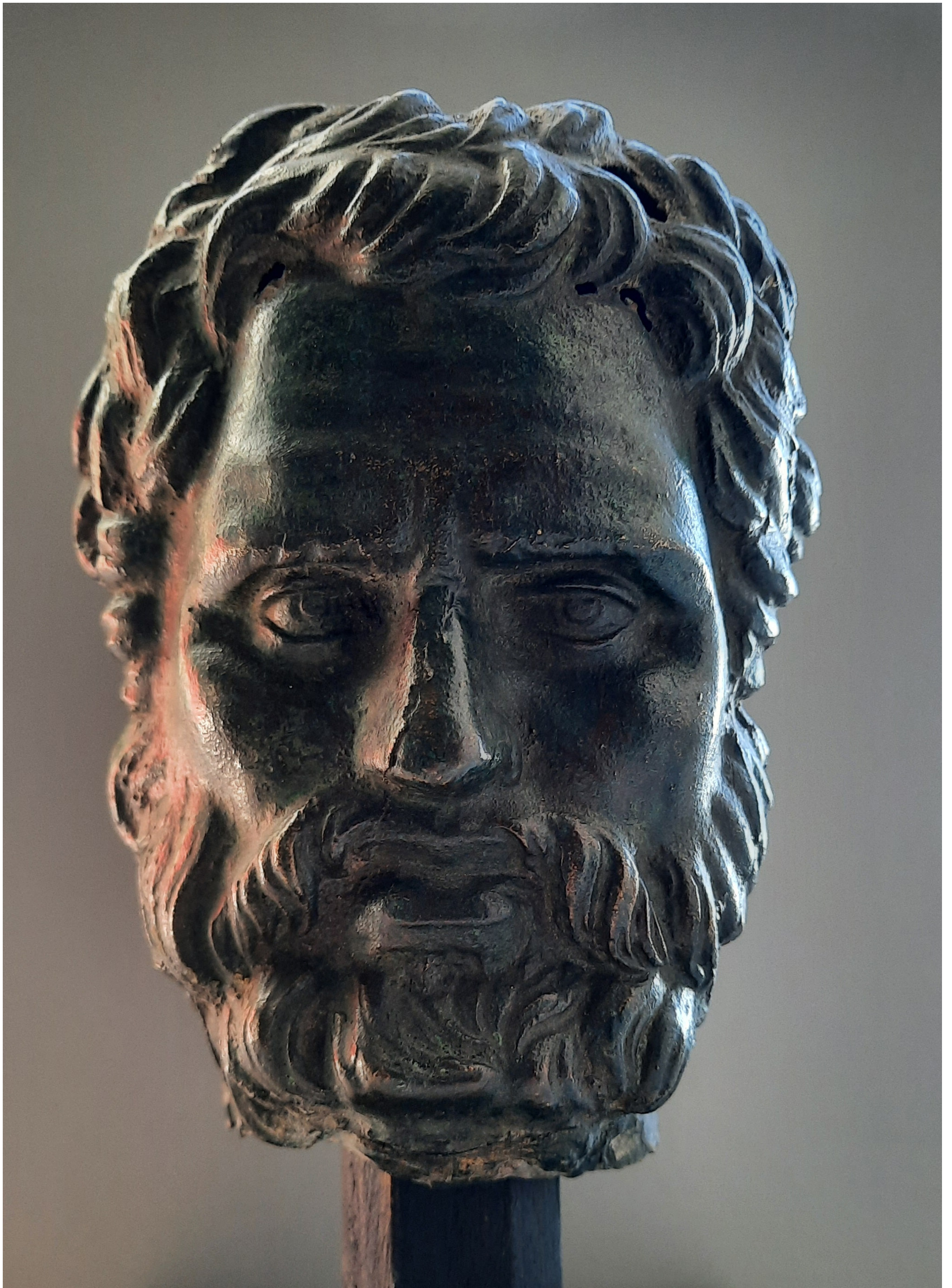

Fig. 1. Bronze head of Bias, Tübingen, “Old Inventory” no. 46.

the pre-Socratic philosopher, produced by the Italian gem-cutter and medallist Valerio Belli (1468–1546),[2] and to an imaginary portrait in the handbook *Promptuarium Iconum Insigniorum* by the French humanist Guillaume Rouillé (c. 1518–1589).[3] In the nineteenth century, the workshop of Leopoldo Malpieri produced a partial cast from the Vatican original, without the herm shaft and bearing only the inscription "Bias."[4] A copy related to the Tübingen head is found in a 27 cm-high plaster bust—also inscribed "Bias"—from the plaster and artificial-stone casting firm Egregia di A. Giannelli Srl near Volterra.[5] The Tübingen head and the Volterra plaster bust derive from the same source, from which, in the nineteenth century, tourist souvenirs in plaster and metal were evidently produced.

How, then, did an authentic ancient coin come to be inside the head of a modern reproduction in Tübingen? The Tübingen head derives from the antiquities collection of the Württemberg colonel Hermann von Wundt (1823–1888).[6] Part of his collection—a colourful potpourri of objects from Italy, Greece, and Germany, including many forgeries—entered the University of Tübingen's possession in 1893. The Tübingen holdings register ("Old Inventory") of the antiquities collection mentions a cement bust that originally served as a support for the head; the neck of the head has been cut off in a peculiar manner. The inventory states: "Modern reproduction of the bust of Bias in the Vatican, cast out with cement and, at Wundt's, embellished with a dreadful cement bust, which was removed here. When the cement was chipped away, one of the well-known crocodile coins of Nemausus fell from the top of the head."

In addition to a few perforations in the first row of curls above the forehead, there is an elongated opening, nearly 3 cm in length, on the cranial vault (Fig. 2). A roughly circular hole, extending from—or perhaps serving as the starting point for—the larger break on the crown, appears to have been made with a tool. It is a tempting thought that the coin was deliberately inserted into the head through this "slot"—like a piggy bank. We know that Wundt maintained close contact with the bourgeois coin collectors of Stuttgart and had access to ancient coins. A note added in 1976 to the "Old Inventory" of the antiquities collection further records: "1976. Cement residues removed from the head; fragments of a newspaper embedded in the cement from the Stuttgart area, not datable; late 19th c." This remark suggests that Wundt (or the person who attached the cement bust) deposited the coin inside the head, and that the piece fell out on 26 May 1893 when Ludwig Schwabe (1835–1908), head of the institute of archaeology and the Tübingen coin and antiquities collection, inspected the objects handed over to the institute on 18 May 1893 and removed the cement bust.

So far, so unusual. Yet are finds of ancient coins in incongruous contexts (whether modern, or geographically non-ancient) truly so unique? A brief comparison with several similarly curious examples—without any claim to completeness—may serve to round off this contribution. A case closely comparable to the Tübingen finding is the discovery of 305 Chinese cash coins inside a gilt Guanyin statue. On 10 June 1862, John Williams acquired a battered statue at auction; it had previously belonged to the Museum of the Royal United Service in London.[7] After repairing the damaged areas the following day, the new owner noticed an unusual layer of cement on the base. When he broke through it, he found a cavity within the statue which, in addition to the coins—comprising pieces dating from the seventh to the seventeenth century—also contained, among other items, silk cloths, aromatic woods, seeds, and papers bearing Buddhist prayers and precepts. Unfortunately, the deposit offers no clue as to the original intention with which these objects were carefully placed inside the statue.

The recently publicized hoard from Eisleben, Germany, is striking precisely because of its deliberately chosen hiding place within a sculptural component of an epitaph monument. During the refurbishment of St Andrew's Church, restorers discovered coins concealed in a hollow within the leg of a kneeling sandstone figure—so effectively hidden that the deposit remained undiscovered for

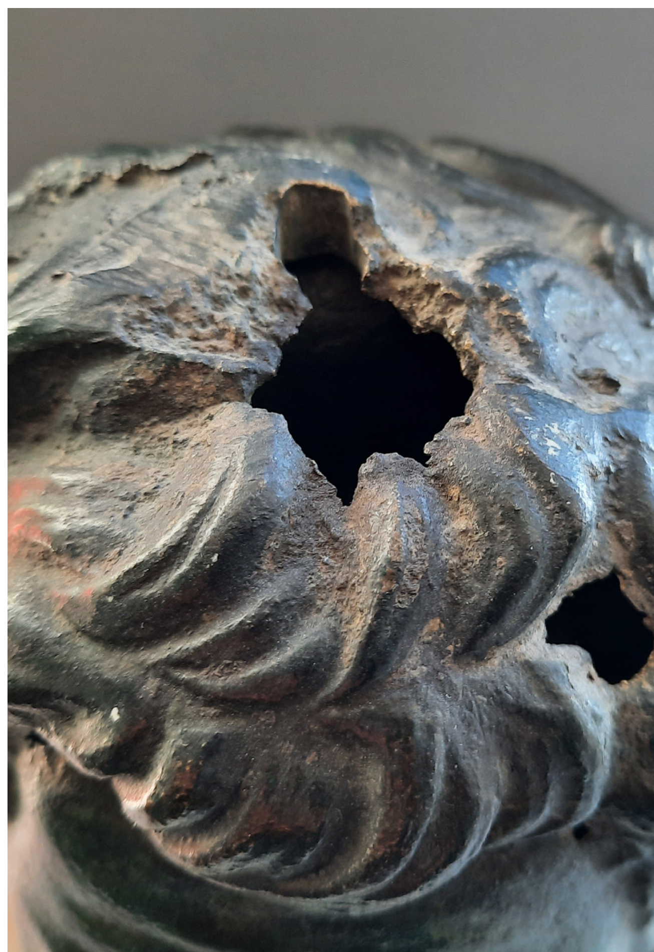

Fig. 2. Bronze head of Bias, Tübingen, "Old Inventory" no. 46, view from above.

[2] ATTWOOD 2003, 216 no. 348a.
[3] ROUILLÉ 1553, 99.
[4] https://arachne.dainst.org/entity/1225956 (accessed 31 January 2026).
[5] „Personaggi Illustri" (Inv. 241), Egregia di A. Giannelli Srl (https://www.egregiastore.it/doc/Egregia_di_A_Giannelli___Catalogo__Collezione_Personaggi_Illustri.pdf, accessed 31 January 2026).
[6] BAAS 2017, 85–104.
[7] WILLIAMS 1863.

almost four centuries. The figure forms part of an epitaph erected in 1567 for Count Johann Albrecht I of Mansfeld-Arnstein and Countess Magdalena. The find consisted of four leather bags containing 816 coins, ranging from the mid-fourteenth century to a latest issue dated 1638. The contents included an English golden angel, ducats, talers, and hundreds of groschen, indicating that this was not a simple Sunday offertory but an accumulated fund derived from clerical "special services," seat rents, and other sources. The concealment is plausibly connected with the repeated plundering of the region by Swedish troops between 1636 and 1644. The church may have seemed a comparatively protected space, while the epitaph offered an especially unlikely target for routine searching.[8]

While the Eisleben deposit exemplifies concealment as a strategy of safeguarding, other "misplaced" coin finds are better understood not as efforts to protect valuables but as deliberate interventions designed to mislead later discoverers. In this regard, we are unusually well informed thanks to a description of the estate "Glenthorne House," which documents the purposeful burial of Roman coins in places where no traces of ancient settlement existed. The representative building, located directly on the border between Devon and Somerset above the cliffs of the English coast, was erected in 1830 by Reverend Walter Stevenson Halliday (1793–1872). Halliday came from a wealthy family; his father already owned the Castle Wemyss estate in Jamaica, through which the family prospered via sugar and rum production. Halliday also undertook the Grand Tour together with the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), whom he had known since their time at Eton. For the present enquiry, however, Halliday's eccentric humour is more relevant. One of his greatest pleasures was to bury Roman coins in places where there had never been Romans, imagining how he would thereby confuse future discoverers. The account concludes dryly: "It seems—since he cannot be there to chuckle over the jest—a strange kind of humour."[9]

A manifestation of the problem of "misplaced" coins is the recent discovery of Roman coinage in Japan. In 2016 it was reported that a controlled archaeological excavation at Katsuren Castle in Okinawa Prefecture—a UNESCO World Heritage site—had yielded four Roman coins together with an Ottoman coin.[10] Recovered at a depth of approximately one meter within Enclosure 4, the assemblage immediately raises a chronological problem. Of the four heavily corroded and worn late Roman copper coins, one has been attributed to Constantius II, while the remaining three are thought to have been minted between 320 and 370 CE. The fifth coin, found in association with the Roman pieces, is an Ottoman issue dated to 1687/1688. By contrast, the castle walls were constructed in the fourteenth century, and the complex fell into ruin after the late fifteenth century.[11]

Another intriguing coin find outside its proper time and place—yet one whose riddle can be resolved—is documented in southern Africa. In Bindura, today the capital of Mashonaland Central province in Zimbabwe, an antoninianus of Claudius II (268–270 CE) was found during excavation work prior to the planting of new trees.[12] The findspot lay near the quarters of the Assistant Native Commissioner. Although the discovery was initially interpreted as authentic evidence for ancient contact between Rome and southern Africa, John F. Schofield (1886–1956), who had been present as Chief Building Inspector during the construction of the buildings, was able to refute this claim: "I happen to know that when the Native Affairs Dept. buildings were erected in 1924, at least two members of the P.W.D. staff had similar coins as pocket pieces."[13]

A further mode of "odd deposition" arises when a single ancient coin appears within an otherwise modern hoard. A well-documented instance is a hoard found in April 1894 during foundation excavation work for an extension to an electrical exchange at 139 Cedar Street, New York City. Alongside largely "revolutionary period" American material (most of which was retained by the workmen and never fully recovered), the property owner John Petit reportedly obtained only three coins: a Roman bronze coin of Nero (reverse type "Securitas"), a British halfpence, and a Spanish colonial silver.[14] The Roman coin is clearly an intrusive object within a modern deposit horizon (with a date of deposit of 1792). Its presence is fully compatible with mundane pathways—kept as a curiosity, handled as a pocket piece, or added to a pot of savings—none of which leave diagnostic traces beyond the paradoxical co-presence of chronologically incompatible items.

That ancient objects could be transferred out of their original geographic context as memorabilia, heirlooms, or out of antiquarian interest is well illustrated by the discovery of sherds from a Roman *firmalampe* in the United States. The fragments of a lamp dated to the early imperial period (Loeschcke type Xc) were found in a layer dated 1617–1624 at Jamestown—then still called James Fort—the first permanent English settlement in North America, during archaeological excavations.[15] Recovered from the smithy/bakery (Structure 183), the sherds were assembled by the excavators into a lamp; the lamp constitutes the earliest artefact of European origin in the Jamestown settlement. How did this object reach America? All indications suggest that an early settler brought it to Virginia as a keepsake from England or as a valued family heirloom.[16]

In a similar way, a Roman coin appears to have reached the United States. The piece was recovered in 2004 from a stratified layer during archaeological excavations by the Texas Historical Commission at the battlefield of San Jacinto, where on 21 April 1836 the decisive battle between the Texan and Mexican armies was fought during the Texas War of Independence. Because the piece is pierced, it may have been lost as a pendant or item of personal adornment belonging to a soldier. The coin is now preserved in the

[8] https://neu.muenzenwoche.de/menschen-und-maerkte/lutherstadt-eisleben-kirchenkasse-nach-fast-400-jahren-aus-versteck-geborgen/ (accessed 31 January 2026).
[9] HARPER 1908, 42.
[10] SZMONIEWSKI 2020, 130–131.
[11] HOPPÁL *et alii* 2019, 475–476.

[12] HILL 1930.
[13] CHARLESWORTH 1949, 108–109
[14] KLEEBERG 2009, 147 no. 501.
[15] STRAUBE 2008.
[16] LAPP 2022.

Sam Houston Memorial Museum in Huntsville, Texas (Inv. L2009.1.46).[17]

If we wish to categorize the examples presented here in broad terms, we may distinguish three different groups of coin finds in contexts that are incongruent in content, time, and space. Halliday's coins were deposited as a joke—or out of malice—in order to deceive later finders by means of a paradoxical findspot. The antoninianus from Bindura and the Roman oil lamp in Virginia were torn from their functional contexts and only subsequently became "finds" that seem nonsensical at first glance, because knowledge of their former function as souvenirs or keepsakes was lost without any intent to deceive. For the coin inside the head of Bias and for the deposits in the Guanyin statue, by contrast, we lack any information as to why the objects were placed there.

Yet anyone who engages with the broad spectrum of contemporary reports on the handling of coins beyond their economic function also encounters finds that result from wholly arbitrary—one might say "non-rational"—human action. On the online forum coincommunity.com, the discussion thread "Coins In The Doors Of Old Homes?" contains a number of instructive posts. One participant ("Wornslick"), for instance, reports that, without much thought, he permanently deposited a coin at the centre of a basketball court during construction work: "I work construction and when we built the new basketball arena at the University of Missouri they were preparing the court area to be poured in concrete so they could lay the hardwood flooring down. The day of the pour I went to the benchmark showing the center of the court. I split the plastic and placed a quarter heads up facing the tigers home basket, as close to the benchmark as I could. Taped the plastic back up and walked away. I wasn't into coin collecting back then so it was just a quarter I pulled from my pocket. But everytime I see the Tigers playing at home I think of that coin."[18]

Another user ("just carl"), evidently inspired by the forum discussion and purely for the pleasure of imagining how future finders might react, deposited coins in a hole in the pavement in front of his house: "Just finished a patch on my front sidewalk. Nothing big but about a foot long and six inches wide area I had to break out due to crumbling. So thinking of this topic on this forum, before I mixed the concrete, I dumped 10 pennies into the hole. Sure wonder what someone will say in about 100 years."[19] A third participant ("odentheviking") likewise reveals that he repeatedly buried coins for posterity while planting trees, simply for amusement: "I live in Colorado and it seems I am always planting trees as weather/wind breaks. I always throw in a few modern coins, bottles, toys, etc.... just for fun. I figure when we humans are all dead and gone the aliens will dig this all up and say look at these humans, they worshiped trees with relics, etc..... just to mess with them."[20]

In a certain sense, deposits of coins—or, more precisely, coin-like objects—can be just as devoid of meaning for their original users when they are discarded after the end of their functional life. Yet for archaeologists, the same findspots can appear highly suggestive: if the depositional intention is unknown, such contexts may readily invite alternative readings, including ritual interpretations. In 1987, the US state of Nevada introduced "Regulation 12. Chips and Tokens," which has since required casino operators in Las Vegas to provide the Nevada Gaming Control Board with detailed documentation concerning the introduction of new chips and the proper disposal and destruction of old casino chips.[21] Prior to this, thousands of obsolete chips were disposed of in inaccessible locations: in abandoned mine shafts, in the desert—echoing Nicky Santoro's remark in the 1995 film *Casino*, "A lot of holes in the desert, and a lot of problems are buried in those holes"—in Lake Mead east of Las Vegas, or in the construction pits of newly built casinos.[22] When the former Dunes Hotel & Casino was demolished in 1993, the old chips discarded in its construction pit re-emerged. Likewise, the removal of the New Frontier Hotel & Casino in 2007 revealed thousands of chips and tokens embedded in its concrete foundations. Concrete fragments from casino construction sites containing old casino chips are now sought-after collectors' items.[23]

Sometimes a presumable "meaningless deposition" of coins—even of high-value pieces—can be nothing more than the result of sheer misfortune. On Tuesday 10 and Wednesday 11 June 2025, a collection of 807 rare gold and silver coins was auctioned by Beaussant Lefèvre & Associés in Paris. Across the two days, the sale realized more than €3.3 million (c. $3.8 million). The backstory is striking.[24] The coins had belonged to Paul Narce (1934–2024), a French collector who lived discreetly in a small village in the Lot-et-Garonne. Known to only a handful of numismatic professionals, Narce assembled over several decades a remarkable collection of high-value gold and silver coins. After his death, a notary inspecting the house discovered the trove concealed behind a painting, hidden within the wall of a storeroom. It seems likely that Narce—who died without direct descendants—was struck down before he could retrieve his treasure—including a stater of Alexander III, an electrum drachm of Syracuse, a tremisses of Constantine II, and three Iron Age gold staters—from this unusual hiding place. The case attracted wide media interest, including coverage in *The Jerusalem Post* and on CNN.com. *The Times of India* offered perhaps the most apt headline: "He took a secret to his grave — and left 1,000 gold coins hidden behind a wall."[25]

17 https://samhouston.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/735F8A57-1C89-4D05-92C6-345208728269 (accessed 31 January 2026).

18 http://goccf.com/t/61487&whichpage=2#483384 (accessed 31 January 2026).

19 http://goccf.com/t/61487&whichpage=2#487348 (accessed 31 January 2026).

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25 https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/etimes/trending/he-took-a-secret-to-his-

To sum up, if we assemble all information surrounding the find of a coin—from archaeological context to all relevant written sources and oral traditions—it is often possible to reconstruct the biography of the object[26] in question and thus to explain rationally a find that at first glance makes little sense, even when it ultimately derives from a meaningless act. Only in the case of the coin in the head of Bias do we reach an impasse. The find will remain, forever, a fascinating riddle.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I acknowledge the use of ChatGPT (OpenAI; GPT-5.2) for English-language editing and stylistic suggestions. All interpretations and any remaining errors are my own.

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