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The future of NUMIS, the Dutch coin finds database

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The future of NUMIS, the Dutch coin finds database

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One of the tasks the Money Museum has set itself is to record, as thoroughly and completely as possible, coin finds from the Netherlands. It is well known that this is a daunting job as finds are numerous, and there is never enough time. In 2008 the Collections and Research department of the Money Museum went through a painful reorganization. This resulted in budget cuts and the dismissal of six colleagues, including the ones responsible for recording and identifying coin finds. The amount of time that can be spent on the processing of coin finds by the Museum's staff is now severely reduced. This situation requires new solutions to keep the Dutch coin finds database running, and to look for innovative ways to keep adding high quality data to it. To achieve this, the Museum is now working on a plan involving volunteers. The success or failure of the experiment will determine how the Museum will progress with the Dutch coin finds database in the future.

One of the tasks the Money Museum (GeldMuseum) has set itself is to record, as thoroughly and completely as possible, coin finds from the Netherlands, both hoards and single finds. It is a well-known fact that this is a daunting task as finds are numerous and time is always in short supply. In 2008 the Collections and Research department of the Money Museum went through a painful reorganization that resulted in budget cuts and the dismissal of six colleagues, including the ones responsible for recording and identifying coin finds. As a result of this, the amount of time that can now be spent on the processing of finds by the Museum's staff is severely reduced. This situation requires new solutions in order to keep the Dutch coin finds database, NUMIS, running and we have to look for innovative ways to keep adding high quality data to it. To achieve this, the Museum is working on a plan involving volunteers. The success or failure of the experiment will determine how the Money Museum will progress with NUMIS.

To some extent the title of this article is misleading, because in order to be able to present some thoughts on the future of NUMIS, it is also necessary to elaborate a little on how coin finds from the Netherlands were processed in the past, and there is already a long tradition with regard to this. From the beginning of the 19th century onwards, the staff of the Royal Coin Cabinet faithfully recorded coin finds from all over the Netherlands. This was done as thoroughly as was humanly possible. Private people who had found a coin could make a visit to the Coin Cabinet in person, or send their finds through the mail. The Keepers identified the coins and composed a neat letter addressed to the finders which contained all the numismatic data of interest. After this the coins were returned to their owners. All information on the coins, their find spots and, when available, the archaeological context, was recorded. The data were subsequently stored in a documentation system on paper that could be accessed geographically. Coins found by professional archaeologists of the State Archaeological Service were processed in a similar fashion. Up until *circa* 1980 this system worked effectively. Every year a few hundred coins were duly identified and registered. Most of these came from official excavations.

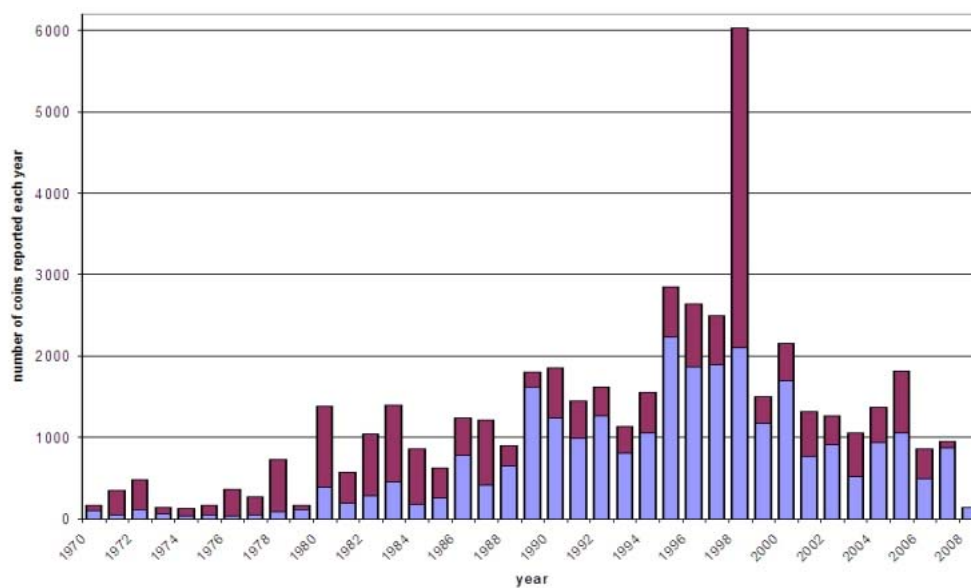


Figure 1: Number of coins reported to the Royal Coin Cabinet and Money Museum in the period from January 1970 to December 2008.

The rising popularity of the metal detector changed everything. Figure 1 clearly shows that from the 1980s onwards the number of recorded coin finds is much larger than during the 1970s. The numbers are rising from several hundred to several thousand a year, and the general trend is clear.

In addition, Figure 1 illustrates that the activities of metal detectorists also caused a shift in the ratio between single coin finds and coins from hoards. From 1980 the number of single coins reported rises slowly but steadily, *albeit* with some ups and downs. From 1988 onwards the number of single finds that are reported each year is consistently larger than the number of coins from hoards, the only exception being 1998. During that year a lot of hoards were reported, including one found in Den Bosch (province of Brabant) consisting of 2121 coins.

Because of the increasing number of reported finds a new full-time job was created at the Royal Coin Cabinet. In 1995 an Assistant Keeper was appointed, whose task it was to support the Keepers with the identifying and processing of all coins finds. The new coin finds specialist also inaugurated NUMIS, the coin finds database of the Museum. At that time every curator an individual database and each of these was organized differently. The new assistant Keeper had to streamline all data into one new database, called NUMIS (**NUM**ismatic **I**nformation **S**ystem).

We can see a striking thing happening in Figure 1: from 1995 onwards the number of recorded coin finds increases even more. This is an interesting phenomenon, and it is thought that this is, at least partly, related to the principle that the more coins you identify, the more coins are reported. A lot of the amateur metal detectorists normally find more coins than they initially report to the Museum. Since there is not always time or opportunity to identify coin finds on the spot or on appointment, finders frequently have to leave their coins at the Museum for identification. Some people are somewhat reluctant to do so and they do not bring all the coins they have found at once. Only when the Museum's staff has processed one batch of coins and returned them to their owners, are they willing to give you more of their finds. This means that the longer it takes to process coin finds, the lower the numbers that are brought into the Museum.

After the year 2000 the numbers dwindle again. This decrease is partly related to all the work involved with the merger of the three numismatic organizations in the Netherlands, the building of the new Money Museum, and the move of all collections to here. This meant there was less time to identify coins and, consequently, fewer coins were reported at the Museum. Finders were also actively encouraged not to report their finds too often, as there was very little time to process them. In short, because of all the work involved with the merger, the level of service the staff of the Museum could offer had to be reduced for a couple of years. It is well-known that it takes years to build up good contacts, but it is very easy to lose these again.

When the newly built Money Museum opened its door in 2004, we even had the luxury of having two Assistant-Keepers working on coin finds. It turned out that even two people were not enough to process all the finds and they were constantly battling against a flood of newly reported coins. In 2008 only 141 coin finds were added to the database, and at the moment the adding of new data has almost come to a grinding halt. This was the result of the reorganization already mentioned in the introduction.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the Money Museum staff think it important to keep adding new data to NUMIS because it can be such a valuable and powerful tool. NUMIS contains information that is important for (future) research, and that can help us to find answers to questions that are not only important for numismatists, but also for archaeologists, historians and (historical) economists. In addition, NUMIS is also a source of information for the members of the general public who are interested in coins and (monetary) history.

Towards a solution?

Because there is now considerably less time to work on coin finds, the Money Museum has been looking for solutions to keep NUMIS running. Basically we have two options: to process fewer coins or to look for other ways to solve the problem. Before we resort to the first option we would like to try something else, and we have come up with a plan that involves volunteers.

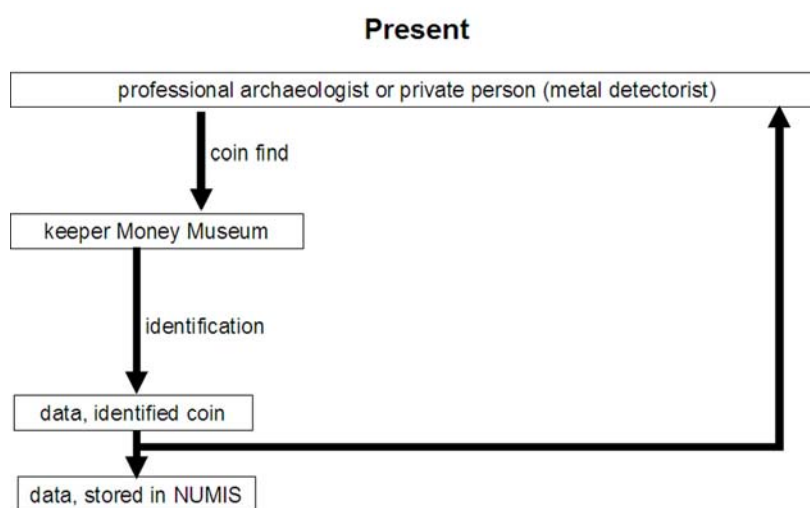


Figure 2: the way in which coin finds are processed at the time of writing

Future?

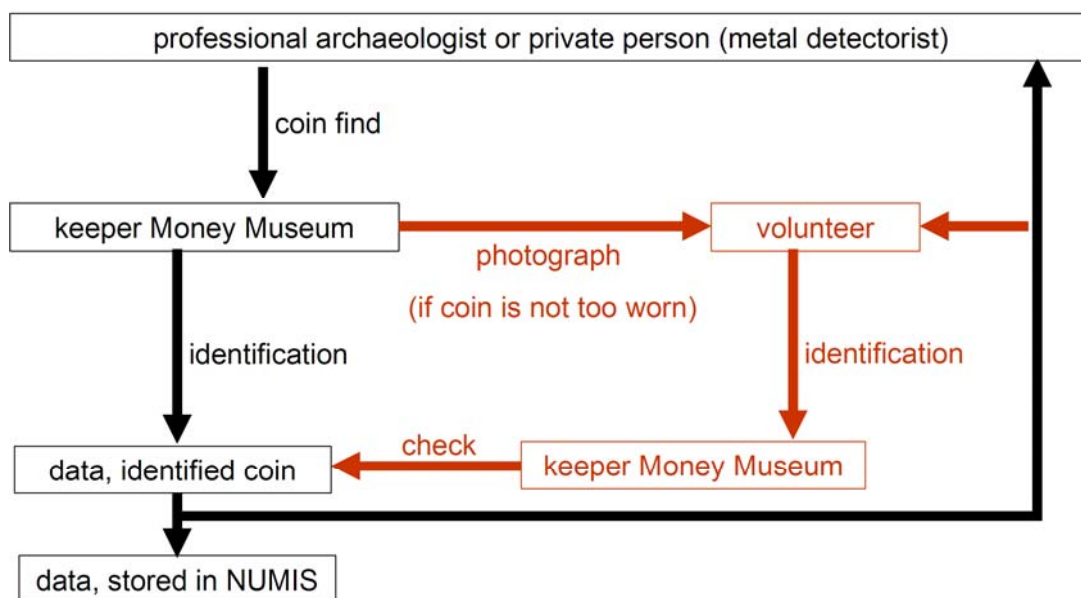


Figure 3: a possible way in which coin finds could be registered in the future.

We know that there are potentially a lot of problems involved with this plan, but we will not know if it works or not, if we do not try it first.

That the work of volunteers can be very useful and important is shown in Figure 4. Here we can see how many records, each representing one coin, were added to the database during the period from 1995 (start of NUMIS) to 2008. The large number of coins in the graph for the period from 2005 until 2008 (tens of thousands!) is the result of work done by several volunteers, who digitized information on old coin hoards from the paper archives. This project was started in 2005.

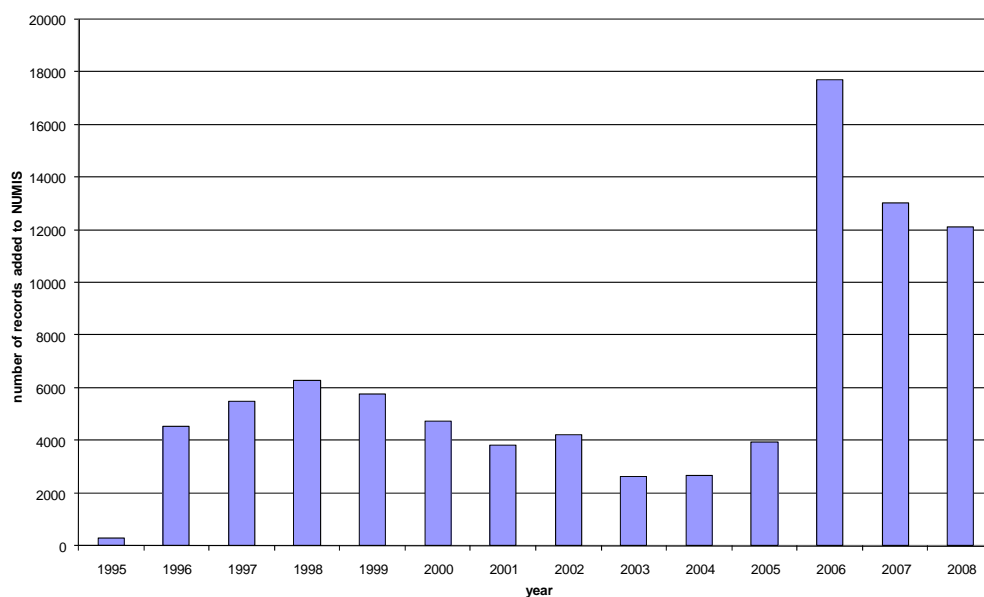


Figure 4: Number of records added to NUMIS during the period from 1995 (when the database was started) to 2008.

NUMIS now contains almost 98,000 records, representing 255,000 individual coins (at the moment some hoards in the database are represented by only one record, but some of these contain large numbers of coins). An important thing that has to happen in the near future is to streamline our data in order to improve the accessibility of the database. A lot of work on this has already been done, but this is not enough. There are, for example, still many inconsistencies and duplicate entries. If the Museum decides to involve volunteers in the identification process, and if we want to avoid similar problems in the future, the Museum has to specify high standards of quality to which the data provided by volunteers have to comply.

As it is vital for future research to have access to high quality data on coin finds, we have to look for new ways to keep up all the good work that has already been done. As it is impossible to do everything ourselves, we must rely more on volunteers, students and others who are willing to make an effort to keep numismatic data from being lost forever. As we have yet to start with this experiment it is impossible to know if it works or not, but we will keep you up to date.

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