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Roger Bland
Head of Portable Antiquities & Treasure
British Museum
E-mail: Rbland@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk

The paper draws on a project to catalogue all recorded finds of Roman gold coins from Britain. Two volumes published in 1990 and 1992 catalogued single finds from most of the western provinces of the Empire, but finds from Britain have not hitherto been studied in detail. The aggregated summaries of single finds from the western provinces provide a unique dataset that gives a picture of the fluctuations of coin loss from the whole of the Roman period. The British study enables Britain to be set in its context in the Roman Empire, and shows how rich Britain is in coin finds, particularly since the systematic recording of coin finds by the Portable Antiquities Scheme started in 1997. Originally the study intended to cover only single finds; as it became increasingly clear that the distinction between hoards and single finds was blurred, hoards were also included. This paper will consider how far it is possible to study both types of find together without skewing the data. The dataset also presents an interesting picture of the date of discovery of gold coins from Britain, and their circulation pattern, which is quite different from that of lower-value denominations.

The paper draws on a project by the author and Xavier Loriot to catalogue all recorded finds of Roman gold coins minted in Britain. Jean-Pierre Callu, Xavier Loriot and an international team of collaborators catalogued single finds of gold coins from most of the western provinces of the Empire in two volumes published in 1990 and 1992 in the series *L'or monnayé* [Callu and Loriot, 1990 and Brenot and Loriot, 1992], but the finds from Britain have not hitherto been studied in detail.

Single finds of gold coins: loss per year

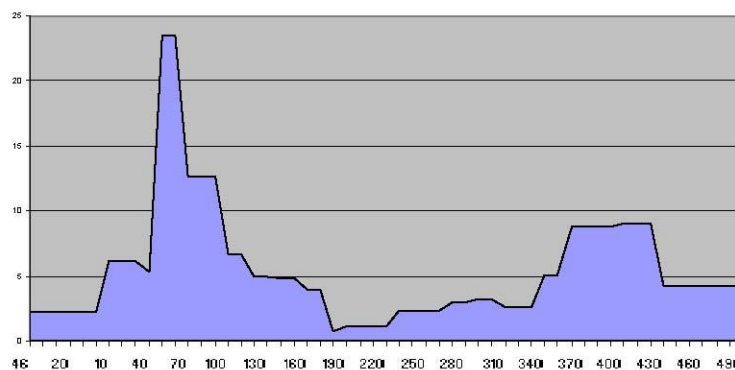


Figure 1

The aggregated summary of single finds from the western provinces of the Empire in the latter publication gives a unique picture of the fluctuations of coin loss from the whole of the Roman period: the author knows of no other dataset that gives a comparative picture of coin loss from across the whole Roman period. This shows a peak at the end of the reign of Nero and the civil war, with a second peak in the early 5th century.

Single finds of gold coins from the western Roman Empire: totals

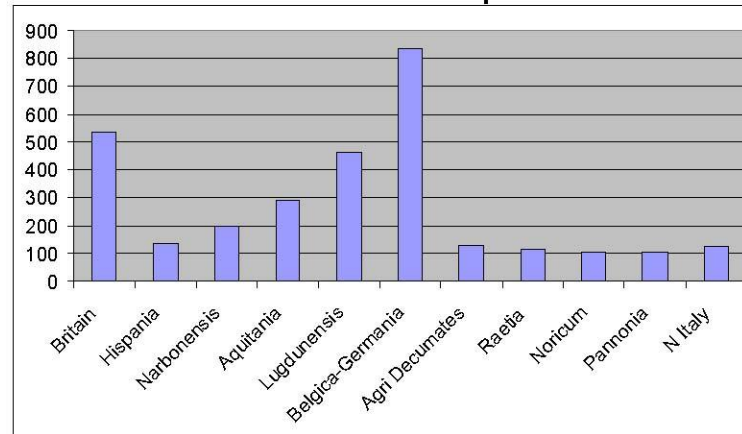


Figure 2: Stray finds of gold coins from the western Roman Empire: totals

Figure 2 is based on the same data, and shows the number of single finds of gold coins from ten provinces covering a large part of the western Empire; added to this is the number from Britain, as known in 1989, so that the data are comparable with the results from the other provinces (although another 118 coins have been recorded since then). This shows that, at least in terms of coin loss, Britain cannot be seen as a poor relation compared with other provinces nearer the centre of the Empire.

Number of single finds and numbers of gold coins in hoards

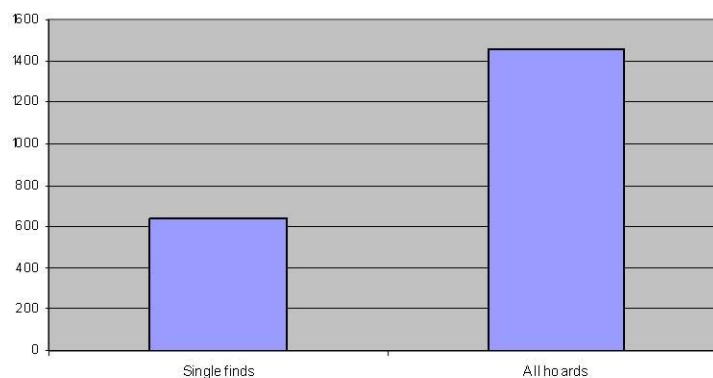


Figure 3: Number of single finds and numbers of gold coins in hoards

Originally, the study was intended to cover only single finds, but as it became increasingly clear that the distinction between hoards and single finds was blurred, hoards were also included. Traditionally, hoards and single finds have been studied separately, but studies such as the *Fundmünzen* series and Guest and Wells's corpus of Roman coin finds from Wales [Guest and Wells, 2007] have included both types of coin find.

The corpus of the present project stands at 715 single finds and 122 hoards, with more than 2,863 coins. 70 of these hoards are sufficiently well described to enable them to be analysed, and these contain 1,467 coins. Of interest is how far both types of evidence can be studied together, and how far the distinction between coins from hoards and single finds needs to be maintained.

One obvious point about the hoards is that a very small number of finds contain a disproportionate number of coins. One hoard alone, that from Hoxne, contains 584 coins, 40% of the total from the 70 analyzable hoards, while a further four finds contain another 457 coins; between them, these five hoards contain over 70% of all the hoard coins. The Hoxne hoard, in particular, has a capacity to skew the data, and it has been excluded from many of the charts that have been produced. The effect on total numbers when Hoxne is removed is readily apparent.

Number of single finds and numbers of gold coins in hoards, without Hoxne

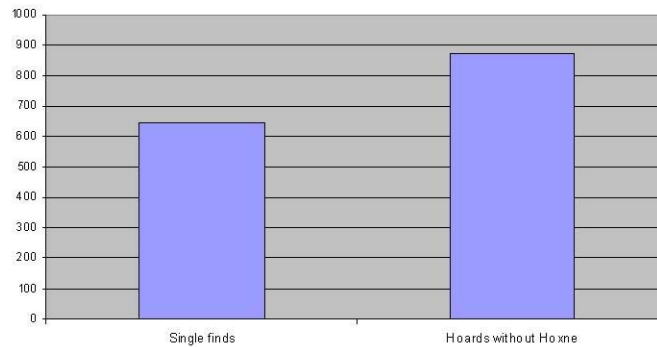


Figure 4: Number of single finds and numbers of gold coins in hoards, excluding Hoxne

Rate of discovery per annum: single finds and hoards

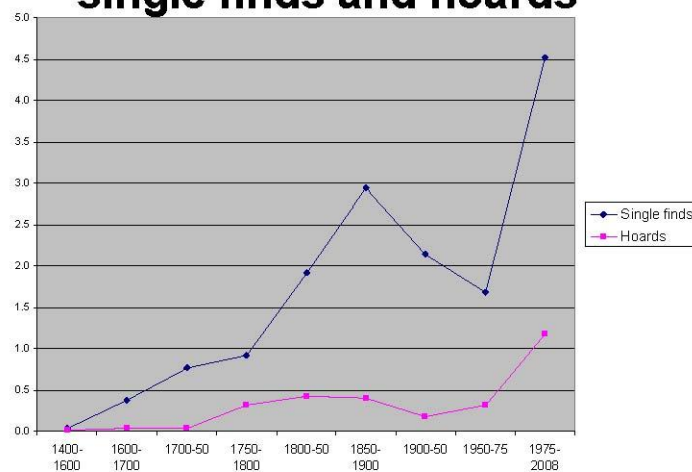


Figure 5: Rate of discovery per annum: single finds and hoards

One of the areas of interest has been the rate of discovery and reporting of these finds, as this information is needed to give an estimate of the total number of coins discovered. Discoveries of Roman gold coins attracted great antiquarian interest in Britain from the 18th century onwards: this chart looks at the annual rate of discovery of single finds and hoards from the earliest published reference in the 15th century to today. The blue line represents single finds and the red line hoards. It is interesting to note that there was a peak in the late 19th century, followed by a falling off in the 20th century until c1975, with the advent of metal detecting. The peak presumably reflects the building boom of the late Victorian period, including the development of railways. Since 1975, metal detecting has transformed the picture, and the rate has shown a huge increase. Single finds and hoards largely follow the same trend.

Method of discovery: single finds and hoards

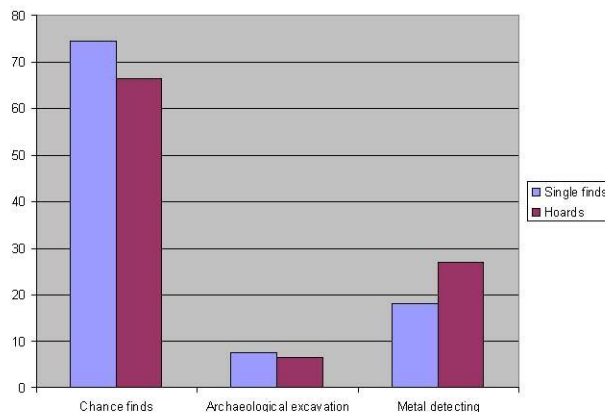


Figure 6: Method of discovery: single finds and hoards

Figure 6 looks at the method of discovery of hoards and single finds, divided into three broad categories - chance finds, archaeological excavation and metal detecting – and displays the percentage of single finds and hoards discovered by these methods rather than the raw numbers. Again, single finds and hoards are broadly comparable, although a higher proportion of hoards is found through metal detecting.

Method of discovery since 1975: single finds and hoards

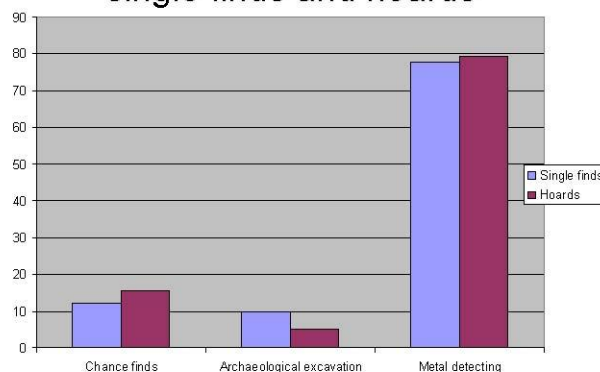


Figure 7: Method of discovery since 1975: single finds and hoards

Figure 7 looks at the method of discovery since the introduction of metal detecting *c*1975: again, the relationship of hoards and single finds is quite close, although a higher proportion of single finds is found in archaeological excavation.

Gold coins on PAS database

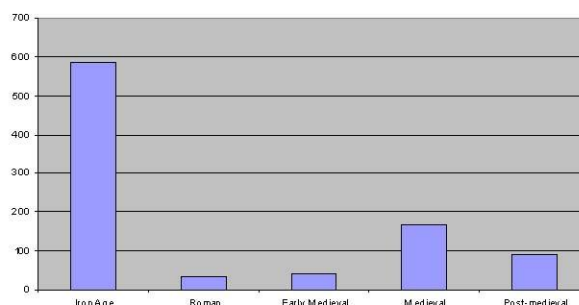


Figure 8: Gold coins on Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) database

The database of coin finds being formed by the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) represents a unique research tool, with huge potential, including the capability of analysing coins by different metals and timeframes. Figure 8 looks at the chronological breakdown of the 922 gold coins recorded by PAS. Most of them come from the Iron Age; at 34, the number from the Roman period is very low.

All coins on PAS database

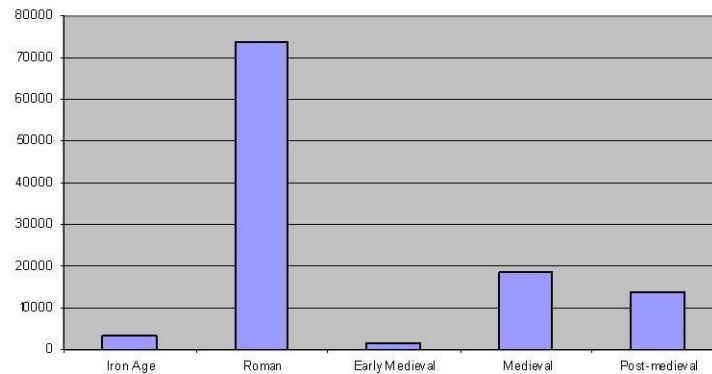


Figure 9: All coins on PAS database

By contrast, coins from the Roman period are the most numerous recorded on the database: of the 110,000 coins so far recorded by PAS, 73,500 come from the Roman period.

Gold coins as a percentage of all coins on PAS database

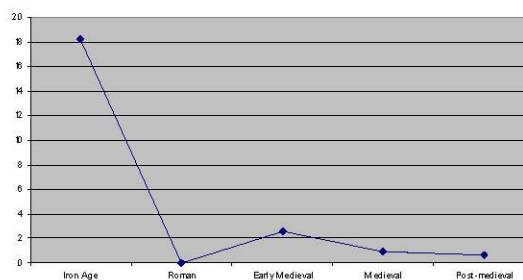


Figure 10: Gold coins as a percentage of all coins on PAS database

The number of gold coins as a proportion of all coins recorded by PAS falls to its lowest point in the Roman period. This is perhaps unexpected, because most collectors would regard Roman gold coins as not uncommon.

Chronological distribution of gold finds from Britain and Belgica-Germania

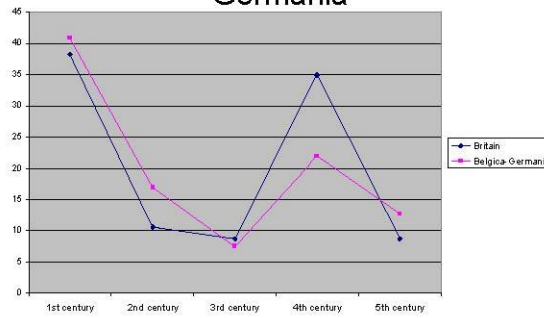


Figure 11: Chronological distribution of gold finds from Britain and Belgica-Germania

Looking at the wider picture, figure 11 shows the percentage of Roman gold single finds by century, comparing Britain (the blue line) with the provinces of Belgica and Germania, *ie* northern Gaul and Germany (the red line). The patterns are close, although Britain is stronger in the 4th century, as also happens to be the case with hoards of silver coins from that period.

Chronological distribution of gold finds from Britain, Belgica-Germania and Spain

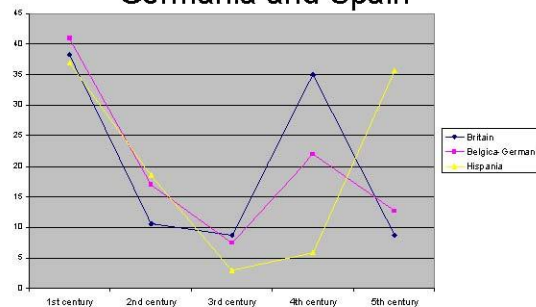


Figure 12: Chronological distribution of gold finds from Britain, Belgica-Germania and Spain

Other provinces have a very different distribution, and if data for Spain (the yellow line) are added to this chart, a completely different pattern is seen, with Spain being weak in the 4th century but very strong in the 5th.

Chronological distribution of single finds of gold coins vs Reece's British mean

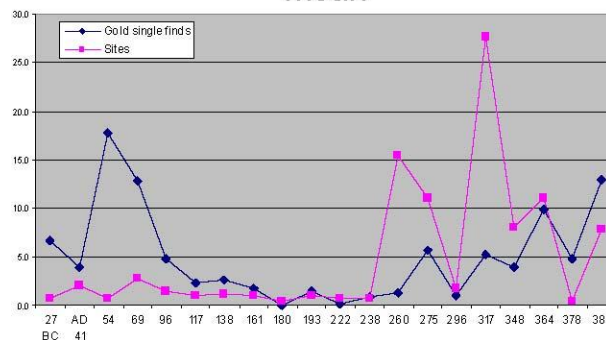


Figure 13: Chronological distribution of single finds of gold coins vs Reece's British mean

How does the chronological distribution of single finds of gold coins compare with the distribution of silver and base metal coins from Britain? Richard Reece [Reece, 2002] compiled a chart showing the 'British mean' derived from the mean of the coin distribution from 140 sites which he studied: this is shown as the red line, while the single finds of gold

coins are the blue line. The differences are immediately obvious: the sites all have very low numbers of coins until the radiate period, around 260, when they have the first peak, and then a second, higher, peak in the Constantine period, between 317 and 348. The gold coins have their highest peak in the reign of Nero, and then have a gradually increasing frequency at the very end of the 4th century.

Chronological distribution: single finds and hoards

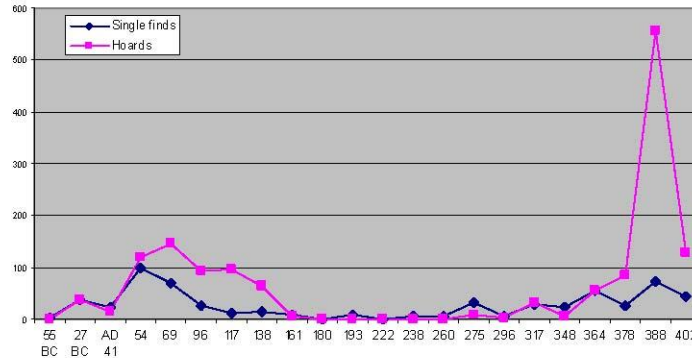


Figure 14: Chronological distribution: single finds and hoards

Figure 14 compares single finds of gold coins (the blue line on this chart) with hoards including gold coins (the red line on this chart). The hoards show a very strong peak in the period 388-402, which is undoubtedly caused by the inclusion of Hoxne.

Chronological distribution: single finds and hoards, excluding Hoxne

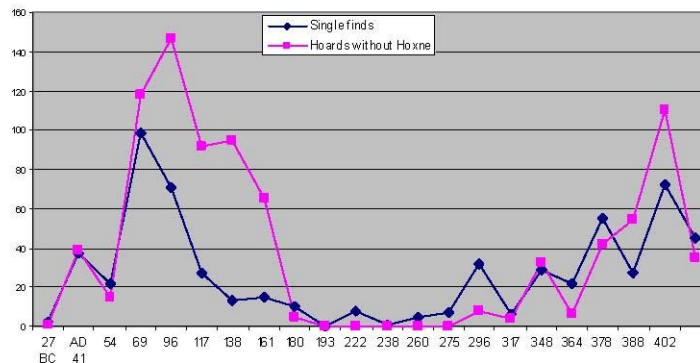


Figure 15: Chronological distribution: single finds and hoards, excluding Hoxne

If the Hoxne hoard is taken out of the picture, the match is much closer. The hoards still have a rather stronger late 4th century peak than the single finds, but in both cases the trends are broadly matching. The other point of difference is in the period AD 50-150: whereas the single finds peak in the reign of Nero and then drop off quite sharply, the hoards peak in the Flavian period, and numbers drop off more slowly. However, the hoards and single finds probably reflect the same pattern of coin distribution as many of the Neronian and Flavian coins, both single finds and hoard coins, are very worn and must actually have been lost, or hoarded, in the 2nd century.

Mint distribution: single finds and hoards

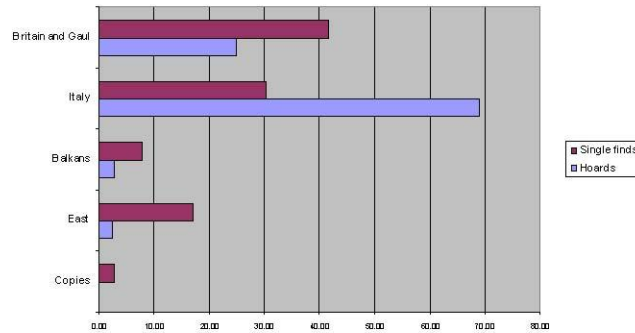


Figure 16: Mint distribution: single finds and hoards

The one significant difference between coins from single finds and coins from hoards concerns the mint distribution of coins from the 4th century AD. This chart summarizes the mint distribution of coins made between AD 324 and the end of the 5th century AD, broken down into five broad groups: the British and Gallic mints (London, Trier, Lyon, Arles), the Italian mints (Rome, Milan, Ravenna, Aquileia), the Balkan mints (Siscia, Sirmium, Thessalonica), Eastern mints (Heraclea, Constantinople, Nicomedia, Antioch), and Gallic and Visigothic imitations and ancient forgeries. The sample is quite large: 167 single finds and 859 coins from hoards. The red bars are single finds and the blue bars hoards. The striking feature is the higher proportion of eastern mint coins among the single finds.

Mint distribution: single finds and hoards, excluding Hoxne

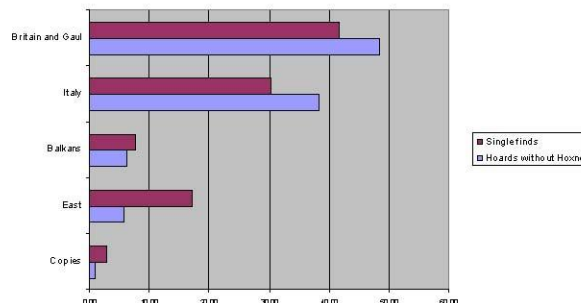


Figure 17: Mint distribution: single finds and hoards, excluding Hoxne

Excluding Hoxne from the hoards does not change the bias towards eastern mint coins among the single finds. It is difficult to account for this: the most plausible explanation is perhaps that the coins in the hoards represent batches of coins that have come fairly directly from official sources, such as military pay chests, and one would not expect these to contain many eastern coins. The single coins, on the other hand, could have reached Britain through a wide variety of methods and some, at least, might have come in trade from the eastern Mediterranean. If this is correct, it throws interesting light on the nature of trade in 4th century Britain.

Regional distribution of single finds of gold coins and PAS finds

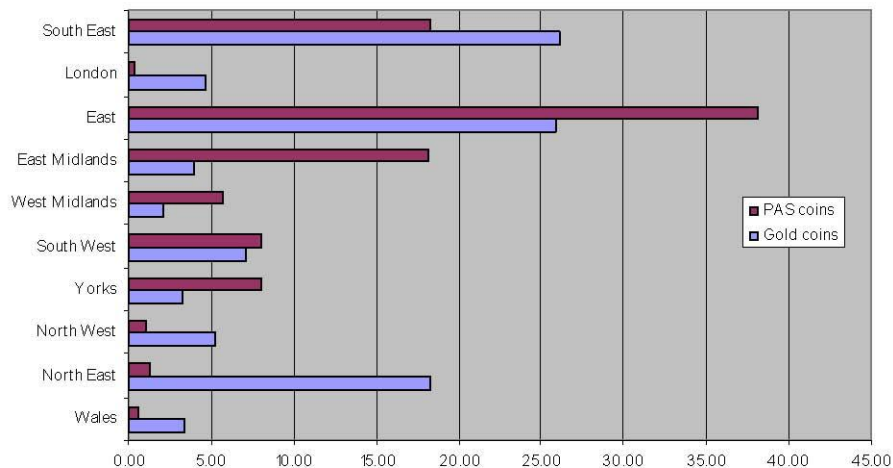


Figure 18: Regional distribution of single finds of gold coins and PAS finds

Figure 18 looks at the regional distribution of single finds of gold coins (the blue bars) and all Roman coins recorded by PAS (red bars), dividing England into nine regions with the addition of Wales. Gold coins are, in proportion, rarer than PAS finds in the Eastern region and the East Midlands, whereas they are more common in the South West, North West, North East and Wales. This can be explained by the fact that many gold coins are found on military sites.

Sites which have produced single finds of gold coins

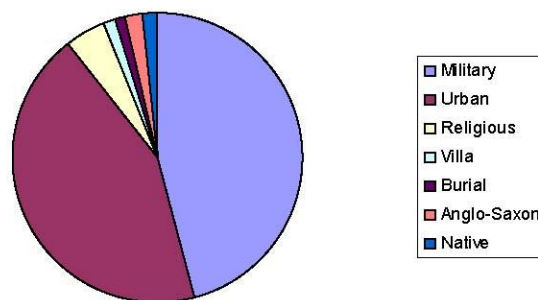


Figure 19: Sites which have produced single finds of gold coins

Figure 19 analyzes those single finds which have come from known Roman sites. Approximately 45% of all single finds are associated with sites. Overwhelmingly, the sites fall into two, evenly balanced, categories: military sites (shown in red) and towns (shown in blue). Nothing could demonstrate more clearly the fact that the military must have received all or most of their pay in gold, and the coins were then spent in towns. Indeed, it is striking that gold coins have been found in every *civitas* capital in Britain.



Figure 20: Roman gold finds: 1st century

The remaining figures in this paper are maps showing the distribution of gold coins and hoards from the 1st-5th centuries AD. In the 1st century, there is a very marked concentration in the north of England and Scotland, which suggests that the distribution of gold coins at this period has a link with military activity.



Figure 21: Roman gold finds: 2nd century

The map of 2nd century finds shows an even greater bias towards Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall, strengthening the argument for a link with military activity.

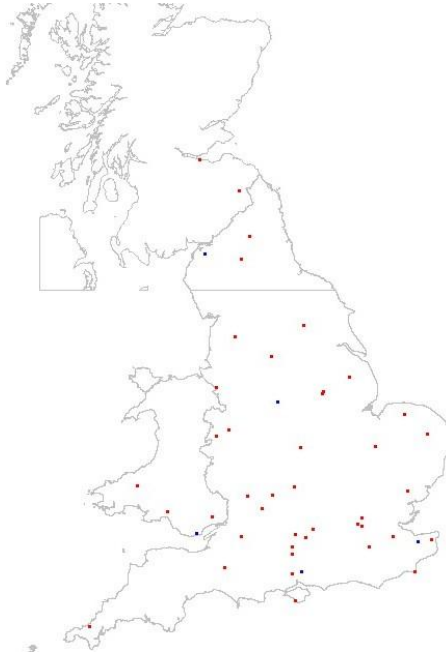


Figure 22: Roman gold finds: 3rd century

There are relatively few finds of 3rd century gold coins, and it is difficult to draw any conclusion from this array of data.



Figure 23: Roman gold finds: 4th century

In the 4th century, the number of finds picks up, displaying a more even distribution across the country.

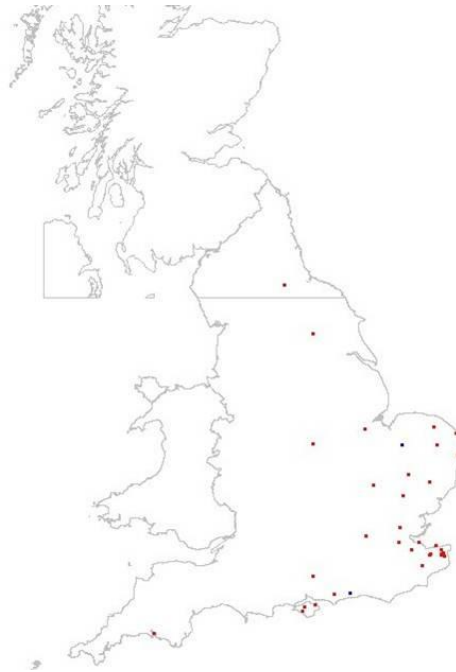


Figure 24: Roman gold finds: 5th century

Finally, and not surprisingly, the 5th century gives the smallest sample of all, but, apart from a few outliers, the distribution can be seen to have completely contracted into the south east of England.

This has been only a very brief summary, but it is hoped that it gives some idea of the potential of this particular dataset for shedding light on the circulation of coinage in Britain and across the western Roman Empire.

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