

Function of Roman coins in *Barbaricum* of Later Antiquity. An anthropological essay

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In *Barbaricum*, area stretching east of the river Rhine and north of the Danube¹, Roman coins begin to appear in larger number starting from the second half of the 2nd century AD and continue to occur in native contexts until the Migration Period².



Fig. 1. Kostkowice, distr. Zawiercie (PL), late 4th century hoard of Dancheny-Brangstrup horizon with denarii and solidi (Dymowski A. 2007); private collection.

The largest group is represented by 2nd century denarii; their significant concentrations are registered in the valley of the Vistula in Poland, in north–western Ukraine, Denmark and in the Baltic islands of Gotland and Bornholm³. Most commonly they appear in later assemblages dated to the 4th, 5th and even the 6th century (Fig. 1). Territories of former East Prussia (*Ostpreussen*) i.e. areas of Mazuria, western Lithuania, estuary of Neman river and Samland (Sambian Peninsula) – zone of Balt settlement, have produced an impressive number of brass sestertii dating from the 2nd c. and the first half of the 3rd c. mostly found in 3rd

¹ On the term “*Barbaricum*” cf. Sarnowski T. 1991; in this contribution we concentrate on the territory of the more remote parts of *Barbaricum*, east of the Elbe and north of the Carpathian mountains, consequently, coin finds from the area occupied by Sarmatian tribes will not be discussed here cf. Farkas E., Torbágyi M. 2008 in this volume.

² Bolin S. 1926a, 1929; Berger F. 1992, 1996; Bursche A. 1994a, 1996a, 1996b, p. 36–37, 2002a, 2002b, 2004b, 2006; Lucchelli T. M. 1998, Wolters R. 1999, p. 381–389; Ciołek R. 2008; Komnick H. 2008.

³ Zedelius V. 1974, 1982; Lind L. 1981, 1988, 1991; Kromann A., Watt M. 1984; Nielsen S. 1989; Fønnesbech-Sandberg E. 1989; Berger F. 1992, Bursche A. 1994a, 1994b, 2006; Kromann A. 1999; Bjerg L. 2007; Horsnaes H. W. 2008.

century graves⁴. Another interesting group are aurei from the latter half of the 3rd c., and 4th c. solidi, which have a wide distribution across almost the whole territory of Barbaricum⁵. Roman 4th century gold medallions are not numerous but form a spectacular category of numismatic sources. They are known from 6 Scandinavian and 30 continental finds, many of them, extremely rich hoards⁶. Also striking are finds of solidi from the 5th and the first half of the 6th c., which tend to concentrate especially in the zone around the Baltic Sea⁷.

The number of finds of Roman coins rapidly grew in recent years as a result of increasingly widespread use of metal detectors by professional archaeologists and amateurs. What is extraordinary is that in parts of Northern Europe Roman coin finds outnumber early medieval issues. And this brings us to a number of vital questions – how did these different categories of Roman coinage circulate and what was their function within native societies of Northern Europe? What was the semantics of money uses in Barbaricum?

Unfortunately, written sources are largely silent on the role of Roman currency among northern Barbarians who were called by the ancient authors – *ulteriores* or later *superiores barbari*. The reference in Tacitus (Germ. 5) concerns a much earlier period and most probably is a classical topos⁸. Consequently, the only sources available to us are the coin finds themselves and their archaeological context.

Theory

In modern literature the role of Roman coins in Barbaricum continues to be analysed largely in terms of and using the apparatus of market economy, mostly of Marxist origin⁹. However, this is a serious anachronism, aptly summed up by Karl Polanyi as “our obsolete market mentality”¹⁰.

The role of Roman coinage exported beyond the Rhine and the Danube, whether as tribute or as payment for goods, captives or services¹¹, changed radically once it reached the Barbarian hinterland settled by Germanic and West Balt communities. The circulation of coins in native societies during Late Roman and Early Migration Periods needs to be analysed similarly as this is done for the Dark Age in Europe.

We must turn to anthropological theories regarding non-market economies, introduced by substantivistic and primitivistic schools of K. Polanyi, G. Dalton and R. Hodges¹². The main thesis of the crucial contribution first published in 1947 by K. Polanyi (1968b) is that we cannot analyse early or so-called ‘primitive’ societies using the tools from market economy; many rules, as e.g., the need for economic profit, did not exist at all or at least were not very important in many past societies. Social relationships were regulated there by tradition, prestige and honour. Some of the concepts presented by Polanyi were and still are harder to

⁴ Bolin S. 1926b; Michelbertas M. 1972, 1995; Bursche A. 1992, 2006; Nowakowski W. 1996, p. 74–76; Zapolska A. 2008.

⁵ Grünhagen W. 1954; Werner J. 1973; Kromann A. 1987, 1994; Henriksen M. B. 1992, p. 55–70; Bursche A. 1996a, p. 85–87; 1998, p. 151–155; 2003; Henriksen M. B., Horsnæs H. 2006.

⁶ Bursche A. 1998, 2000, 2001; Seipel W. ed. 1999.

⁷ Werner J. 1949; Fagerlie J. M. 1967; Gaul J. 1979; Iluk J. 1985, 1998; Kyhlberg O. 1986; Metcalf D. M. 1995; Ciołek R. 2005.

⁸ Wolters R., Stoess Ch. 1985, p. 35–38; Lund A. A. 1987/88, Wolters R. 1999, p. 371–393; Kolendo J. 2008a, p. 115–117; 2008b.

⁹ Gaul J. 1982 and Hedeager L. 1988, 1992 are exceptional in this respect.

¹⁰ Polanyi K. 1968b.

¹¹ Bursche A. 1996a, Kehne P. 2008.

¹² Polanyi K., Arensberg C. M. (eds.) 1957; Bohannon P. 1959; Reining C. C. 1959; Dalton G. 1965a, 1965b, Dalton G. (ed.) 1968; Polanyi K. 1978; Humpreys S. C. 1969; Melitz J. 1970; Hodges R. 1982, 1988; cf. also Grierson P. 1959; Desmond W. 1962; Gurevich A. 1968; Köhler U. 1985; Thurborg M. 1988; Gaimster M. 1992.

accept for many western colleagues than for those living central or eastern part of Europe. Probably the reason is that central-east Europeans spent at least a part of their life in a situation quite similar to that of such primitive societies, without a real market economy, in so-called socialist economy, where toilet paper often had a much greater value than the state currency and wealth or riches were not a very important measure of social prestige. This experience lived by the post-war generation is a classic example of what T. Zawadzki (1993) called *vita magistra historiae*.

Analysing Tacitus or other classical authors who write about Barbarian behavior, we need to remember that the so-called *interpretatio Romana* was also coloured by the market mentality of the writers. They could not understand many of the symbolic, non-economic modes of living or motivations by which the Barbarian societies were guided, for the same reason as modern Europeans very often did not understand native societies of Africa.

K. Polanyi was probably the first who connected historical economy with the theory of money and its function in the past¹³. George Dalton popularised the theses of his mentor in his contribution “Primitive money”¹⁴ and in many later works. As a result of such studies, mostly focusing on the “impact of money on an African subsistence economy”¹⁵ researchers of the substantivistic school created their own definition of money and its functions. According to their now classic model, in a very great simplification, money has 4 functions: medium of payment, means of exchange, standard of value, and value guarantee¹⁶. We may speak of all purpose money only when all 4 functions are realized together. Where only three, two or just one of these functions is fulfilled we have to do with ‘special purpose money’. In many of his historical and anthropological studies K. Polanyi himself and his pupils tested their model on early and primitive societies, different civilizations and cultures all over the world. One of the most important conclusions was that “all purpose money” is never seen in pre-state communities, statehood being connected in particular with the fourth function of money i.e. value guarantee. pre-state societies lacked sufficiently powerful and stable authority to serve as a guarantor of value.

The substantivistic model may be of great help for elucidating the situation of the Late Roman and Early Migration Periods Barbaricum. Conrad C. Reining described the role of money in Zande economy, amalgam of tribes living in the former Belgian Congo, Sudan and French Equatorial Africa¹⁷. In late 1950s Azande had been using foreign money for about 50 years and were familiar with it as a medium of exchange, however, only for external transactions. For many of the internal, particularly, social transactions (like marriage payments), they used iron spears made from locally smelted ore or continued on the level of natural exchange. It is easy to imagine a similar situation in Barbaricum of Late Antiquity. Barbarians could be using Roman coins for external exchange with merchants from the Empire, but in case of internal transactions they most probably continued on the level of natural exchange. Possibly they also use as a means of exchange local objects or, for instance, Roman glass beads, which occur en masse on territory of Barbaricum¹⁸. This is just one example of possible advantages of using substantivistic method of thinking in our discussion.

The simplified model describing the function of Roman coins in Northern Barbaricum, which I proposed some time ago¹⁹, is quite complex; this is because the role of practically

¹³ Cf. a high-sophisticated paper “The Semantics of Money-Uses” firstly published in 1957 in “Explorations” by University in Toronto and re-edited in his essays by George Dalton (Polanyi K. 1968a).

¹⁴ Dalton G. 1965a.

¹⁵ A title of another paper by Paul Bohannan (1959).

¹⁶ To this four function a means of hoarding (thesaurisation) is also often added.

¹⁷ Reining C. C. 1959.

¹⁸ Tempelmann-Męczyńska 1985.

¹⁹ Bursche A. 1996b, p. 44, 2002b, p. 126.

every category of coinage (gold, silver and bronze) varied depending on the region and period of its occurrence. I discuss these functions on three levels: circulation (=uses), transformation and deposition.

Circulation

Within the market economy of the Roman Empire coins were usually used as all-purpose money²⁰. Not so in Northern Barbaricum, where they most probably served special purposes in a prestige economy, circulated as means of payment in socially or politically motivated transactions such as the payment of tributes, ransom, blood-money, dowry or heirloom, but also of services (particularly military) and taxes. This function they probably shared with other media of exchange, such as glass beads. Roman currency may have been used in gift-exchange transactions in the same way as seashell necklaces were in the *kula* tradition among the Triobriand societies of the Western Pacific²¹ or as pieces of copper in the *potlach* tradition among the North American Quaquits²², to mention only the best known examples.

In limited circumstances, within centres of trade and power or early “ports of trade”²³ the most common coins, the denarii, may have played the economic function as means of exchange. Recent research – mostly using metal-detectors – of early emporia on the Baltic, such as Gudme and Lundeberg on Fyn, Sorte Muld on Bornholm (Fig. 2) or Upåkra near Lund²⁴, helped to uncover several score denarii, scattered like other categories of Roman coinage, all over these settlements. More than a hundred denarii and subaerati were discovered at a number of power-and-craft centres on the mainland, i.e., Jakuszowice in southern Poland and Gródek Nadbużny on Poland’s eastern border²⁵.

Even within these “gateway communities” it is more likely that the denarii circulated as personal wealth containing tangible and fluctuating value, varying from one transaction to the next. There were no standard values or, even more so, standardised prices²⁶; this notion is particular for communities with developed statehood and as such did not exist within Barbarian societies of Northern Europe of the period. Neither could Roman coins have been used in the form of a value guarantee within Barbarian societies, because the central authority minting them (the Roman emperor or senate) was external and had no real power in the North.

Different to Celts and Late La Tène Period, Barbarians of Late Antiquity usually had at their disposal only one denomination, most commonly denarii, sometimes sesterii (Balts) or solidi (Baltic Sea Region). There are very few examples of finds of different denominations from one site and with a few exceptions²⁷ they are limited to the “port of trade” sites like Gudme or Sorte Muld. If the Barbarians really needed Roman coins for currency purposes, as a common means of exchange for daily transactions, first of all they would have needed small value coins. But the number of asses or late Roman bronzes in Northern Europe is quite limited. Relatively few denarii and siliquae were cut up or clipped and are almost never noted

²⁰ However not only and not always, with many exceptions, depending on time and territory – cf. van Heesch J. 2008.

²¹ Malinowski B. 1922; Mauss M. 1950.

²² Benedict R. 1934.

²³ On the ‘port of trade’ concept cf. Polanyi K. 1968c; also Humpreys S. C. 1969; Polanyi K. 1978 and further discussion in *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 11, 1978.

²⁴ Kromann A. 1987, 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1994; Jensen S., Watt M. 1993; Thomsen P. O. 1994; Silvegren U. W. 1999, Horsnaes 2008 cf. also Dankirke on south-western Jutland (Hansen J. H. 1988–9).

²⁵ Godłowski K. 1995; Bursche A. 1997a, 1997b; Bursche A., Kaczanowski P., Rodzińska-Nowak J. 2000.

²⁶ Until now finds of parts of scales and wages dated without doubt to Roman period are not very common.

²⁷ Gotland is such an exception, where denarii are often found with solidi cf. Östergren M. 1981, 1989; Gaul J. 1983; Jonsson K., Östergren M. 1992.

in Nordic hoards of scrap silver²⁸. They participated in the weight-based economy of the Migration Period on a very limited scale, quite differently than silver coins in the Middle Ages²⁹. At the same time, unlike the Celts, the Roman Period Barbarians developed no real native coinage before the Early Middle Ages. Counterfeits of denarii, aurei, siliquae and solidi were minted on a very limited scale, probably for prestigious purposes³⁰.



Fig. 2. Sorte Muld, Bornholm (DK); selection of finds from the central place; National Museum of Denmark; photo by K. Weiss.

There is one more argue related to the limited range of uses of Roman coins for exchange purposes in Barbaricum. One of the main directions of trade contacts in ancient north-central Europe was the Amber Route running from the middle Danube to the Sambian Peninsula (now in Kaliningrad distr.). It is widely accepted that the route played a very important role both in external and internal contacts within Barbaricum. All the same, we see almost no denarii finds at the end of the Amber Route in Lithuania and Sambian peninsula, where the absolutely dominant denomination is the sestertius. In regions more to the south we observe an opposite situation – domination of the denarii and almost no setertii finds. If Roman coins played an important role in external and internal trade, these denominations would be represented in the two areas by roughly the same amount of finds or at least their ratio would be less disparate.

²⁸ Voss O. 1954; Munksgaard E. 1955.

²⁹ Thurborg M. 1988; Gaimster M. 1992.

³⁰ Regling K. 1930; Kuczyński J. 1964; Krzyżanowska A. 1968; Berghaus P. 1976; Zedelius V. 1980, 1982; Lind L. 1988, p. 112–126, 2007; Berger P. 1996, p. 148–150; Stribny H. 2003; Morawiecki L. 2004, Peter M. 2008; cf below.

Transformation

Roman coins in Northern Europe were often reused as amulets, ornaments or jewellery. In Germanic and West Balt societies denarii and sesterii were pierced and appear in necklaces next to glass and amber beads³¹. Apparently, they were used by Barbarians in similar way as Belgian medals worn on his chest, together with European and native pendants, by Tata Beaka, chief of the Wagena people on the Congo, photographed in 1997 by a known Polish photographer Krzysztof Miller (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Tata Beaka, the chief of the Wagena people on the river Congo in 1997 with his necklace; photo by K. Miller, Agencja Gazeta.

Another function which Roman coins apparently had among Barbarians was ideological: their iconography – the imperial portrait in particular – apparently played a special role in the Germanic symbolic language. Images seen on obverses of Roman coins must have been mysterious and fascinating to non-Romans, especially within Germanic societies, where portraiture was avoided. Gold plaques cast from coin obverses appear as fittings in Barbarian war gear and belts³² or as ornaments on wooden caskets³³. Representations of Roman emperors played a more important role still: pierced, looped and/or framed gold coins and medallions (Fig. 4), often with granulated triangles added over the obverse image (Fig. 5), were used as a symbol of prestige and power by the Germanic elite, always worn face-side up, as shown by their invariably worn reverses³⁴. Ownership and display of the imperial image, particularly in gold, was undoubtedly a matter of prestige for the high-ranking Barbarians.

Roman coins were also used as a handy stock of scrap metal. Denarii, sestertii and a solidus all occurred in a silversmith's hoard from Frombork (former Frauenburg), east of

³¹ Bursche A. 1998, p. 151–156; Bursche A., Okulicz-Kozaryn J. 1999; Bursche A., Hauła K. 2004.

³² v. Carnap-Bornheim C., Ilkjær J. 1996, vol. 5, p. 231–233 and p. 236, fig. 177; vol. 6, p. 222–223; vol. 7, pls. 237–238; Ilkjær J. 2001, vol. 9, p. 185–187; vol. 10, p. 98; Becker M. 2000, p. 204; v. Carnap-Bornheim C. 2002, Quast D. 2005.

³³ Grempler W. 1888, p. 11–12, pl. VII.

³⁴ Bursche A. 1998, 2000, 2001; cf. Seipel W. ed. 1999.

Gdańsk³⁵. Finds of partly melted and halved denarii are recorded in the context of silversmith's workshops³⁶. Denarii in the bog at Illerup Ådal on Jutland and in some other moor offerings were often found in purses together with scrap metal pieces³⁷. Without doubt they served as a reserve of metal for repairing elements of military equipment of Germanic warriors or for adding silver adornment to them. Silver and gold ornaments, valuables and armour fittings, often are identical in chemical content to denarii or solidi, some even corresponding to the coins in weight³⁸. Apparently, Roman coinage was in Barbaricum a very useful source of metal.



Fig. 4. Romanów, distr. Krasnystaw (PL), a Probus aureus, first pierced, later, supplied with a suspension loop; private collection (Bursche A. 1998, p. 152); photo by M. Dąbski (scale 1:1).



Fig. 5. Suspended solidus of Valentinianus II minted in Treveri (RIC IX, p. 21 no 39) unknown Barbarian find-spot, from the collection of the Polish king Stanislaus August Poniatowski, unpublished; National Museum of Ukrainian History in Kiev (Albertrandi J. Ch.1799, p. 236); photo by B. Kashtanov (scale 1:1).



Fig. 6. Gródek Nabużny, distr. Hrubieszów (PL); pierced counterfeit subaeratus found at the Late Roman settlement, unpublished; Muzeum im. ks. St. Staszica, Hrubieszów; photo by M. Bogacki (scale 1:1).

Finds of imitations of Roman coins in Barbaricum are not very common although the technology of counterfeiting, as proved by recent research, was quite simple³⁹. Certainly it did not pose a problem for Barbarian smiths and jewellery-makers who were familiar with sophisticated techniques as e.g., filigree⁴⁰. The craftsmen were well acquainted with the technique of silver-plating and gilding, which they used also on coins. This is confirmed e.g., by the discovery in 2008 on site of the Gothic settlement at Gródek nad Bugiem (eastern Poland) of a Barbarian imitation – a gold subaeratus, possibly produced locally (Fig. 6).

The most frequently imitated issues were denarii of the Antoninian dynasty, next to them, 3rd century aurei, siliquae and solidi of the House of Constantine. Quite commonly it is accepted that counterfeits of denarii were produced, starting from the second quarter of the 3rd

³⁵ Peiser F. E., Kemke H. 1914.

³⁶ E.g. at Gudme and Lundeberg (Jensen S., Watt M. 1993; Thomsen P. O. 1994; Vang Petersen P. 1994; Jørgensen L. 1994, 1998), Klein Körös (Gustavs S. 1989, 1998) and probably in Jakuszowice (Godłowski K. 1995, p. 159; Bursche A., Kaczanowski P., Rodzińska-Nowak J. 2000, p. 117).

³⁷ Ilkjær J. 1990, 1993; Kromann A. 1992.

³⁸ Werner J. 1980.

³⁹ Stribny H. 2003; Lind L. 2007; Peter M. 2008.

⁴⁰ Andersson K. 1993, 1995.

century, on the Lower Danube⁴¹. In point of fact definitely this took place at the latest even in early 3rd century, as attested by four imitations struck with the same pair of dies recovered from the bog at Illerup (Fig. 7). Dendrochronological evidence shows that this deposit of military equipment could not have been thrown into the lake later than in the first years of the 3rd century⁴². Moreover, the presence of four identical counterfeits inside one of the pouches suggests they could have been produced by a local silversmith, member of the defeated band whose war-gear found its way into the waters at Illerup. Such craftsmen were indispensable to take care of running repairs to what often was quite elaborate military adornment. The deposit from Illerup also features jeweller's tools, as well as two rivets from a shield-grip of an elaborate shield which on their silver gilded heads had an identical impression from the same coin⁴³. Apparently, a craftsman from Illerup would have had no problem with producing an imitation denarius.



Fig. 7. Illerup Ådal, distr. Århus (DK), counterfeits of denarius; Moesgård Museum; photo by P. Dehlhom (scale 1:1).



Fig. 8. Høje Tåstrup, distr. Copenhagen (DK), necklace with a counterfeit aureus from a grave; Kropedal Museum for Astronomi – Nyere Tid – Arkæologi; photo by J. Weng (scale 1:1).

That counterfeits could have been produced deeper within Barbaricum is suggested also by the discovery of a casting mould from the Gothic settlement at Gródek nad Bugiem, dated to 3rd and 4th c. AD⁴⁴. The diameter (18 mm) of openings seen on this piece suggests that it could have been used for casting coin blanks. The same settlement yielded a particularly large concentration of imitation denarii, including subaeratii. Similar later imitations of gold coins which form a particularly great concentration along the so-called

⁴¹ Stribny H. 2003; Peter M. 2008.

⁴² Daly F. 1998.

⁴³ Cf. footnote 32.

⁴⁴ Kokowski A. 1995, p. 62 Fig. 38, p. 137.

Dancheny-Brangstrup horizon between the Lower Danube and Denmark⁴⁵, may have been produced locally. It is certain that imitation gold medallions were produced in the 4th c. in Scandinavia, presumably, on Gotland⁴⁶. A relatively small number of imitations of gold coins and medallions and the fact that in the 3rd century they were pierced, and in the 4th, fitted with suspension loops (Fig. 8), indicates that they were produced for reasons of prestige.

Finds of 5th c. imitations of solidi known from the Baltic zone (Fig. 9) presumably were produced on Ostrogothic territory in the South and reached North with the rest of the gold⁴⁷. They testify to the emergence of local Germanic minting only in the period of formation in the West and South of the first Germanic states.



Fig. 9. Smoldzino, distr. Słupsk (PL), counterfeit of a Theodosius II solidus; Muzeum Narodowe, Szczecin (Ciołek R. 2007, p. 224 No 309, Pl. 2); photo by A. Bursche (scale 1:1).

Deposition

Coins could have found their way into the ground for quite prosaic reasons, dropped by their owners or buried for fear of robbery. These were the typical circumstances within the Empire. In Barbaricum, on the other hand, it seems that in quite many cases deposition of coins was ritual in character.

Depending on their archaeological context it is possible to distinguish four categories of assemblages containing coins that may have been deposited for ideological reasons:

- 1) hoards
- 2) house and settlement deposits
- 3) water deposits
- 4) graves and cemeteries⁴⁸.

Coin hoards may have been a special category of personal belongings, in their own right, in Barbaricum representing only individual wealth and no objective value, items of personal possession, rather than units of wealth. Hundreds of denarii included in rich dynastic hoards, often together with Roman gold medallions, gold and silver plate as well as jewellery, playing the role of high-status valuables, attested to rank, prestige and power (Fig. 10). In such a context the purpose of deposition may have been apotropaic – to carry their owner's power (*mana*) into the afterlife, in the same way as grave goods accompanying the deceased in death⁴⁹. In keeping with an ancient custom these objects would have been destroyed – bent out of shape, broken or cut up (Fig. 11). Tradition recorded in sagas of the later period suggests that the 5th and 6th century inhabitants of the Baltic zone would bury their property

⁴⁵ Alföldi A. 1928-9; Henriksen M. B. 1992; Andersson K. 1993; Bursche A. 1998, p. 151–155; 2002a.

⁴⁶ Öhnel T. 1996.

⁴⁷ Fagerlie J. M. 1967; Ciołek R. 2005.

⁴⁸ Earlier on this subject cf. Rosenstock D. 1982; Berger F. 1996; Bursche A., Okulicz-Kozaryn 1999; Steuer H. 2002; Bemmann J. 2005.

⁴⁹ Gurevich A. 1968; Hines J. 1989; Bradley 1990; Hedeager L. 1991; 1992, p. 31–77; Bursche A. 1998, p. 222–223.

for later use in the Valhalla⁵⁰. Consequently, these Migration Period deposits, given the absence of graves in that region, represent a unique form of cenotaph; their burial had a sacred/religious/ideological and symbolic dimension.



Fig. 10. Boroichichi, distr. Berestechko (UA), late 4th century hoard with denarii; Państwowe Muzeum Archeologiczne, Warsaw (Mitkova-Szubert K. 1999); photo by A. Ring.



Fig. 11. Grossbodungen, distr. Eichsfeld (D), bog deposit of solidi and scrap-silver plates; Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie Sachsen-Anhalt – Landesmuseum für Vorgeschichte Halle (Grünhagen W. 1954); photo by J. Lipták.

An interesting phenomenon is the deposition of coin hoards inside burial grounds. Deposits of sestertii are known from Balt necropolia⁵¹. Unfortunately, their archaeological

⁵⁰ E.g. Icelandic Egils (Egill Skallagrímsson) saga – cf. Gurevich A. 1968, p. 126–138; Piekarczyk S. 1979, p. 173–179; Bursche A. 1996a, p. 45.

⁵¹ Bolin S. 1926b; Bursche A. 1992; Zapolska A. 2008.

context is obscure. Much more insight is provided by a hoard of aurei from the middle of the 3rd c. deposited inside a Gothic cemetery at Stara Wieś in eastern Poland⁵². Some 28 quarter fragments of 22 aurei were discovered inside four small pits, each of them 5 cm in diameter. The pits were arranged in a semi-circle = 18 mm in diameter. The fragments of 9 coins had perforations. The aurei were preserved in excellent condition. They were issues ranging from Gordian III to Trajan Decius. Thus, the time-span between the earliest and the latest emission was no more than 15 years. It is highly probable that the aurei in question formed part of war loot taken in the south in AD 251 by Gothic troops⁵³. Subsequently, the coins were deposited as a votive offering within the sacred space of the cemetery, hallowed by local tradition. This is suggested by the fact that prior to deposition they had been destroyed by hacking into quarters, in keeping with Germanic tradition of destroying war booty.



Fig. 12. Świlcza, distr. Rzeszów (PL), a hoard from a Przeworsk culture dwelling; Muzeum Okręgowe, Rzeszów (Gruszczyńska A. 1999); photo by J. Hura.

Archaeological context of some of the Late Roman and Early Migration Periods assemblages suggests that Roman money played a very important role in rites of passage (*rites des passages*) of northern Barbarians. Coin deposits have been discovered under dwellings or inside stone walls, placed there presumably as foundation-offerings (Fig. 12)⁵⁴. Coins cast into springs, wells, lakes and moors, presumably played a similar role of chthonic sacrifice (Fig. 13)⁵⁵.

⁵² Radig W. 1942/43.

⁵³ Zos. I 24,2 – cf. *Zosimos, Historia nova* 1, Les Belles Lettres (Paris, 1971), ed. Fr. Paschoud, p. 147–148; Demougeot E. 1969, p. 413–417; Wolfram H. 1990, p. 55–57; Bursche A. 1996a, p. 112.

⁵⁴ Cf. particularly on Gotland (Lind L. 1981, p. 13–100); also in Świlcza in south-eastern Poland (Gruszczyńska A. 1999), Gąski in Wielkopolska (unpublished materials kindly made available to me by A. Cofta-Broniewska) or Gudme on Fyn (Kromann A. 1987, 1989, 1990a, 1994; Vang Petersen P. 1994); cf. also Bjerg L. 2007; Ciołek R. 2008.

⁵⁵ E.g. the spring at Bad Pyrmont in Lower Saxony (Geschwendt F. 1978, p. 14–50; Teegen W.-L. 1999, p. 213–258), the lake at Buczek in Pomerania (Geisslinger H. 1981; Raddatz 1994; Ciołek 2007, p. 19–20) or the solidi bog deposits from the area of the Baltic Sea basin (Fagerlie J. 1967; Geisslinger H. 1967; Hedeager L. 1991; Ciołek R. 2007); on the Roman coin finds from rivers cf. Bursche A. 2004a.



Fig. 13. Buczek, distr. Białogard (PL), current view on the lake which yielded Roman Period deposits (Raddatz 1994); photo by A. Bursche.



Fig. 14. Weklice, distr. Elbląg (PL), grave no 379 of Wielbark culture with a pierced denarius of Trajan; Muzeum Archeologiczno-Historyczne in Elbląg (Bursche A., Okulicz J. 1999); photo by M. Dąbski.

Roman coins were also a very common funeral offering (Fig. 14). In some cases they played the role of typical grave goods, appearing as pendants, elements of necklaces, attire (in pouches attached at the belt) or war gear. Therefore their presence cannot be interpreted as intentional and ritual. Nevertheless it was observed in a number of cremation burials that unlike other grave goods coins showed no trace of having been in the funerary pyre⁵⁶. This suggests they were deposited after cremation, i.e. during the ceremony of the burial itself and that their significance was ritual. Also quite frequently the position of a coin in an inhumation grave suggests its intentional deposition as the so-called *obolus*⁵⁷. Nevertheless it must be emphasised that this rite had nothing to do with the one known to us from classical tradition, rather, it had its common anthropological roots in rites of passages⁵⁸.

In West Balt societies of Late Roman Period (particularly the 3rd century) the shiny and gold-like brass sestertii were commonly used as grave offerings. We know of cemeteries

⁵⁶ A.g. denarius from Piecka Dąbrowa in the central Poland (Kubiak S. 1979, p. 63).

⁵⁷ Rosenstock D. 1982; Berger F. 1992, p. 216–222; Bursche A., Okulicz-Kozaryn J. 1999.

⁵⁸ Eliade M. 1953.

in Samland where every other grave produced at least one sestertius. Single or several (up to 20) coins were noted in burials in various positions, usually close to the head, sometimes inside a birch bark vessel⁵⁹. Let me note that the birch tree is thought to have played a significant role in Balt mythology and features prominently in many Balt *dainas* – sagas – where it has the function of the “cosmic tree”⁶⁰. In the absence of a birch bark container coins were placed inside an accessory vessel or underneath it, sometimes also wrapped in a piece of cloth. Deposition of sestertii in Balt graves appears most frequently to have been an intentional act associated presumably with specific beliefs from the sphere of rites of passage. It is interesting that in Balt areas (especially Lithuania) the custom of placing coins in graves continued until the 19th century.

Chieftain’s graves of the Leuna-Hassleben-Zakrzów horizon from Thuringia, Bohemia and Silesia, dated to late 3rd century AD, are an interesting example of a specific funeral rite among the Barbarian elite. Aurei, mostly of Gallic emperors, probably part of payment made to German chieftains for leading their troops against Gallienus (*ingentia auxilia Germanorum*), are usually found inside the mouth of the buried individuals. In some cases the aureus is substituted by a golden finger-ring or a round-shaped plaque⁶¹.

The tradition of furnishing sumptuous graves with gold coins, noted in Germanic areas, continued from the 3rd c. into the 4th and the 5th century and later⁶². It was then carried by the migrating Germanic population to the South and particularly, to the West, being especially marked in the territories of the Franks⁶³.

Conclusions

The special and multi-faceted function of Imperial coinage in Barbarian societies is illustrated best by gold pieces circulated in the North of Europe during Late Roman and Early Migration Periods (Fig. 15). Their purpose varied considerably depending on the chronological period or territory, ranging from specific social, political and religious roles in a system of gift-exchange, through symbols of rank and status to tokens of loyalty and friendship in political and personal contacts. Roman gold medallions in particular, their imitations and Nordic bracteates, had very specific functions in this respect, comparable with medieval insignia, where the Roman emperor’s portrait played an important ideological and charismatic role, comparable to the Christian cross. Images seen on 4th century imitation medallions and 5th century Germanic bracteates are accompanied by imperial insignia shown next to local power symbols and Roman titles written in sacred runes⁶⁴. Roman gold was often melted down for reuse as more familiar, native primitive valuables, such as spiral rings or ingots, or into different forms of status symbol, such as neck-rings, Kolbet-bracelets, medallion imitations and later Scandinavian bracteates, both used in the Migration-Period weight-based and/or prestige economies⁶⁵.

⁵⁹ Bolin S. 1926b; Michelbertas M. 1972, 1995, 2001; Bursche A. 1992; Nowakowski W. 1996, p. 74–76, 2001.

⁶⁰ Suchocki J. 1991, p. 283–286.

⁶¹ Werner J. 1973.

⁶² A.g. in Fullerö in Uppland (S) – Lamm K. 1963; Andersson K. 1993, p. 236; Nystrup on Zealand (DK) – Lund-Hansen U. 1987, p. 410; Andersson K. 1993, p. 25 or Årslev on Fyn (DK) – Lund-Hansen U. 1987, p. 426; Storgaard B. 1990, p. 41–42; in Silesia (PL): Pęciszów – Jahn M. 1926, p. 103, Bursche A. 1998, p. 153–154 note 154, Raków – Jahn M. 1926, p. 103; Żerniki Wielkie, grave 12 – Zolt L. 1935, p. 17, 66–7, pl. 2 and in Lower Saxony (D) cf. Berger F. 1996, p. 217–222; about later finds cf. Berghaus P. 1961 and Zedelius V. 1973.

⁶³ Böhme H. 1974, p. 150; Gorecki J. 1975, p. 241 and finds nos 76, 293, 382, 430, 431, 435; Werner J. 1935; Wieczorek A. et alii eds. 1996.

⁶⁴ Vierck H. 1981; Andrén A. 1991; Axboe M., Kromann A. 1992; Seebold E. 1992; Düwel K. 1992; Lamm J. P. 1994; Axboe M. 1994, 2004, 2007; Bursche 1998, 2000, 2001; Pesch A. 2007.

⁶⁵ Hedeager L. 1988, 1991.



Fig. 15. Fuglsang Sorte Muld II, Bornholm (DK), hoard of solidi, gold Nordic bracteats and pendants; National Museum of Denmark (Horsnæs H. 2002; Axboe M. 2002); photo by J. Lee.

There was no uniform function of Roman coinage in Northern Europe. Its role was that of symbol or sign in social communication of a heterogeneous meaning. The Barbarian societies of Late Antiquity lacked clear dividing lines separating the economic from the social, political or symbolic function of coins, and indeed this continued to be the distinctive feature in Northern Europe until the medieval period or even the modern times of market economy and market mentality.

Abbreviations

FSt, *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, Münster.

RGA, *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, Beck H. et alii (eds.), 2 ed., Berlin, New York.

RIC, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. 9, J. W. E. Pearce, London.

SFMA, *Studien zu Fundmünzen der Antike*, Alföldi M. R.- (ed.), Berlin.

WN, *Wiadomości Numizmatyczne*, Warszawa.

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