



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Roman coins in Iceland

Roman remnants or Viking exotica

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Davíð Bjarni Heiðarsson

Maí 2010

Háskóli Íslands
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Fornleifafræði

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ÁGRIP

Í þessari ritgerð verður fjallað um Rómverska peninga sem fundist hafa á Íslandi. Peningarnir hafa verið gáta í Íslenskri fornleifafræði síðan fyrsti peningurinn fannst fyrir tilviljun árið 1905. Peningarnir verða rannsakaðir út frá sögulegu, fornleifafræðilegu og myntfræðilegu sjónarhorni, til að reyna að komast að því hvenær og hvernig þeir hafa komið til Íslands. Kristján Eldjárn framkvæmdi nokkuð ítarlegar rannsóknir á peningunum sem fundist höfðu þegar hann skrifar bókina Gengið á reka árið 1948 og kemst að þeirri niðurstöðu að peningarnir hafa líklegast komið til landsins með Rómverjum sem hafa villst norður frá Bretlandseyjum. Hann útilokar að peningarnir hafi komið frá hinum Norðurlöndunum á tímum víkinga vegna skorts á þessari gerð peninga þar. Eftir fund fjórða og síðasta af þeim peningum sem stuðst er við í þessari rannsókn kemst Þór Magnússon aftur á móti að þeirri niðurstöðu að peningarnir séu að öllum líkindum frá Norðurlöndum og hafi komið til landsins á tímum víkinga, ekki Rómverja. Ég kem til með að nýta nýjustu rannsóknir innan myntfræði á Norðurlöndum ásamt þekkingu á klassískri og norrænni fornleifafræði til að reyna að komast að líklegustu ferðaleið peninganna. Þegar allar upplýsingar hafa verið metnar að fullu kemst ég að þeirri niðurstöðu að líklegasta ferðaleið peningana er frá Norðurlöndum og þaðan til Íslands.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Early one evening in the summer of 1923 a young man was strolling round the valley of Hvaldalur on the southeast coast of Iceland. The valley is known to be one of the most severe and inhospitable areas in Iceland, harsh weather with heavy rain and storms presenting great danger to visitors even today; cars are being blown off the road by violent wind blows, windows of cars and caravans braking from stones and other debris carried off and swirling through the air as it whizzes down the mountains on its way towards the open sea. Vegetation in the valley is extremely sparse, sand and stones making up the ground surface. It is in this place the young man is walking when he sees something lying on the ground glittering in the afternoon sun. He picks up the tiny object and looks at it. It is a coin. Probing the soil around the find spot with his fingers to make sure there are no other coins hidden under the rocky surface, he makes no further discoveries and quickly carries on with his stroll.

This is the fictionalised account of how a British geologist came upon a Roman coin on Icelandic soil. Prior to this rather astounding discovery, only one Roman coins had been found in Iceland. An additional four coins from the Roman era were later to be discovered, contributing to the mystery, which still puzzles archaeologists and numismatists: How did six coins stamped with the portrait of Roman emperors end up on Iceland and when did this happen?

In the present paper, the enigmatic presence of Roman coins within Viking Age contexts on Iceland will be addressed from numismatic, archaeological and historic perspective. The fields of Classical archaeology and Scandinavian archaeology will be combined with the intention to obtain the most valid conclusion possible. The aim of the present paper is to present different theories regarding the questions noted above. Following a presentation of the archaeological material, the body of material will be evaluated with regards to each individual coin's authenticity within the particular find context. A brief account of the Roman historical context will be presented, providing the contextual background for the archaeological material and conducting to the evaluation of different theories presented in the final section of the paper. Also, the

specific coin type's prevalence within the Scandinavian countries as well as Scotland and Ireland will be studied in order to identify a general distributional picture.

2. THE MATERIAL

Individual descriptions of the four *antoniniani* and the two *dupondii* are presented in Table I, all entries based on information given in Eldjárn (2000). Images of the *antoniniani* (A), (B), (C), and (D) are presented in Table III–IV. The available information regarding discovery and provenience of the coins are put forward in the following section 2.1, and issues regarding authenticity will be discussed in section 2.2.

2.1. LOCATIONS AND ACCOUNTS OF DISCOVERY

The farmstead of Bragðavellir is located on the southeast coast of Iceland, the farmland running along the sea line in the bottom of the Hamarsfjörður fjord. Within this area (Table II, 1 and 2), the *antoniniani* (A) and (C) were discovered by the owner of the farmstead – the second discovery being made after a 28-year interval. The area is described in Eldjárn (2000)¹:

”Bragðavellir standa niðri undir sjó nær botni Hamarsfjarða. Í suðaustur frá bænum gengur dálítið dalverpi milli miðmundarfjalls og Bragðavallarhóla; dalbotninn er fremur flatur en hallar þó til austurs- eða norðausturs, enda rennur lítil á, Selá, austast í dalnum, neðan undir Bragðavallahólum. Í miðju dalverpinu, sem heitir Djúpibotn, er syðst og örskammt frá fjallshlíðinni lyngi vaxin, aflíðandi jarðvegstorfa, en norðaustan undir henni er allt blásið niður í aur og farið að gróa lítið eitt aftur. Upp úr síðustu aldamótum fór Jón bóndi Sigfússon á Bragðavöllum að finna mannvistarleifar í þessum uppblæstri.”

¹ Eldjárn (2000) p. 26: *”The farm of Bragðavellir lies near the sea at the bottom of the Hamarsfjörður fjord. Between the mountain Miðmundarfjall and the hills of Bragðavallahólar southeast of the farm is a small valley; The bottom of the valley is generally plain but lowers in the east – or northeast, where the river Selá runs under Bragðavallahólar to the east. In the middle of the valley, which is called Djúpibotn, just south of the ascending mountain is a small mount overgrown with heather. On the north-eastern slope, however, all vegetation has been blown away by the wind, revealing the rocky surface, though some vegetation is slowly beginning to reappear. Around the beginning of the past century Jón Sigurðsson, farmer from Bragðavellir, began to find ancient remains in this windblown area”.*

The coin of Probus (C) was discovered in 1905 together with a glass bead², though it was not until 1932 that the finds were handed over to the National Museum in Reykjavik. Other archaeological remains were identified within the same area; in his letter to the director of the National Museum, Páll Jónsson, a keen amateur archaeologist from Djúpivogur, describes the traces of two houses located close to each other. He writes: *"You can see stones that seem to be laid out in rows, and even floor tiles, and the farmer has told me that pieces of charcoal has been found in the area, and between the rows of stones there was a very thin layer of black charcoal residue."* ³

In 1933 the coin of Aurelian (A) was found within the same area and was sent to the National Museum along with various other finds, which had been collected over the years.⁴ Shortly afterwards the state antiquarian, Matthías Þórðarsson, arrived at Bragðavellir to conduct an archaeological survey. Unfortunately the tough weather conditions had obliterated most traces that might have been left of the purported settlement, although Þórðarsson did identify the remains of a construction made from mountain rock stones.

The recorded finds from Bragðavellir mostly consist of small fragments of worked stone and iron objects, glass beads, and teeth from cattle. The material is of the traditional Iron Age type recorded within Viking age contexts in Scandinavia⁵.

During the summer periods of the years 1963 to 1967, archaeological excavations were carried out on the land of the Hvítárholt farmstead (Table II, 1). The site had yielded several Viking Age structures and artefacts. During the 1966 season, while excavating a house, the field supervisor, Þór Magnússon, discovered the *antoninianus* (B). The coin was located inside house no. VIII, which was one of the largest at the site and reckoned to be the second oldest⁶. In his report, Magnússon stated that the coin was covered with verdigris, yet very well preserved, having suffered only minor corrosion⁷.

2 Þjms. 1198

3 Letter dated 10.09.1909; *"Þar vottar fyrir steinaröðum, sem sýnast að vera reglubundnar, og jafnvel gólfhellum, og bóndinn segir mér, að viðarkolsbrot hafi fundist þarna og verið eins og næfubunnt, svart kolamylnulag innan steinaraðanna."*

4 *More detailed information on the finds can be found in Eldjárn (2000) pp. 26–38, and Eldjárn (1949) p. 2*

5 Eldjárn (1949) p. 3

6 Magnússon (1972) p. 55

7 Magnússon (1972) p. 71

The circumstances surrounding the discovery of the Diocletian *antoninianus* (D) has already been presented with poetic licence at the outset of the present paper. The young gentleman in question was Mr. Leonard Hawkes, a British college teacher and practiced geologist, who had travelled to Iceland in order to study the island's topography and geology⁸. Before his return to England, Hawkes handed over the coin to the National Museum in Reykjavik, where it is still kept and on display.

For the location of Hvaldalur, see Table II, 1.

Allegedly, the *dupondius* (E), probably minted during the reign of Phillip the Arab, was found at the Skansinn renaissance fort in the Westman Islands off the south coast of Iceland. Claiming to have found the coin lodged between the building blocks, the discoverers handed the *dupontius* over to the National Museum. This was in 1991, since then, however, only minuscule scholarly interest has been shown this Roman coin because of the great uncertainty regarding the time of deposition. It is impossible to assert both *how* and *when* the coin ended up within the wall construction, and for all we know it could be a hoax⁹. As a consequence, the *dupontius* (E) will not be included in the present study of Roman coins found within Viking Age contexts.

Likewise, the badly corroded *dupondius* (F) will not be incorporated in the research material. In 1993, excavation and remodelling of the Arnarhóll mount was being carried out in the centre of Reykjavík. The coin was discovered inside the remains of an 18th–19th century house, though in his report the field supervisor expresses certain doubts concerning the authenticity of the find, noting that it could have been planted while excavation was in progress¹⁰.

2.2. AUTHENTICITY: A CRITICAL DISCUSSION

The genuine nature of the individual coins has been asserted by authorities, however, there has been some dispute regarding the authenticity of the coins (A), (C), and (D) within their context of discovery. Supposedly, all four *antoniniani* were found within or

⁸ *A short account is found* Eldjárn (1948) p. 12

⁹ Eldjárn (2000) pp. 36–37

¹⁰ Edvardsson (1994) p. 25

within close proximity to Viking Age sites, but due to the fact that only coin (B) was documented during archaeological excavation, information concerning coins (A), (C), and (D) are utterly reliant on the validity of the unofficial accounts given by the individuals involved. As a consequence, the accounts presented in the above section 2.1. will be evaluated individually, addressing the issues concerning reliability.

The two Roman coins from Bragðavellir have been regarded with some scepticism among scholars, the main issue being the insufficiently recorded find contexts¹¹. As noted above (section 2.1.), however, the specific area has yielded archaeological material of Viking Age date as well, strengthening the plausibility and credibility of the account.

The *antoninianus* of Tacitus (B), which was found during the excavations at Hvítárholt, is described in detail by Þór Magnússon in the excavation report. In his report Magnússon specifically states that he personally made the discovery and that the authenticity of the coin within the specific context is beyond discussion.¹²

The relatively common prevalence of Roman coins in Britain¹³ has led to speculations, whether Hawkes might have brought the coin with him to Iceland with the droll intention of hoaxing the Icelandic archaeologists and historians. But who was this man, this Mr. Leonard Hawkes? Judging by his *curriculum vitae*, the late Mr. Hawkes was by no accounts a dubious character in any respect relevant to the present study. Besides practicing as teacher at Bedford College in London, Leonard Hawkes was a highly respected geologist with a speciality in Icelandic geology, travelling to Iceland numerous times from 1912 onwards. Furthermore, Hawkes had been appointed Fellow of the Royal Society and held academic posts within the study field of geology in Great Britain.¹⁴

Hawkes' discovered the Roman coin, supposedly on the ground surface, during a research trips to *Hamarsfjörður*. The question thus remains; is this Mr. Hawkes – a scholar with fervour for igneous rocks and stones – really the devious prankster as has been speculated? Certainly, it is *possible* that he did plant the Roman coin, however,

¹¹ Holt, *pers. comm.*

¹² Magnússon (1972) p. 71

¹³ See e.g. Horsnæs (2006) p. 53

¹⁴ Dunham (1982)

evaluating whether this is the most *plausible* scenario, the answer must be ‘no’. To this point, there is no reason to exclude coin (D) from the present study.

Preferably, all archaeological material should initially be studied *in situ* by professionals. Removing an object from its original context without careful documentation, important information might be lost. The authenticity of the coins (A), (C), and (D) has been questioned because of the missing archaeological documentation. However, the chronological correspondence between all four *antoniniani* supports their individual credibility, which is further strengthened by the discovery of coin (B) within a securely dated context.

3. MONEY, MONEY, MONEY: THE SCIENCE OF NUMISMATICS

In his comprehensive work from 1996, *Numismatisk Leksikon*, Peter Flensburg defines numismatics as “*the study of coins, from primitive payment methods and coins to medallions, money bills, tokens, and other related historical objects such as coin weights and minting tools etc.*”¹⁵

Coins represent an excellent tool for dating archaeological contexts, most often providing either a *terminus post quem* or a *terminus ante quem*. However, the field of numismatic research encompasses multiple aspects; focusing on the physical perspective, the application of methods used in the natural sciences will yield information otherwise unattainable for archaeologists and historians. For instance, identification of the metallic composition – by means of e.g. spectroscopic analysis – provides information of great value in the study of the socio-economical and socio-political conditions etc.

The archaeological study of ancient coins – and Roman coins in particular – is focused on the iconography and the accompanying inscriptions. Roman coins constitute a powerful demonstration of imperial propaganda, political messages skilfully being conveyed to the people around the Empire through the deliberate employment of specific iconographic elements¹⁶.

¹⁵ Flensburg (1996) p. 255

¹⁶ *An excellent book on the subject is N. Hannestad’s Roman Art and Imperial Policy* (1988)

Up until the mid-20th century, numismatists regarded the iconography of coins as a ‘pictorial language’, which could be directly translated¹⁷. In the introduction to the first edition of vol. I of the corpus *Roman Imperial Coinage*, Mattingly and Sydenham made this conviction explicit by stating that coins “...were, in short, the newspapers of the day”¹⁸. Years of research, however, have revealed a far greater complexity within the iconographical ‘language’. The inadequacy of the traditional, at times almost rigid, interpretation has been recognized, and the interpretational dependence on the specific historical contexts has been acknowledged.

4. THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE

The period during the reign of the so-called ‘soldier-emperors’ was a perilous time for the Roman Empire. Financially and politically, the empire was in ruins after years of warfare against northern barbarian tribes and the Persians in the east. Unlike earlier times, where the ruling emperor himself would appoint his successor, the new emperors were now generals, who had been chosen to rule by their legions – hence the name *soldier-emperors*. Their power relied on the support of their legions, and when that support came to an end, usually so did their lives.

The time of the soldier emperors covers a period of app. 50 years, spanning from the death of Septimus Alexander in 235 to the proclamation of Diocletian’s emperorship in 284.

A brief account of the history of the Late Roman Empire from the year 270 and until the coin reform of Diocletian in 296¹⁹ is presented in the present section.

Written evidence from this period is sparse, more or less restricted to the much-debated *Historia Augusta*²⁰. Believed to have been written around the time of Diocletian or Constantine the Great, the *Historia* accounts the history of the Roman emperors ruling during the years 117 – 284.

17 Hedlund (2008) pp. 21–29

18 Mattingly&Sydenham (1921) p. 22

19 For references, see Mattingly (1971) ch. IX and XI

20 For a discussion of *Historia Augusta*, see Baynes (1926); Syme (1968), (1971), and (1983).

Coins, however, offer a great source of information regarding the period. The sheer number of coins relating to a specific emperor usually reflects the duration of his reigning period, i.e. the fewer coins in circulation, the shorter the emperorship. Likewise, iconographical studies might yield valuable information.

In the year 270, the emperor Claudius dies from the plague that has been roaming the empire. After his death, his brother Quintillus was chosen as the new emperor by both the army and the senate. Roughly three months later, however, another man claimed the throne - and because they regarded him as a greater general, the army abandoned Quintillus in support of the new candidate. He was a man of humble birth and a veteran soldier. His name was Aurelian, and he was the man that would revive the ailing Roman Empire.

Both the Gallic Empire in the West and the Palmyrenes in the East were threatening the unity of the empire, Germanic tribes at the same time laying pressure on the North and North-eastern borders. Eventually, Aurelian managed to reincorporate the Gallic Empire into the Roman Empire and to destroy Palmyra. In order to defend the Northern territories, the Danube frontiers were moved from Dacia to the right bank of the Danube River, thus strengthening the defence line. Following his victories, Aurelian embellished himself with the titles of *Arabicus Maximus*, *Dacicus Maximus*, *Germanicus Maximus* etc., following Roman custom²¹.

Following his successful campaigns in the East and the West, Aurelian triumphantly entered Rome, where he initiated a mint reform, calling back old and issuing new coins. Most notably, the quality of the *antoniniani* was improved with an increase in the percentage of silver.

Aurelian's death in the spring of 275 was followed by an *interregnum* period, the exact duration of the *interregnum* still being the subject of discussion among scholars.

As a result of a compromise made between the senate and the army, the senator Tacitus was appointed the new emperor. Already an old man of 75, Tacitus passed away by natural causes only 6 months into his emperorship.

²¹ Hannedsted (1986) p. 300

Tacitus' successor was the short-lived Florian, who was killed by his own men after a mere three-month reign as emperor of the Roman Empire. Florian was succeeded by Probus, an able general, who had the support of the Roman troops in Syria and Egypt.

Like Aurelian, Probus was a general of the old school. His harsh disciplinary demands from the Roman armies eventually led to a revolt among the soldiers, ending with the murder of Probus in the fall of 282.

Carus, the Praetorian Prefect, had remained loyal to the emperor, still the army chose him as the new emperor. Just as his predecessors, Carus had spent his life in the Roman army and knew very well the foundations for his imperial power.

In early months of 283, Carus marched with the army towards the East to meet the Persians, who had been threatening the borders for years. In the summer of that same year, however, Carus died under mysterious circumstances, the official version being that the emperor had been killed by a lightning strike. A more likely scenario is that Carus was murdered by his Praetorian Prefect 22.

The emperor's two sons were the most obvious candidates to succeed their father. The imperial power was divided between the brothers, Carinus ruling the Western provinces, and Numerian ruling the Eastern. Numerian soon brought the Persian war to an end. As the army marched back towards Rome, Numerian suddenly fell sick and died. Following the death of Numerian, Carus' Praetorian Prefect, Aper, had been hoping for the support of the Roman army in the East in his personal pursuit of imperial power. However, the generals had other plans, and instead they appointed Diocles, the relatively unknown commander of the Imperial Lifeguard (*protectores domestici*), as the new emperor of the Roman Empire.

Having assumed the imperial title, Diocles – ruling under the name of *Diocletian* – immediately gathered an army and marched towards the West. In the valley of Margus, the new emperor met Carinus and his armies in battle, resulting in the death of Carinus, who was killed by one of his officers. Diocles spared the lives of the soldiers and generals of Carinus' army, thereby avoiding much bloodshed and showing exceptional

22 Mattingly (1971) p. 322

political skill. This rekindled the work, which Claudian, Aurelian, and Probus had initiated, and during Carinus' 21-year reign, the Roman Empire was stabilised.

In 286, Diocletian granted Maximian, his lifelong friend and comrade in arms, the power over the Western provinces by appointing him *Augustus* with powers equal to Diocletian himself, ruling the Eastern provinces. In 293, in order to make the control of the empire even more efficient, the two emperors each appointed one *Caesar*; Constantinus in the West, and Galerius in the East. The *tetrarchy* was now a reality.

In 286 or early 287²³, a general by the name of Carausius rebelled against the Western Empire, successfully taking over control of Britannia and the north coasts of Gaul. Carausius, chosen by Maximian to lead the Roman fleet against Frankish and Saxon pirates in the English Channel, was suspected of abusing his powers to plunder from the pirates for personal gain. Carausius was sentenced to death by the emperor, but he was warned in time and managed to escape to Britannia, where he was proclaimed emperor by his army.

The first attack against Carausius, launched by Maximian was repelled, and a peace treaty was negotiated. Constantius, the Western *Caesar*, spent years preparing for a second attack against the rebel Carausius, launching a successful attack in 293. He besieged the main port of the Channel navy, Gesoriacum (modern day Boulogne), by drawing a mole across the harbour and thereby closing the town for re-enforcements. The defending forces were rendered defenceless without help, and the town fell. Following the fall of the town, Carausius was murdered by his chief minister, Allectus, who then took over the control.

Constantius spent two years preparing his next move, and in 296 the Roman fleet set sail from Gesoriacum. Two squadrons – one under the command of Constantinus himself, the other under the command of his Praetorian Prefect, Asclepiodotus, defeated Allectus' army. Allectus fled from the lost battle and was subsequently killed by his own men²⁴.

23 Mattingly (1971) p. 331

24 Mattingly (1971) p. 332

The next years were lined with small attacks on the empire, but stability was all in all restored. In 296 Diocletian puts in effect his coin reform. The reform will be discussed later in the article.

5. LATE ROMAN COINAGE

The Roman economic system was already well developed within the Empire by the time Diocletian assumed imperial authority, monetary economy forming an integrated part of the trading system.

Coins were produced in materials as gold (the *aureus*), silver (the *antoninianus* and the *denarius*), bronze (the *sestertius* and the *dupondius*), and copper (*as*).²⁵

The system had remained more or less unchanged since the time of Augustus²⁶ with the introduction of the double *denarius* by the emperor Caracalla, late in the year of 214²⁷. Because the original name of this specific coin has not been recorded by contemporary sources, the double *denarius* is often referred to as the *antoninianus*. The *antoninianus* was supposed to comprise double the amount of silver compared to the old *denarius*; however, the actual portion only contained approximately an extra 50%²⁸.

In the period during the reign of Diocletian, the silver portion of the *antoninianus* was as low as a mere 5%. Understandably, people's confidence in this coin was infinitesimal, and large amounts of older coins were being hoarded and melted down in order to avoid the risk of exchanging them for new, lower silver value coins.

The main part of coins made was used to pay the Roman Legions stationed around the empire. During the time of the soldier emperors a soldier serving in the Roman army would receive roughly 650 *denarii* pro annum²⁹. Consequently, if the entire army were to be paid in newly minted coins, the coin production would have had to exceed 90.000.000 *denarii* a year, the Roman army comprising more than 30 legions of around 4000 to 6000 men³⁰.

25 *The relative value of the coins will not be discussed in the present paper. Information on the subject can be found in* Greene (1986) p. 49

26 *Discussed in* Mattingly&Sydenham (1968a), pp. 1-3

27 Mattingly&Sydenham (1968b), p. 85

28 Greene (1986) p. 61

29 Watson (1969) p. 91

30 Watson (1969) p. 22

Based on thorough studies on numismatic, literary, and archaeological evidence, H. Crawford has reached the conclusion that "... *the use of use of money as a means of exchange was largely limited to the cities of the empire.*" In more rural areas of the empire, barter most likely accounted for the majority of the daily trading transactions³¹.

From an economic anthropological viewpoint, Dr. Richard Reece has argued that monetary economy did not become the predominant form of payment in Britain until around the year 200³². Still, coins are found everywhere within all regions of the Classical Roman Empire and beyond its borders.

Antoniniani are found in great numbers all over the Late Roman Empire, however, only few are found outside the Roman Provinces. The issue regarding the distribution of *antoniniani* outside the Roman regions will be discussed in the following sections 5.1 and 5.2.

5.1. ROMAN COINS IN SCANDINAVIAN VIKING AGE CONTEXTS

The connections between the Roman Empire and Scandinavia have been the subject of discussion for many years. Discoveries of Roman archaeological material have been made across most of Scandinavia, primarily in Denmark and Sweden. Some of the most spectacular Roman archaeological sites located within northern European regions include the sites of Thorsberg and Nydam in Slesvig, the Vimose and Kragehul sites in the Danish region of Funen³³, and Illerup Ådal³⁴ in Jutland, the latter being counted among the most extraordinary archaeological discovery within Scandinavia. Material from these sites includes many kinds of items of Roman origin and Roman style copies produced in the *Barbaricum*. More on the subject of Roman influence and of Roman artefacts discovered in Scandinavia can be found in Dobson (1936) and Ilkær (2002).

The great majority of Roman coins discovered in Scandinavia are *denarii* struck during the 2nd century³⁵. The late Roman *antoninianus*, however, have only been found in limited numbers – 19 in Denmark³⁶ and two in Norway³⁷. A possible explanation

31 Crawford (1970) p. 45, 48

32 Reece (1979)

33 Dobson (1936) p. 83

34 Ilkær (2000)

35 Lind (2006) p. 44; Horsnæs *pers. comm.* *Roman denarii in Scandinavia*, see e.g. Bjerg (2007); Lind (1988)

36 The Danish National Museum, *unpublished list of antoniniani discovered in Denmark*

for the conspicuously scarce extra-imperial prevalence may be found in the low silver value of this specific type of coin.

In her forthcoming book on Roman coins in Danish contexts, Helle Horsnæs advocates that the *antoniniani* should be regarded as bronze coins alongside the base metal coins when studied within contexts postdating the Roman era, as the actual value of *antoniniani* resembles the value of base metal coins more closely than they do the older, higher quality *denarii*³⁸.

In 1998, Korthauer performed a comprehensive study of single finds of Roman coins, issued until the 5th century, which had been discovered within *Germania Libera*³⁹. His research revealed that the number of coins decreased significantly around the 3rd century, then again increasing from the onset of the Diocletian and Constantinian monetary reforms, continuing to increase until the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century⁴⁰.

Generally, research regarding Roman coins found within Viking age context has been badly neglected in the research of Roman coins in Scandinavia, due to the apparent lack of interest in the subject. However, both numismatists and archaeologists are slowly beginning to pay these – often rather enigmatic finds – increasingly more attention.

In his newly published article by the Norwegian numismatist, Svein Gullbekk, has gathered information on the number of coins found in Viking age contexts in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Bornholm. Gullbekk's research revealed that a large portion of the silver *denarii*, which has been found e.g. on Bornholm, are larger and contains a higher quality silver than Scandinavian coins found within the geographical area. Gullbekk suggests that the long-lasting circulation of these coins – some of them still in circulation in Scandinavia nearly 1000 after their production date – might be explained by discovery of hoards in later times. Consequently, this would bring old

37 Kusthistorisk Museum Oslo, *unpublished list of Roman coins in Norway*

38 Horsnæs *pers. comm.*

39 Korthauer (1998) Taf. 9

40 Ward-Perkins (2005) p. 2

coins into circulation again, thus accounting for the presence of the Roman coins within Viking age contexts⁴¹.

In her forthcoming book, Helle Horsnæs points out that no *denarii* have yet been found in Danish Viking Age contexts although quantitatively, they outnumber other Roman coins. At present time, the only coins of Roman origin to have been found within Danish Viking Age contexts are bronze coins⁴².

Bronze coins have been documented at trade centres such as Birka⁴³, Ribe⁴⁴, Hedeby⁴⁵, and at the Tissø marketplace on Sealand⁴⁶. Compared to the number of silver and gold coins discovered, the number of bronze coins is very low, possibly indicating a limited use of this type of coin⁴⁷.

In Denmark, five *antoniniani* have been discovered within Viking Age or Late Germanic Iron Age contexts; one in Viking Age Ribe and four in secondary contexts⁴⁸. This distributional prevalence supports Horsnæs's suggestion that *antoniniani* should be studied from the same premises as base metal coins in spite of their nominal value as silver coins.

5.2. ROMAN COINS IN IRELAND AND SCOTLAND

Due to the close proximity of the Roman settlements in Britannia to Scotland, many Roman coins have been found within the Scottish regions. The distributional pattern generally follows the Scandinavian pattern described above; Silver *denarii* are the most common finds, supplemented by the occasional find of base metal coins⁴⁹.

The total number of coins also seems to correspond closely to the number documented in Denmark. One of the few differences between the Danish and the Scottish find contexts is the total absence of original, Roman sites in Denmark, the

41 Gullbekk (2009) pp. 174–175 *with references*

42 Horsnæs (*forthcoming*) p. 133

43 Rispling (2004) p. 46

44 Feveilie (2006) p. 158

45 Wiechmann (2007) p. 37

46 Jørgensen (2004) p. 196

47 Horsnæs (*forthcoming*) p. 133

48 Horsnæs (2006) p. 51

49 Bateson&Holmes (1997) p. 553–555

Romans never venturing beyond the *limes*. The sheer number of stray finds within the Scottish regions constitutes another contextual difference⁵⁰.

According to Eldjárn (2000), only 15 *antoniniani* dating to the years 260 – 294 have been found in Scotland⁵¹. Recent studies have revealed the existence of an additional 12 *antoniniani*, all published subsequent to Eldjárn's book. Of these 12 coins, four date to the reign of Probus, and three to the reign of Diocletian. Finally, three coins are attributed to Maximian, the Western emperor and co-ruler of Diocletian.

The total number of Roman coins found in Scotland and dating to this specific period, is 158.⁵²

In Ireland, the prevalence of Roman coins is quite frequent, but unfortunately only a marginal part of the coins have been thoroughly published. Access to information regarding new archaeological discoveries of Roman coins in Ireland is practically unobtainable, this field of research is still suffering the deficiency of publication. Whether any new research has been carried out during recent years remains a mystery even to fellow British numismatists⁵³.

6. ROMAN COINS ON ICELAND: THEORIES AND DISCUSSION

The first scholar to study the coins, attempting to assess the origin of the coins, was Kristján Eldjárn, former state antiquarian and president of Iceland. In three articles written in the years 1948-51⁵⁴ Eldjárn introduced his ideas regarding the origin of the coins. He is convinced that the 3 coins found at the east coast of Iceland⁵⁵ must have been transported to the country in the same purse.

The coins were discovered within the area of Bragðavellir, in a location containing several remains of Viking Age activities, as previously noted in section 2.1⁵⁶. However, Eldjárn considers it highly unlikely that the coins should have been brought to Iceland from Scandinavia during the Viking Age. According to his comprehensive studies, the quantity of *antoniniani* found within the Scandinavian countries is so scant

50 Robertsson (1950), (1961), (1971), (1983). Bateson (1989). Bateson & Holmes (1997)

51 A mistake Eldjárn repeats number of times as Antoniniani were not produced after Diocletian's coin reform in 296

52 Robertsson (1950), (1961), (1971), and (1983); Bateson (1989); Bateson & Holmes (1997)

53 Reece, *pers. comm.* One of the few published articles on Roman finds in Ireland is Bateson (1976)

54 Eldjárn (1948), (1949), and (1951)

55 As noted in section 2.1 coin (B) was not discovered until 1966.

56 Eldjárn (1949) p. 4

that the probability of the coins being transported to Iceland with Norsemen is highly unlikely – if not unthinkable⁵⁷. Instead, he suggests that the coins must have travelled from Roman Britain onboard a boat driven off course by stormy weather⁵⁸. Eldjárn tells of Carausius' rule over Britain and how this specific period was the golden age of Rome as the supreme naval power, particularly in the waters of the English Channel. In his book from 1956, Eldjárn reaches the same conclusion.⁵⁹

In the 1951 issue of *Antiquity* an article by F.M. Heichelheim⁶⁰ was published, supporting Eldjárn's belief that the coins had arrived in Iceland during Roman times, around the year 300. However, Heichelheim did not support Eldjárn's idea that these sailors were Roman soldiers. Instead, he was more convinced that the sailors had been Scandinavian or Saxon pirates, who had served in the Roman military in the Danube regions, or perhaps in the Orient.

He argues that a large number of Germanic men were employed within the Roman army during the last years of the 3rd century, mostly serving within the Danube area. Receiving payment in Roman coins for their services, any one of these Germanic men could have brought the Roman coinage on a journey to Iceland. He supports his theory that soldiers from Carausius' navy would most likely not been paid with coins minted in Rome or Asia Minor but with coins minted in Gaul or Britain.

The theory is in many ways very good, and well supported. The main points that support the theory are the following: Firstly, the story of the general/emperor Carausius has been told above in page 14 and tells how the Romans were attacking Saxon pirates in the Channel. As many ships were sailing around Britain at the time the possibility of one ship getting caught in a storm and by accident sailed towards the north. Secondly, the ships of the Roman times were definitely able to withstand the sail over the Atlantic.

The Roman merchant ships were in many ways not very different from schooners used in the late middle age⁶¹ that sailed over the Atlantic to the USA and back in the 16th and 17th century. Thirdly, the soldiers on Carausius' ships were a part of the Roman Navy and therefore got paid in Roman coins before the split from Rome. Fourthly it is

57 Eldjárn (1949) p. 5

58 Eldjárn (1949) p. 6–7

59 H. Shetelig has supported mr. Eldjárn's theories in his article from 1949 Shetelig (1949) p. 161-164

60 Heichelheim (1952) p 44

61 Lethbridge (1959) 574-575

known from written sources that learned men of the time could well have known of the land in the north, called Thule⁶².

However, there is some knowledge that does make the theory a bit less probable: Firstly the ships used in warfare⁶³ were not made for sailing on open sea. They mostly relied on oars to manoeuvre the ships and only had a small sail to move the ship out of battle if too many oars were disabled⁶⁴. These ships kept close to the shore and storms would most likely not get these ships to stray of course like ships sailing on the open sea. Secondly according to R. Reece it looks like Britain was isolated from the monetary supply in the 3rd century, both because of military and political reasons. There are still some denarii found, most likely because of payment to the military.⁶⁵ Thirdly there are no known historical sources that tell of any ship sailing north of Iceland.⁶⁶ Fourthly there is the account of Mr. Heichelheim about the origin of the coins where he states that these coins were a seldom sight in Britain at the time of Carausius.⁶⁷

Dr. R. Reece supports this theory by saying that still there are not many Roman coins found in Britain or NW Gaul from this time, those coins found are mostly Denarii, probably for paying the troops.⁶⁸ Last but not least Prof. E. Hasted has expressed his serious doubts of the Romans' psychological capability of venturing so far from known waters by saying: "the Romans were afraid of the sea"⁶⁹.

After reviewing these facts it seems highly unlikely that these coins came from a Roman ship from the years 387-396 as Mr. Eldjárn suggests.⁷⁰

62 *Ultima Thule: Pliny the Elder, The Natural History, liber IV, XVI, 104.: ultima omnium quae memorantur Tyle, in qua solstitio nullas esse noctes indicavimus, cancri signum sole transeunte, nullosque contra per brumam dies.see. See e.g. note 16 at perseus.tufts.edu. Further information on Ultima Thule and the Icelandic connection may also be found in Stefansson (1942) and Whitaker (1982)*

63 *There has not been as much merchant traffic around England at the time in question as the waters were insecure because of pirates. Also there has not been as much transfer of goods to Britain at the time as the emperor of Britain was not supported by the rest of Rome. Mattingly (1971) p. 331-332, RIC V part 2, 427-429*

64 Lethbridge (1959) p. 571-572

65 Reece, *pers. comm.*.

66 *As noted above, there are many blanks in the history of that period, however, a trip like that is very likely to be mentioned at some time. There is also the possibility that the ship never made it back if it came to Iceland.*

67 Heichelheim (1952), p. 44

68 Reece, *pers. comm.*

69 Hasted, *pers. comm.*

70 Eldjárn (2000)

Subsequently to his discovery of the coin of Tacitus (B), Magnússon writes that he does not believe in Mr. Eldjárn's theories on the origins of the coins. He states that in his meaning the coins most likely were brought to the island in Viking times, as the find contexts of three of the coins suggests.⁷¹ In the reviewed publication of *Kuml og Haugfé*, A. Friðriksson did a new study on what had been written on the subject since the original came out in 1956 and found out that two articles had been written since Mr. Magnússon did his study on the subject.

In 1988 R. Jordan comes to the same basic conclusion as Mr. Magnússon, that the coins are most likely to have come to the island in Viking times. Two years earlier, Mr. J.M. Antonio-Núñez writes an article where he apparently does not know of the coin found in 1966. There he comes to the same conclusion, that the coins are most likely from Viking times. He suggests that the coins have come from Britain in the middle ages.⁷² When looking at the writings that have been presented in this study, the arguments in favour of Magnússon's theory seem highly plausible.

Studies done by Horsnæs and others suggest that bronze coins are often found in Viking age contexts in Scandinavia. Also these types of coins are found in the countries Iceland had contact with in Viking times. Coins similar to the coins found in Iceland have been found in the biggest trading centres in Scandinavia so it is not so improbable that these coins were part of a bigger group of coins that travelled from the mainland to the island in the north.

In the introduction to his book *Kuml og Haugfé*, Mr. Eldjárn tells of Irish monks that allegedly were in Iceland when the first Nordic settlers came to the country.⁷³ He does discuss the possibility that these Irish monks might have taken the coins with them when they came to Iceland. He does still not believe that the monks are the most possible way for the coins to have come to the island.⁷⁴

The Icelandic numismatician A. Holt has discussed the possibility that these monks might have taken the coins with them.⁷⁵ However there has no evidence been found that proves without a doubt that these monks have ever been on Iceland, though Mr.

71 Magnússon (1972) p. 64

72 Eldjárn (2000) p. 36 *with references*

73 *More on the Irish monks can be found in* Eldjárn (2000) pp. 23–24; 34–35 *with references*

74 Eldjárn (2000) p. 31–32

75 Holt, *pers. comm.*

Eldjárn spent many years looking for evidence of their existence, without luck.⁷⁶ To finish the discussion on the Irish monks there is one more information that makes the possibility of the coins coming from Ireland even more distant is the fact that there are few if any Roman coins found in Irish monasteries from the time of the alleged travels of the monks to Iceland.⁷⁷

7. Conclusion

The four *antoniniani* of Late Roman date discovered on Iceland have been presented in the present paper. Each coin has been analyzed within the specific context of discovery, evaluating and accepting their individual authenticity within the contexts. They have been studied within both the Late Roman historical context, and Scandinavian archaeological context.

The theories presented in the paper were evaluated from both numismatic, archaeological, and historical perspectives.

According to one of the theories put forward by Kristján Eldjárn, the Roman coins were transported to Iceland by Roman sailors, setting off from the Roman province of Britain. Eldjárn recons that heavy storm caused the boat to veer off course, eventually arriving at the Southeast cost of Iceland. Eldjárn considers the fact that the Roman fleet was at a peak during the reign of Diocletian to be in support of his theory. The theory is definitely plausible, however, certain issues leave more questions than answers.

The same goes for the second theory put forward by Mr. Eldjárn. According to this theory, Irish monks might have brought the coins along with them to Iceland before the arrival of the Nordic people. However, the arrival of these monks to Iceland has never been proven, rendering the theory nothing but a speculative idea with too many questions unanswered.

The first person officially to support theory of a Viking age date for the arrival of the Roman coins was Þór Magnússon, who did some research following his discovery of the Roman coin (B) in 1966. This theory appears to be the most plausible of the three, being further supported by the most recent discoveries made within the scientific research field of Scandinavian numismatics.

⁷⁶ Eldjárn (2000) pp. 34–35

⁷⁷ Reece, *pers. comm.*

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