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Hidden, and not intended to be recovered

An alternative approach to hoards of mediaeval coins

V.T. VAN VILSTEREN*

Introduction

In almost all publications on Roman-period or mediaeval hoards a strong consensus is to be found regarding the reasons why the money was hidden in the ground. In suggesting alternatives to the explanation that the money was lost by accident, authors usually point to the absence of institutions like banks, and always claim that dangerous circumstances must have forced the owners to hide their money temporarily to save it from robbery or plunder.¹ Natural or violent death must then have prevented them from recovering their treasure, and the money consequently remained in the ground. This explanation is hardly ever disputed. One of the main reasons for this is that mediaeval coins, and consequently also hoards of medieval coins, are studied almost exclusively by numismatists, and only very rarely by archaeologists. This specialization undoubtedly has many advantages, but it also has at least one disadvantage and that is that numismatists, being so strongly focussed on this one topic, lack the much broader perspective of archaeologists. As will be demonstrated below, hoards of coins are but one element in a wide range of finds demanding a specific interpretation.

This paper does not aim to completely deny the anti-robbery hypothesis, but intends to emphasize that this is not the only hypothesis, and in many cases certainly not the most obvious and logical explanation. An alternative explanation, firmly rooted in long-term traditions, is offered.

Boethius

Very often publications on hoards are illustrated with a well-known, brightly coloured picture of a farmer who had dugged a hole in the ground in order to

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1 VAN GELDER en BOERSMA (1967) 10-11; cf. also KENT (1974) and HAECK (1996).



1. Miniature A.D. 1476 by Jean Colombe depicting a farmer and jugs filled with coins (collection and photo: British Library, London: Harleian Ms. 4339, fol 2).

hide three jugs full of coins. This is the one and only mediaeval illustration of what we will for the time being call a 'pre-banking safe deposit' (fig. 1). The scene of the digging farmer stems from a miniature in a 15th-century copy of a French translation of one of the books of the late Roman writer Boethius. This Boethius was a theologian, philosopher and statesman who lived from AD 480 to 524. In the latter year he was put to death by strangulation as a traitor. During his imprisonment he wrote an impressive book (in Latin of course) called *De consolazione philosophiae*, on the consolation of philosophy. It was a very popular work in the Middle Ages, and was consequently frequently copied and commented on. The miniature depicting the hoarding is probably the work of Jean Colombe, a well-known illuminator in the second half of the 15th century.² In the French copy of 1476 the scene serves as an illustration to book 5, in which Boethius reflects on the meaning of chance. *As, for example, so Boethius reasons, if a man digging in the ground in order to till his field were to find he had dug up a quantity of gold. Now this is*

2 KREN (1984) 157.

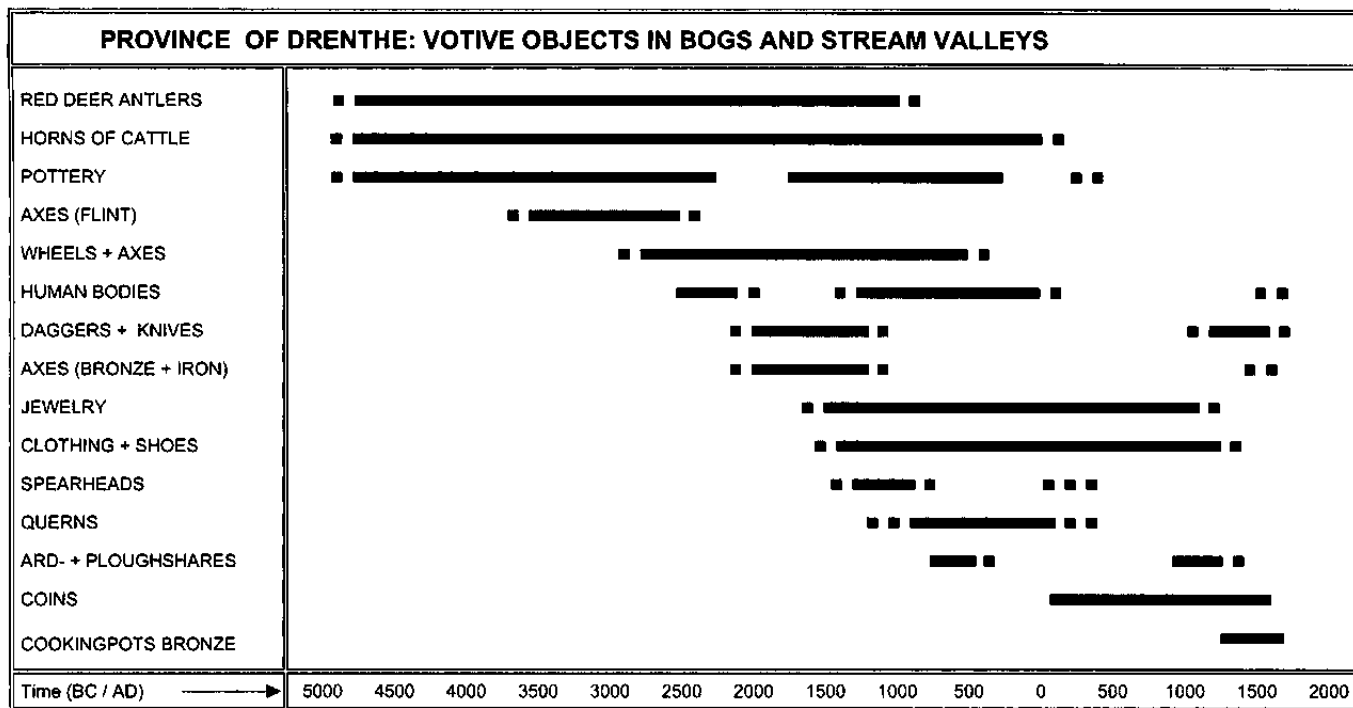
*indeed believed to have happened by chance, but it does not come from nothing; for it has its proper causes, and their unforeseen and unexpected coming together appears to have produced a chance event. For if the man tilling his field were not digging the ground, and if the man who put it there had not hidden his money in that particular spot, the gold would not have been found. Omitting the philosophical implications of the text, we can focus on the event itself, to which Boethius adds a very interesting remark: For neither he who hid the gold, nor he who worked the field, intended that money to be found (...).*³

Searching for motives for the hiding of the gold, most 20th-century archaeologists and numismatists will read this phrase to intend that the person who hid the gold did naturally not intend that money to be found by others. This seems logical if hoards are regarded as pre-banking safe deposits; in that case the only person intended to find the money was the man who hid the gold. This interpretation is highly speculative, and in no way dictated by Boethius' original text. An important fact that we must take into consideration is that Boethius lived in the 6th century, and consequently wrote his book in a completely different time and a completely different setting. Moreover, Boethius was not a Christian. So we are justified in searching for an alternative and more probable explanation of the motives for this hoarding.

Motives for hoarding

In spite of the almost complete absence of written sources, our knowledge of the religion of the indigenous peoples of north-western Europe in pre-Christian times is fairly extensive. Two hundred years of collecting archaeological information has yielded an overwhelming amount of data relating to various aspects of religion. Not only are we familiar with different ceremonies practised on occasions like inhumation and cremation, but we also know of megalithic monuments and temple complexes, and we have extensive knowledge of the custom of offering gifts to deities. This last aspect was indeed a common practice among all Germanic and Gallic tribes. The custom of course differed in different regions and showed fluctuations through time as far as intensity and the types of offerings are concerned. But every period has yielded evidence of some form of ritual deposition. Votive deposits that are most easily identified as such in archaeological contexts are those found at temples and recovered from streams, stream valleys and bogs. This paper focuses on the

3 BOETHIUS (1973) 387-389.



2. Survey of finds from wet contexts in the province of Drenthe, The Netherlands.

second category. A wide range of items found in such wet contexts can indeed be interpreted only as having religious connotations. Priests and common people will have gathered at the sites of shrines and other holy places to worship their gods, to celebrate the prescribed feasts and festivals, to ask for favours, and to offer suitable gifts and sacrifices. Most of the offerings will undoubtedly have had a votive character.

The custom of depositing votive objects along streams and in bogs was widespread in pre- and protohistoric north-western Europe.⁴ The mythical role of the landscape in this context is evident. Sometimes offerings are found concentrated in one place. Such places may have served as cult sites for a group of people for a certain period of time. Other votive objects are clearly solitary deposits, and may hence be of a more individual character. A survey of finds from such wet contexts in the province of Drenthe (the Netherlands) has shown that this custom started in the early neolithic in this area (fig. 2). Technological innovations led to new items and new materials, and the range of objects consequently varied through time (with some objects being deposited for only short periods of time, judging from the evidence). This changing pattern is certainly not unique to Drenthe, but is also found elsewhere. At some time in the early Roman period coins made their appearance in the range of votive deposits. Like the other objects, coins have been found in bogs and along small rivers, as simple solitary hoards or combined with other votive deposits. There is nothing unusual to these items, and there is no reason whatsoever to treat the coins differently from the other objects recovered from the same contexts. Offering money was just one of the ways of expressing one's gratitude or begging for a favour. The intrinsic value of money was very much comparable with the value of other votive objects. Something we should also bear in mind is that for most indigenous peoples in Roman times, and well into the Middle Ages, money did not have the same function as it has today.⁵ Outside the Roman empire there were no market-places where goods could be exchanged at more or less fixed prices. And even in large parts of the Roman empire itself the economy was strongly based on the exchange of goods and services rather than on our modern practice of buying and selling. This once again shows that money was indeed very much comparable with other votive objects in terms of value.

Whether the gifts were offered in a temple, along a river or in a bog, the deposition of votive objects was an intrinsic part of everyday life. This applies to

4 ZIMMERMANN (1970), SCHULZE (1984), BRADLEY (1990) 116-118, DERKS (1998) 138-144.
5 VAN DER VIN (1996).

the whole of what is now Europe. Among the 'barbaric tribes' of the north, but also in the civilised world of the ancient Greeks and Romans, the deposition of votive objects was part of the religious system.

Boethius lived in a time and setting in which the deposition of votive objects was quite normal. A philosopher and statesman, Boethius himself will certainly have made many an offering and sacrifice. Bearing this in mind, Boethius' remark: *For neither he who hid the gold, nor he who worked the field, intended that money to be found (...)*, urges reconsideration. It is most likely that what Boethius actually meant to say is: "he who hid the gold, did naturally not intend that money to be found, neither by himself nor by any one else". The money was meant for some god, and was by no means supposed to get back into circulation.

Christianity and offerings

In numismatic studies the possibility that a coin hoard once might have been buried as an offering, is usually not even taken into consideration.⁶ However, most archaeologists nowadays are much more familiar with the concept of this pagan tradition. The custom of depositing votive objects, especially in wet parts of the landscape, is now commonly accepted as far as prehistoric and Roman times and the early Middle Ages are concerned. The disagreements begin when Christianity comes into play. Although not at all an issue among historians, Christianity and the deposition of votive objects are generally thought by archaeologists to be mutually exclusive.⁷

An interesting case concerns a number of magnificent hoards of silver objects from the late Roman period found in England. These hoards would have been interpreted as the usual votive deposits, had they not contained objects decorated with Christian signs and symbols. This sheer fact led to a surprisingly old-fashioned interpretation of the hoards as *the domestic accoutrements of well-to-do Christians who buried their most valued possessions at a time of danger or unrest (...)*.⁸ If these signs and symbols had been absent, there would have been much less reason to speak of concealment at a time of danger rather than of the deposition of votive objects.

Only very rarely are finds so directly linked to Christianity. In most cases there is only an indirect relation, provided by the date of the finds in a period after

6 For example KENT (1974), STREEFKERK (1995), HAECK (1996), VAN GELDER (1998).

7 MOSTERT (1995) 259.

8 WOODWARD (1992) 99.

the introduction of Christianity. Objects from this period (including hoards of coins) are hardly ever interpreted as offerings. They are regarded as objects thrown away as rubbish, lost or (in the case of precious metals and coins) buried at a time of danger. In the eyes of archaeologists, and certainly numismatists, there was simply no such thing as the deposition of votive objects in a Christian context. In 1990 the well-known prehistoric-hoarding specialist Richard Bradley specifically stated (in reference to a real, well-documented anti-robbery hoard): *In this case the problem is not too serious – we know too much about the seventeenth century for votive offerings to be a serious option.*⁹ Even in this case, and certainly generally speaking, such statements are to be considered highly biased, as they ignore for example all the superstitious practices of witchcraft – including the burying of ritual objects – in very recent times.

I, too, held such biased views until 1991. My ultimate conversion was provoked by the Dutch Coevorden find, a hoard containing some 90 silver pennies found together with a great number of iron objects.¹⁰ The pennies dated mostly from the 13th century and the first quarter of the 14th century, indicating that the hoard must have been buried around 1330, more than 500 years after the first missionaries started preaching Christianity in this area. By this time the Catholic Church was firmly established in the Netherlands. Moreover, the lord of this part of the Netherlands was not a count or a duke. The province of Drenthe (in which Coevorden is situated) was the possession of the bishop of Utrecht. Besides the coins, the hoard contained a great number of iron objects: horseshoes of two different types (in total more than fifty pieces), stirrups, a set of leg-irons, several kinds of horse-bits, boat-hooks, iron ingots and a whole range of weapons: arrowheads, daggers, knives, spearheads and an axe. A remarkable aspect of these objects is that some seem to have been deliberately bent. The iron objects were certainly not without value at the time. Most of them must have been brand-new tools. Others derived their value from the fact that they could be used as raw materials for the production of other items. Both the coins and the iron objects will have been of considerable value, and may very well have been buried at this particular spot by a blacksmith. Their findspot, however, lies in a very marshy area along a rivulet with no occupation sites in the direct vicinity. It lies about a mile from Coevorden, which in the 14th century was a very small town dominated by a castle. The site is indeed so marshy and swampy that all the iron objects were covered with a thick rusty

9 BRADLEY (1990) 19.

10 VAN VILSTEREN (1992).



3. Removal of a thick rusty crust revealed a nice pair of leg-irons, part of the 1991 Coevorden-hoard
(photo: Provincie Drenthe / G. Oosterveen, Assen).

crust (fig. 3). If we interpret this hoard in the traditional way (as a safe deposit buried at a time of unrest), the swampy environment presents a problem. The suggestion that the former owner buried this hoard with the intention of digging it up at some later time doesn't make sense. He would certainly have chosen a much drier site, because this site's conditions had a disastrous effect on the iron objects. So there must have been other reasons for burying this hoard in this particular environment.

More evidence

If the Coevorden hoard had been the only one found in a wet environment, the reason why it was buried here may have remained obscure. But a survey in the province of Drenthe (60 x 60 km) has revealed a whole series of early and late medieval hoards of coins recovered from wet contexts. Could this be coincidence? If they had not been found to date from the Middle Ages, i.e. Christian times, we would have no difficulty associating these hoards with the pagan tradition of depositing objects in wet environments (fig. 2). The museum in

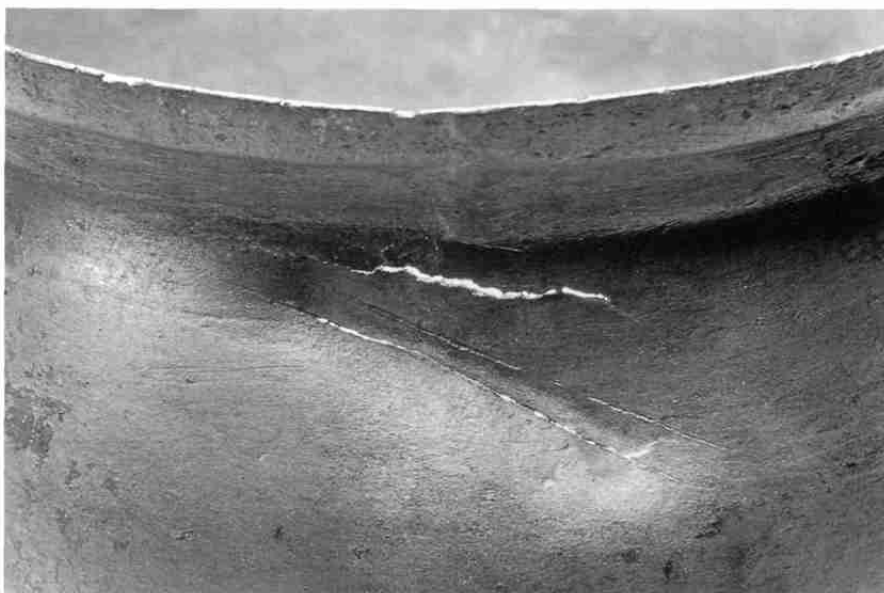


4. Peat-digging activities in the province of Drenthe resulted also in many mediaeval and post-mediaeval finds; F.J. von Kolkow, 1873: stereographic photo from part of the collection of the Drents Museum
(photo: Drents Museum, Assen).

Assen has a rather extensive collection of finds that have come to light during the exploitation of the extensive bogs and other wet parts of the province of Drenthe since the middle of the 19th century. Most date from prehistoric times or the Roman period and have been published over the past ten years by Van der Sanden.¹¹ The mediaeval and post-mediaeval finds that have been recovered from the same contexts have, however, received much less attention (fig. 4). So far, only the bronze cooking pots from the 13th-17th centuries have been studied in some detail.¹² Inventories of other categories of finds show that a large number of (post-)medieval finds have indeed been recovered from wet contexts, and that they moreover comprise a wide range of different objects: daggers, copper kettles, various pewter objects, swords, stirrups, copper dishes, pottery, textiles, etc. These objects have several things in common. First of all, none of them were found in association with settlement debris. Secondly, they are mostly intact. On the whole, the various objects do not appear to have been simply discarded. They still had a considerable value when they were buried in the ground. So they must have been buried for some specific reason. There are simply too many finds, spread too consistently over too long a period of time, for chance to be a good explanation.

11 VAN DER SANDEN (1994), (1995), (1996), (1997), (1998), (1999).

12 VAN VILSTEREN (1996), (1998), (2000).



5. Detail of a 15th/16th-century cooking-pot from Exloërmond (municipality of Borger-Odoorn), province of Drenthe. The wall of the pot has been deliberately damaged with an axe before deposition
(photo: JAV Studio's, Assen).

Close examination of the bronze cooking pots revealed strong evidence that some of them were deliberately damaged before deposition (fig. 5). Similar evidence is known from mediaeval England, where deliberately bent coins, pewter tokens and daggers have been found in the Thames.¹³ A hoard containing 872 coins from the early 15th century that was found at Rheinböllen in Germany, was similarly hidden in a bronze cooking pot with a perforated base.¹⁴ These phenomena are all strongly reminiscent of the many known examples of ritual damaging of prehistoric offerings.¹⁵

Christianity and superstition

It is indeed most tempting to link these mediaeval objects with the pagan tradition of depositing objects in wet environments. That would be the most logical explanation. But we are dealing with a Christian society, which forbade such

¹³ MERRIFIELD (1987) 109-111.

¹⁴ HAGEN (1934) 31.

¹⁵ ROYMANS (1987) 93-94.

pagan practices. Does this preclude a pagan explanation? The answer must be no! Indeed, the Catholic Church did try to ban the practice of depositing objects and making sacrifices. This is well-documented in the various penitential books that were used well into the 13th century.¹⁶ The fact that even in the 13th century many superstitious traditions still had to be forbidden, however, proves that they were then still very much alive. And these traditions emphatically included the deposition of votive objects. Historians provide us with abundant literature on superstitious practices in the Middle Ages.¹⁷

Surprisingly, it was the Catholic Church itself that incorporated the ancient custom of depositing votive objects in its ritual practice. An extremely underestimated example concerns the medieval *ex-votos*. Far better known is the example of purgatory. This mediaeval invention can best be regarded as a sort of waiting room between heaven and hell. Souls of the deceased had to stay there for a certain length of time to do penance for the sins they had committed during their life on earth. They could substantially reduce the length of their stay in purgatory by buying letters of indulgence in life. This eventually evolved into a large-scale commercial activity, which financed many of the Gothic churches in medieval Europe. It was this same degenerating trade in indulgences which in 1517 prompted Luther to launch his reformations. What is of concern here, is that the old pagan mentality of offering persisted in the Christian era. Offering remained a common practice in the Catholic Church, especially when all the saints became involved. People would offer things in order to receive something in return: recovery from some disease, a happy marriage, the benefit of a deceased relative, a reduction in the amount of time to be spent in purgatory, etc. In this sense nothing had really changed. Certain aspects of the old religion were incorporated in the official doctrine, notably those that were of benefit to the Catholic Church. Other aspects were banned and branded superstitious. Even so, many superstitious practices persisted through the centuries. Some are still alive even today.¹⁸ For example, in many towns we find fountains with coins scattered across their bases, reminding us of practices from a distant past.

So we should not assume that when people converted to Christianity all their old customs suddenly vanished into thin air, as if by magic. If we do away with the supposition that offering practices and a Christian society are mutually exclusive, we find that many phenomena are more easily understood. There is nothing unusual about medieval hoards of coins and/or precious

16 MEENS (1994).

17 MOSTERT / DEMYTTENARE (1995).

18 DE BLÉCOURT (1990).

metals. We must, however, abandon the narrow numismatic perspective and see these finds as offerings. As such they are quite common phenomena to be placed in a widespread tradition with a long history.

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Samenvatting

Verborgen, en niet bedoeld om terug te halen. Een alternatieve benadering van middeleeuwse muntschatten. Muntschatten worden zonder uitzondering door numismaten gezien als geld dat door de eigenaar begraven is met de bedoeling om het later weer op te graven. Daarbij was het uiteraard de bedoeling om bij afwezigheid van banken het vergaarde geld tegen plunder en diefstal te beschermen. Veel publicaties over muntvondsten worden geïllustreerd met een middeleeuwse afbeelding van een man die drie kruiken met geld begraaft (of weer opgraaft). Deze tekening stamt uit een 15de-eeuwse versie van een tekst van de laat-Romeinse filosoof Boethius. De begeleidende tekst vertelt dat het niet de bedoeling was van de oorspronkelijke bezitter dat het geld gevonden zou worden. Betoogd wordt dat Boethius, die circa 500 A.D. leefde, met die uitspraak zeer waarschijnlijk refereerde aan het feit dat dat geld geofferd was en het om die reden niet bedoeld was om weer teruggevonden te worden. Het offeren van waardevolle zaken was in die tijd de normaalste zaak van de wereld.

Vanuit archeologisch perspectief gezien, blijken muntvondsten veel beter als offers geïnterpreteerd te kunnen worden. Dat geldt voor vondsten uit pre- en protohistorische tijd, maar ook voor muntvondsten uit de christelijke tijd. Hoewel christendom en het begraven van votieoffers nog veelal gezien worden als zaken die niet samengaan, zijn er sterke aanwijzingen voor het tegendeel. De muntvondst van Coevorden, begraven circa 1330 en behalve uit een groot aantal zilveren munten ook bestaande uit een gevarieerde collectie ijzeren voorwerpen, is daar een mooi voorbeeld van. De vondstomstandigheden (in een moerassig beekdal) pleiten sterk voor een interpretatie als offer. Een overzicht van middeleeuwse vondsten in Drenthe laat zien dat deze schatvondst niet alleen staat. De grote variëteit duidt op een voortzetting van de prehistorische traditie om offers in moerassen neer te leggen. Betoogd wordt tenslotte dat offeren en het christelijk geloof niet zo ver uiteen liggen als wel gedacht wordt.