

“Friesische Halbsceattas”; A comment

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A high proportion of the stray finds of porcupine sceattas, both from Dutch and English find-spots, are well below the peak weight-standards observable in hoards (we have determined the weight distribution of the porcupine sceatta sub-varieties from the secondary phase primarily from the 789 coins in the Kloster-Barthe hoard; these are very well preserved and hardly corroded; their weight range is 0.81-1.57 g (Op den Velde & Bärenfänger, 2012)). This is puzzling. But whether they are half-sceattas, or merely sub-standard for one or more reasons, including fraudulent exploitation of a respected currency, needs to be debated. We wish to point out that the idea of half-sceattas has a social context. The name implies that the people who were handling them would (be) willingly give(n) two half-sceattas for a whole coin, or vice versa. What does the term ‘half’ imply, if not that? Already there is a practical difficulty, in that the supposed half-denomination uses the same design and has the same diameter as its heavier counterpart. It is convenient to measure the outline of the square of dotted lines on the reverse, which again is identical on heavy and light coins. How did the users make the distinction?

Common sense prompts several more obvious questions, which are intended to put the Frisian light-weight coins into a much wider context. For the system to be workable in everyday life, it needs to be reflected in the histogram of weights, showing two clearly separated peaks for the two denominations respectively. Only the histogram for sub-variety c of the secondary-phase porcupines shows such a small secondary peak (Metcalf & Op den Velde, 2009: 74). The data comes, however, from a mixture of sources. For most sub-varieties, the histograms include very few, if any, coins as light as half the main value – in spite of the effects of corrosion and leaching.

The soil in which the coins were found can yield different effects. The sand and seawater of the beaches of Domburg and Westenschouwen are especially unfavorable to the sceattas, as may be seen from the histogram at p. 68 of our monograph (Metcalf & Op den Velde, 2009). There are plenty of instances of duplication between Domburg sceattas and much heavier finds from elsewhere, which proves that the low weights at Domburg are a secondary phenomenon.

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Moreover, in the currency circulating in a given region (not the same thing as what was minted in that region), the gap between the two peak values is filled in with weights for coins which we would simply label “sub-standard”. Many of them are from the same mint-workshops as full-weight coins. Others are certainly fraudulent copies made elsewhere of what was a respected currency. Their weight is sub-standard but their alloy is good, which makes them all the more puzzling. In either case, our point is that, if indeed there were half-sceattas, all these aspects would make it difficult or impossible for merchants or other users to select those coins intended to be halves.

Breternitz c.s. supposes that a weight loss of a coin due to corrosion of more than 50 percent totally obscures the design, or makes the alloy so unstable that it falls apart. Inspection of the coins tells another story. For example, the porcupine sceattas 661 (0.94 g) and 666 (0.32 g) from Domburg do have an almost identical reverse design with two squares of dotted lines. Also, on 666 this is still clearly visible (Op den Velde & Klaassen, 2004: 135). The wotan/monster sceattas 745 (0.93 g) and 747 (0.26 g) show a very similar design on both sides which is well-recognizable. The great majority of the sceattas in Table 1 from the study of Breternitz c.s. were found at Domburg and Westenschouwen. On them, under high magnification, tiny indentations and holes are visible, yet they do not break.

Other issues occur to us. Why are the half-sceattas a phenomenon only occurring during the secondary phase, and not, for example, the primary and tertiary phases of the porcupines, which were used in similar contexts? Why were they minted not only in Friesland, but also in the Rhine mouths region? Why do they not occur in other series of sceattas, including for example those minted in London?

To sum up the succession of arguments which we have pointed out above, our conclusion is that we find the hypothesis of half-sceattas implausible.

Literature

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