Amulet, jewel, coin?
Layers of meaning and the Velp hoard of 1715

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Samenvatting *– In dit artikel worden de vier gouden medaillons uit de goudschat van Velp in 1715 als uitgangspunt genomen voor een nadere reflectie op de apotropeïsche functie van muntsieraden. De functie van amulet wordt nadrukkelijk besproken in het licht van recente historisch-antropologische inzichten die de verschillende 'levens' van munten onderkennen. De positie van de medaillons uit Velp als amulet is onlosmakelijk verbonden met de andere levens van dergelijke munten – politiek, economisch, diplomatiek – en vormt een verfijning van onze kennis over de positie van muntsieraden in de socioculturele context van de late oudheid.*

Abstract *– In this article the four golden medallions of the so-called Velp hoard of 1715 will be discussed as an entry point into the apotropaic function of late antique coin-set jewellery. This recognition of the amuletic function of coins draws on recent insights from historic-anthropologically informed research, which recognises the multiple 'lives' coins could have. Seeing the Velp-medallions as amulets is inextricably linked with the other lives of such coins – political, economic, diplomatic – and refines our understanding of the position of these coin-jewels in the sociocultural context of Late Antiquity.*

In 400 CE the bishop John Chrysostom (347-407) condemned the use of amulets in a sermon to his congregation at Antioch. In the address he posed a series of rhetorical questions: "What would you say of those who use incantations and amulets and of those who tie bronze coins of Alexander of Macedon around their heads and feet? […] After our Master died for us on the cross, will we put our hope for salvation in the image of a Greek king?"[1] The answer should have been obvious to his audience: they should trust and worship their Christian God and they should not put their faith in an idolatrous, pagan ruler from the past. From the perspective of religious history, this short excerpt from the sermon contains a wealth of information about religious life in late antique Antioch. It is a source of evidence for the religious and superstitious beliefs and practices prevalent at a particular time and place, where the orthodox and the personal could coexist, but also collide.[2] The sermon also provides impor-

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1 John Chrysostom, *Ad illuminandos catechesis* 2.5; trans. P.W. Harkins, *Baptismal instructions* (London, 1963): 190.

2 On the importance of Antioch and its religious life in this period, see Sandwell, 2007 and Shepardson, 2014.

tant insights into the use and reuse of coins and thus it is also a valuable source from the perspective of numismatics. It testifies to the fact that coins had multiple lives and functions and could be used and re-used in non-monetary settings. In short, coins with a portrait of the Hellenistic ruler Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE) were used as amulets. The imagery of Alexander the Great still remained a potent visual symbol in the late antique world and it is a known fact that his portraits continued to appear on coinage well after his death.[3] The power of his iconography on coins was so strong that it acquired a specific non-monetary, apotropaic value.[4]

From Antioch and Velp: the limits of a common Late Antiquity?

In this article I aim to show how the apotropaic or amuletic function of coinage can help us understand late antique sociocultural realities. I intend to do so not by focussing on the regions of the eastern Mediterranean, but rather by turning my attention to a case study from North-western Europe: the coin-set medallions of the so-called Velp-hoard of 1715. While further neck and finger rings as well as *Hackgold* were found in 1851. The serendipitous 1715 discovery of late Roman golden coins, medallions, necklaces and bracelets in Velp is one of the rare occasions in which the area of the present-day Netherlands becomes a tangible part of the wider realm of the broader late antique world.[5] Several late antique coin hoards testify to the importance of gold in forging and solidifying relationships between central Roman imperial authority and regional groups in the frontier zones of North-western-Europe. Clearly, these objects were part of late Roman cultural language of the Mediterranean, but what were the limits of this semantics in the northern frontier zones? How were Roman practices received or reconfigured in a regional and non-Roman context? The Velp-hoard and similar finds usually are primarily explained from a political-military perspective: a flow of gold to the frontier regions as a form of pay in order to create alliances in politically unstable times. Yet, such payments gave rise to a hybrid visual culture that eschews a traditional 'Roman'-'barbarian' divide.[6] This article does not seek to provide a comprehensive or structural overview

[3] See Dahmen, 2007.

[4] On coins used as amulets in late antiquity see the seminal study by Maguire, 1997. A brief and useful overview is provided by Fulghum, 2001.

[5] Late Antiquity is understood here as the period between roughly 300 and 700, or from the emperor Constantine I to the rise of power of the Carolingians in early medieval Europe. Generally, on the difficulties of periodisations of Late Antiquity see: Cameron, 2002; Marcone, 2008. An example of the lasting appeal of Roman gold coinage to the Merovingian court is: Gregory of Tours, *Historica Francorum* 6.2, where Gregory writes about the Merovingian king Chilperic who proudly showed his court the golden coins he had received from the Byzantine emperor Tiberius II Constantine.

[6] Roymans, 2017.

of apotropaic imagery on late antique gold coins in jewellery.[7] Nor does it aim to reiterate the rich historiography on the Velp hoard.[8] It rather puts forwards a numismatic perspective by a historian on the broader sociocultural changes of the late antique period. Not the coins themselves, but the story *behind* the (re)use and the (re)contextualisation of these coin types is the primary concern. The four Velp-medallions are used as an entry into late antique practices and what starting to uncover their different layers of meaning of such objects might look like.

My aim is to present the outlines of what the integration of numismatic research in 'mainstream' history-writing might look like. The material culture of the border regions of the late antique world remains an important source for our understanding of the sociocultural upheavals and transformations that took place. Coins have of course already been recognized as important entry points into these changes, but their integration into social histories of the late antique period remain scant.[9] The multiples of the Velp hoard of 1715 – which were made into coin-jewellery – will be examined as sources of social history and the formation of peripheral identities vis-à-vis the imperial centre. The surviving numismatic objects in a jewel-setting are inevitably scattered and of a patchwork nature, but also provide us with exciting lenses through which to look at social practices in late antiquity. I explicitly draw on historic-anthropological notions that coins could and did have multiple 'lives' and functions. I will show that one specific 'life' or function of coin-medallions – such as those in the Velp hoard – can still be explored more in-depth: their apotropaic function as amulet. In doing so, it aims to put numismatics back in sociocultural history-writing of magic in the late Roman world.[10] I advocate an inclusive approach to these lifecycles of coins, which does not privilege certain functions or 'lives' over others, but which rather sees them as interrelated spheres which were in constant dialogue. This approach entails a more detailed analysis of what it might mean for coins which circulated in Northwestern-Europe to have an apotropaic function and how this knowledge refines our understanding of these finds.

Before turning our attention to the Velp-hoard, I first will briefly discuss the historical-anthropological methodology that informs the reading of the medallions. Subsequently, the importance of the materiality of the coins will be explored. An understanding of the economic and cultural importance of gold

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7 Such an undertaking lies far beyond the scope of this essay. The starting point of any inquiry into late antique coin-set jewellery is the wonderful catalogue of Bruhn, 1993 or more recently Jones, 2011.

8 The most recent and comprehensive overview is provided by Beliën, 2008. See also now: Quast, 2009.

9 Martin, 1997 is a notable exception, also see Bursche, 2002.

10 See Dickie, 1995 and Russell, 1995.

in late antiquity is crucial when we want to come to terms with the meanings of the numismatic evidence. Thirdly, the apotropaic function of the imperial portrait will be analysed. In the fourth and final section, the medallions of the 1715 Velp hoard will serve as a test case for the proposed interpretational framework.

The world beyond Finley: from numismatics to anthropology

Until fairly recent, Moses Finley's famous statement that "money was coin and nothing else", went unchallenged and was rather approvingly quoted by historians.[11] Yet, new sociocultural approaches to ancient coinage have also steadily developed over the past decades, resulting in a critical exploration of the uses of anthropological theory and archaeological context for the study of numismatics proper.[12] Not only was coinage not the sole form of money in the ancient world, coinage itself could also fulfil a wider variety of non-economic functions.[13] These new perspectives owe their debts for a large part to the insights of anthropological scholarship. The work of the Hungarian sociologist Karl Polanyi (1886-1964) has been especially important in this debate, picking up on non-monetary functions of coinage that Finley did not take into account.[14] His observation that the economy of Ancient Greece was 'embedded' in a broader societal context – "the economic process itself being instituted through kinship, marriage, age-groups, secret societies, totemic associations, and public solemnities" – holds of course true for the wider ancient world.[15] Polanyi asserted that money did not necessarily have to be the primary medium of exchange, nor that currency always had an exclusively redistributive function within the economy: coinage could have – and did have – more than one societal function or purpose.[16]

More recent anthropological perspectives have further refined the understanding of the multiple 'lives' coins could have. These lives are played out in separate exchange cycles: one for the short-term economic transactions and one for the long-term social transactions, which aims at maintaining a given social order. These two cycles interact and do justice to the various functions that coinage can have in a society.[17] In oxymoronic fashion, the short-term of economic

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11 Finley, 1973: 166.

12 See for example the revisionist view of Harris, 2006. On the importance of bringing archaeology and numismatics back together see Kemmers & Myrberg, 2011.

13 On the potential of such a 'cultural-economic perspective' in the Roman period: Aarts, 2005: 17-27.

14 On the influence of Polanyi in historical studies, see the slightly older but still relevant Humphreys, 1969.

15 Polanyi, 1968: 84.

16 Humphreys, 1969: 183. See also: Aarts, 2005: 10-12.

17 The short- and long-term exchange cycles were introduced in: Bloch & Parry, 1989. For a perspective from ancient numismatics on these concepts, see: Aarts, 2005: 13.

transactions are usually treated in large-scale and encompassing scholarly inquiries of premodern economics, while the long-term social transactions are often part of cultural history-writing, with a focus on the micro-realities of everyday life. The function of numismatics in the former is clear: coinage as a facilitator of economic transactions. Its function in the latter, however, is not at all less valuable, but often less pronounced, or even entirely absent: coinage as a cultural, non-monetary object. In this light, recent calls for a more inclusive archaeological approach to numismatics are to be applauded.[18] Taking the broader archaeological context of coins into account allows us to gain valuable insights into the non-economic aspects of the long-term cycle: the aesthetic, symbolic, and social functions of coins.[19] Late antique gold coinage that is found in a non-monetary context should thus best be seen against its wider cultural background. Coins were essentially multipurpose money, which could facilitate a variety of transactions. Not only did they enable economic transactions, but they also were an important constituent of diplomatic transactions.[20] An anthropological perspective can help historians reclaim coinage beyond the mere economic or strictly numismatic points of view: money was not just coin – but above all, coin was not *just* money.

Gold: at the centre of late antique society

Already in the second century CE the jurist Pomponius mentioned that gold and silver coins that had been set in jewellery could be part of someone's inheritance.[21] During the late antique period gold coinage became the predominant 'jewel coin'. Gold was a central commodity in late antique society, both in an economic as well as in a sociocultural sense. With the introduction of the *solidus* by the emperor Constantine I (r. 303-337), a new stable gold coinage became the cornerstone of the imperial fiscal policy.[22] Moreover, compared to the first centuries of the Common Era, *solidi* were increasingly used in regular market transactions in the Later Roman Empire.[23] "Gold became not only the dominant currency, in the sense that its use in coin or bullion accounted for by

[18] Kemmers & Myrberg, 2011: *passim*.

[19] Kemmers & Myrberg, 2011: 93-94.

[20] Limitations of scope do not allow for a more elaborate discussion of diplomatic gift-giving in the ancient world. Here it suffices to note that (gold) coins too were used as gifts in social and diplomatic settings. They were part of a wider cultural network of gifts as important ritual(istic) commodities in later Roman society. Recently, a number of useful introductions to the study of ancient gifts and gift-giving has been published, amongst others: Hénaff, 2013; Canetti, 2014; specifically on the late antique period see now: Beyeler, 2011: *passim*.

[21] *Digest* VII, 1.28.

[22] Kent, 1956: 191-192. On gold coinage more generally in the Roman Empire see: Lo Cascio, 2008.

[23] Lo Cascio, 2008: 168. Banaji, 2007.

far the biggest share of monetary transactions in the economy as a whole, but also a mass currency which permeated all levels of social life," as Jairus Banaji has stated – both in major urban (trade) centres as well as in more remote rural (agricultural) settings.[24] Although this view is not undisputed, gold was in any case used as a unit of account and from the fourth century onwards as the required unit for the payment of taxes. This makes it not altogether unreasonable that gold currency became an increasingly familiar sight in daily life.

Besides these economic functions, gold also had distinct symbolic meanings in the eyes of its late antique beholders.[25] It had a religious connotation. In (imperial) Roman ideology, glistering gold was connected with light and with God in heaven, and featured regularly in contemporary religious writings, which primarily drew on similar symbolism in the Bible. Perhaps nowhere was this gold so visible as in the many late antique churches in the Mediterranean that were adorned with beautiful (golden) mosaics. The light that was reflected in the gold on earth was holy and also represented the divinely sanctioned imperial rule.[26] After the official sanctioning of the Church by emperor Constantine, Christian communities began to amass large amounts of wealth. Wealth which was increasingly displayed outwards. The churches of the later Roman Empire received many precious gifts and donations which decorated their places of worship.[27] The richly – often golden – decorated church interiors were a way of paying tribute to God. At the same time it helped spreading the religious message of the church by presenting "[a]n appealing vision of the Christian paradise" which sought to persuade and show its new found religious dominancy.[28] Against this backdrop, where gold had important economic as well as symbolic functions, golden coins were used in numismatic jewellery.

The imperial portrait on bodily display

The wearing of coins on the body should be seen in this wider symbolical context. Yet, it should also be interpreted within a legal framework, which set certain boundaries for the dealings with the imperial portrayals outside the economic realm of coinage. Generally, late antiquity saw the development of the increasing autocratic and absolutist imperial bureaucracy.[29] This also meant a stronger legal regulation of imperial portraiture, for example in the case of erecting provincial statues.[30] A particular preoccupation with the safeguarding

[24] Banaji, 2007: 60-61, with further notes.

[25] On the cultural meaning of gold in late antiquity, see: Janes, 2000.

[26] Averincev, 1979: 53-67.

[27] Janes, 1998: 42-60.

[28] Janes, 1998: 94.

[29] Brown, 1992: 3-33.

[30] Rollin, 1979: 180-181.

of imperial portraiture can be found with regard to portraiture on coinage.[31] Penalising the counterfeiting of coins (*crimen falsi*) had already existed since the early Principate. The main aim of this punishment was to safeguard the trust in the officially minted coinage. In the later Roman Empire, a new dimension was added to such misconducts. The defamation of the imperial portrait became a crime in itself (*crimen maiestatis*): any form of damage to the portrait or falsification of coinage was now considered a sacrilege to the *sacra moneta* of the emperor. The symbolic and ritualistic meaning of these portraits was part of the wider imperial court culture of late antiquity, where imperial gifts often displayed the emperor, not only on golden coins or coin-jewels, but also on rings and sumptuous silver dishes.[32] In the case of coin-set jewels, the legally sanctioned imperial portrait remained the focal point.[33] So, how then can these non-monetary appropriations of the coins be understood and interpreted? Which new messages could they convey and which new meanings could they represent? These recontextualised coins could fulfil at least two new functions: as a symbol of pride and adherence to the emperor and as a form of apotropaic amulet.

The prestige function of late antique solidi was perhaps as important as – or maybe even more important than – their nominal value. The high nominal value already partly explains why these objects were also cherished in a non-currency setting, and used in jewellery. Owning and wearing these objects were forms of conspicuous consumption: the proud display of such valuable objects showed one's high standing in society. It helped to form identity, which depended on the allegiance to the central imperial authority. Additionally, the fact that these jewels were fabricated in such a way that the *sacer* imperial portrait faced front, also emphasises a clear connection to the emperor himself. Wearing a jewelled portrait of the emperor – given by the emperor – can thus be seen as a sign of loyalty. This is especially significant when we bear in mind that late antique coin-set jewels are also found in the border regions of the empire. In these communities, regional 'barbarian' leaders could proudly display the imperial portrait. They functioned as a sign of prestige and loyalty to the central Roman authority, but they also acquired a new meaning as a local power symbol: distinguishing the leader from the rest of his community.[34] As a result of the increasing association of portraits with the actual persona of the emperor, 'wearing' the emperor also came to mean being physically closer to the emperor (*Kaisernähe*).[35] This physical proximity then could also have a protective function: the jewel as amulet. In the imperial centre such symbolic

[31] Rollin, 1979: 182-190.

[32] Bauer, 2009: 9-20.

[33] Bursche, 2002.

[34] Bursche, 2001: 89-96.

[35] Bauer, 2009: 18.

closeness can be explained as a form of personal loyalty to the emperor and his family. While regional leaders on the fringes of the Roman world will more likely have demonstrated a loyalty to the idea of Roman authority and rule more generally.

Recalling the speech by John Chrysostom, we know that coins could be and were used as amulets. Late antique golden coins had several characteristics which made them highly suitable to fulfil an apotropaic function. The symbolic meaning of gold in this period was one of Christian, heavenly well-being. The portrait on the coin not only conveyed a message of imperial adherence and presence, but also one of imperial protection. Additionally, late antique portraiture became increasingly stylized and formalized.[36] So perhaps not the protection of a specific person was sought – as in the case of the bronze coins of Alexander the Great – but of the Emperor generally, as the main ruler of the state.[37] During the later Roman Empire, the image of the emperor on coinage became a substitute for the actual person: it was this portrait that took on the role of protector.[38] The practice of carrying amulets might perhaps seem at odds with the official Christian doctrine – Chrysostom certainly thought it was – but that did of not course not have to mean, that it was not practiced. Indeed, throughout Antiquity and into the Middle Ages 'magic' amulets continued to be a current social praxis, both in the East and in the West.[39] Additionally, the fact that these small objects could be touched and worn directly on the body – which needed to be protected – added to their perceived magic or religious qualities.[40]

Historical-anthropology and practice: contextualizing the Velp hoard

In 1715 a hoard containing a wide array of late antique gold objects was discovered near Velp (near Arnhem, modern-day province of Gelderland, The Netherlands). The finds included coins, medallions, necklaces and bracelets. The specific circumstances of the discovery and the subsequent dispersion of its contents are well-known thanks to the antiquarian Gisbert Cuper (1644-1716) who documented the finds in letters.[41] It is not exactly known how many medal-

36 Jones, 2011: 23.

37 Maguire, 1997: 1040.

38 For this development from early until later empire see: Jones, 2011: 24-39, 52-53.

39 See Maguire, 1997: 1045-1052. It was even so common that fake coins were also used as amulets, with portraits of especially noteworthy rulers, such as the aforementioned examples of Alexander the Great, see Maguire, 1997: 1040-1041. One imagines the 'official' coinages – which are the focus here – to possess perhaps better apotropaic qualities.

40 Jones, 2011: 57-58.

41 On this history see the elaborate discussion by Beliën, 2008: 235-238.

lions were found at the time.[42] The four of them that have in any case survived until the present day are the subject of investigation here. They found their way into a number of private collections over the course of the eighteenth century, but are currently all in national collections (two (figs. 1 and 2) in the National Numismatic Collection managed by *De Nederlandsche Bank*, Amsterdam, and two (figs. 3 and 4) in the collection of the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*, Paris). Two of the medallions contain multiples with the portrait of the emperor Honorius (r. 393-423) (both 4.5 solidus in value; dated to 402/403-405/406 (fig. 1a) and 410-423 (fig. 3a) respectively) and the other two of his half-sister Galla Placidia (both 1.5 solidus in value; both dated 426-430 (figs. 2a and 4a)) on the obverses. The reverses of the Honorius coins both show a depiction of an enthroned Roma with a globe and a sceptre (figs. 1b and 3b). The reverses of the Galla Placidia coins both show a depiction of an enthroned nimbate emperor with a *mappa* in his right hand (figs. 2b and 4b). The legends refer to the glory of the Romans (*gloria romanorum*) (figs. 1b and 3b) and the well-being of the Empire and its people respectively (*salus reipublicae*) (figs. 2b and 4b). All were minted in Ravenna.[43]

Fig. 1: Medaillion of 4.5 solidus, Nationale Numismatische Collectie, De Nederlandsche Bank *(Amsterdam). Minted in Ravenna, 402/403-405/406. Weight: 61.00 g; diameter: 60 mm (including the border), 34 mm (excluding the border). Obv.: showing a bust of Honorius, in robes and cuirass, wearing a pearl diadem;* DN HONORI – VS PF AVG *– Rev.: showing an enthroned Roma en face, holding a globe and a sceptre;* GLORIA RO – MANORVM / R – V. *Exergue:* COMOB

[42] A short note on terminology: the term medallion in the context of the Velp 1715 hoard here refers to a multiple *solidi* (4,5 and 1,5 solidi) set in an ornate border; i.e. coin-set jewellery, not medallions minted specifically as one larger object.

[43] The specifications are based on Beliën, 2008: 246-247. The fifth missing medallion was minted in Milan.

Fig. 2: Medaillion of 1.5 solidus, Nationale Numismatische Collectie, De Nederlandsche Bank *(Amsterdam). Minted in Ravenna, 426-430. Weight: 40.11 g; diameter: 50 mm (including the border), 21 mm (excluding the border).*
Obv.: showing a bust of Galla Placidia wearing jewellery (a pearl diadem, a necklace, and earrings), a Chi-Rho-symbol is visible on her shoulder; DN GALLA PLA – CIDIA PF AVG *– Rev.: showing an emperor with a nimbus on a throne en face, holding a mappa and his feet resting on a podium;* SALVS REI – PVBLICAE / R – V. *Exergue:* COMOB.

scale 90%

Fig. 3a: Medaillion of 4.5 solidus, Bibliothèque nationale de France *(Paris). Minted in Ravenna, 410-423 Weight: 74.03 g; diameter: 66 mm (including the border), 37 mm (excluding the border).*
Obv.: showing a bust of Honorius, in robes and cuirass, wearing a pearl diadem; DN HONORI – VS PF AVG *– Rev.: showing an enthroned Roma en face, holding a globe and a sceptre;* GLORIA RO – MANORVM / R – V. *Exergue:* COMOB.

Fig. 4a: Medaillion of 1.5 solidus, Bibliothèque nationale de France *(Paris). Minted in Ravenna, 426-430. Weight: 39.39 g; diameter: 50 mm (including the border), 21 mm (excluding the border).*
Obv.: showing a bust of Galla Placidia wearing jewellery (a pearl diadem, a necklace, and earrings), a Chi-Rho-symbol is visible on her shoulder; DN GALLA PLA – CIDIA PF AVG *– Rev.: showing an emperor with a nimbus on a throne en face, holding a mappa and his feet resting on a podium;* SALVS REI – PVBLICAE / R – V. *Exergue:* COMOB.

The *terminus post quem* for the depositing of the hoard is somewhere after 426 – the earliest dating of the youngest (Galla Placidia) coins. During the fourth and fifth centuries, the regions around the Rhine – where the hoard was found – were mainly inhabited by groups of Franks who stood in close contact with the Romans, whose authority over the course of the early fifth century gradually diminished and gave way to Frankish sole rule. These communities and their rulers did remain under a strong Roman influence (both culturally, as well as diplomatically and military).[44] The reverses might seem of less importance for this particular analysis, but they can give suggestions as to the original recipients of the medallions in question. The imagery and symbolism depicted on reverses of gold medallions found in border regions of the later Roman Empire have been connected to military audiences, as they often represent victories, jubilees or ceremonies of *adventus*.[45] Indeed, military or diplomatic messaging may very well be ascribed to the reverses of the medallions in the Velp hoard. Both types of reverses namely refer to the far-reaching – and maybe even all-

[44] On this transition see for example: Martin, 1997. A comprehensive overview of finds of gold coins and medallions of the late antique period in the (former) border regions of the Roman Empire (along Rhine and Danube) is presented by Bursche, 2001: *passim*, also see Bursche, 2002: *passim*.

[45] Reinert, 2008: 190.

encompassing – authority of Rome and its emperor. In our case, the message of Roman universal rule is communicated through the figure of the personification Roma symbolic as ruler with globe and the divinely sanctioned emperor (with nimbus) with the *mappa*. Although Rome was no longer the political capital, it remained the mental and cultural reference point of late Roman history and society.[46] The rulers who would then wear the medallions in their local communities would continue to pass on this ideology on the fringes of the Empire – or indeed, even widely beyond. This ideal only existed in name and can at this time not be said to have been a political reality anymore.

As we have seen, the imperial portrait was of the greatest symbolic and protective importance. The images of the emperor or his family would also have marked out their wearers as particularly important persons in the local community. This would have not only been the result of the value of the gold – and the symbolic significance attached to this precious metal in late antiquity –, but also because the coin-set jewel displayed a special connection with and proximity to the Roman emperor (or one of his family members) – and through this imperial connection *also* divine protection.[47] Moreover, the way in which the coins of the Velp hoard are set in their golden frames and the position of the ring (for the attachment of a chain for wearing) support this notion of imperial presence and the importance of the imperial portraiture: the obverses of the ornate borders have been more elaborately decorated. The more than striking similarity in style of the borders might suggest that the four coins were part of one and the same gift in the first place. This raises at least three possible scenarios. Firstly, the multiples were put in frames centrally and then sent off as part of a broader diplomatic gift to the border regions. Secondly, the multiples – and the other precious objects – were dispatched from the centre of the empire to a location in the border regions of the Roman Empire, where the medallions would have subsequently been set in frames and/or have loops attached to them by a goldsmith familiar with local tastes.[48] Thirdly, the multiples and other golden objects were received as a gift by a local community and the medallions were subsequently put in the frames by the local ruler(s). The different scenarios do of course not exclude each other. Perhaps an interplay between Roman intentions and regional reception is the most likely. The Frankish community received the medallions and other golden objects as a form of payment, but their meaning expanded in the regional context. The proud display of the golden imperial portrait in the Frankish context might therefore too be seen as a sign of loyalty – or more conservatively: adherence or connection – to a powerful entity, which not only forged diplomatic relationships, but also acquired an amuletic meaning.

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[46] On the place of geography and universality in late antique ruler representation, see for example: Traina, 2015.

[47] Bursche, 1999.

[48] Bursche, 2001: 91-95.

Although this remains a hypothesis, the connection between the emperor and local rulers in the later Roman world can be further developed by bringing numismatic research into the discussion. These medallions of the Velp hoard cemented a relationship between the central (the Roman emperor) and the local (the Frankish ruler or chief), the earthly (diplomatic and/or military contacts) and the divine (the heavenly sanctioning of such contacts through the divinely authorised emperor). Besides the economic function (as valuable objects) and the diplomatic function (in forging relationships between Roman imperial and local powers), the amuletic function helps us to see how these spheres were interrelated and the extent to which single dimensions or spheres fail to fully comprehend the sociocultural position of the medallions in society.

Concluding remarks

Rethinking our modern concepts of what 'coinage' and 'the economy' actually mean, forces us to open up to new perspectives on numismatics. When we bring cultural practices into dialogue with economic transactions, we can see that cultural transactions – which gave rise to personal identities – also formed part of the wider spectrum of the ancient economy. Likewise, by opening up sociocultural history to the insights from numismatics we learn more about the important material side of everyday practices. An analysis of these coins from the point of view of its apotropaic function helps us further understand the importance of these objects.

In this article I sought to expand the boundaries of sociocultural history writing by incorporating a numismatic perspective. In doing so, it drew on the insights of historical-anthropology which have slowly, but steadily gained ground in the study of ancient coins. The approach and results are perhaps of a rather preliminary nature. I hope, however, to have shown that the study of coins can provide wonderful insights into the social practices and identity formation of late antiquity. The gold coins set in frames of the 1715 Velp hoard attest to the significance of such medallions in the communities on the borders of the later Roman Empire. This potential should be brought more fully into dialogue with studies of late antique (post-)Roman successor states. When coinage – and its various lives: economic, social, cultural, moral, religious – is brought into the mainstream history-writing, it becomes a valuable source for microhistories. In the end, these little objects passed through the hands of many persons; they were reviled, admired, showed off, or feared, but were always present in the daily lives of the late antique world. Especially in the 'embedded' ancient economy – which was so determined by non-market economic practices and relations – coins could invariably act as coin, jewel, or amulet.

Endnote

This article is based on research carried out during the seminar 'Coinage and the construction of identity in Antiquity and the Renaissance' (Rome, 3-10 October 2016). I would like to thank Liesbeth Claes and Erika Manders for their suggestions and encouragements. A version of this article was presented at the Jubileumcongres of the Koninklijk Nederlands Genootschap voor Munt- en Penningkunde (16-17 June 2017). I am grateful to the organisers for the opportunity to present my work there and to the audience for their remarks and questions. Fleur Kemmers, Daniëlle Slootjes and two anonymous reviewers provided further useful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

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