

# The Falkirk hoard of denarii: trade or subsidy?

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## ABSTRACT

*It is argued that the Falkirk hoard of Roman silver coins represents payments to a barbarian leader or dynasty in return for the maintenance of peace and order north of the Antonine Wall in the period c AD 160–230.*

The Falkirk hoard of denarii was found by chance in 1934 at Bell's Meadow, N of Callendar Park, about 400 m NW of the Antonine Wall. It was promptly published by Sir George Macdonald (Macdonald 1934a; 1934b) who recognized its unusual character. The composition of the hoard has been set out in full in Macdonald's publications and has been commented on by other writers since (Robertson 1978, 1979, 1982, 1983; Reece 1980) so that a detailed account is not necessary here. Briefly, it contained a remarkably high proportion of Flavian pieces (24%), of Trajanic and Hadrianic coins (23%), and a similarly high proportion of Antonine issues. Severan coinage was present in considerable quantity (5·6%) and issues down to Severus Alexander and Julia Mamaea were also included. The latest coin is of AD 230 and the hoard was presumably closed and concealed in the following decade or two. This is the largest hoard of Roman coins yet found in Scotland, with at least 1925 issues and probably originally numbering close to 2000 pieces.

Macdonald's comments on the general significance of the hoard are worth quoting for they are fundamentally correct.

'The facts on which the conclusion just reached is based are quite inconsistent with the suggestion of an army chest and equally so with that of loot brought back by raiders. In the contents of the jar we have the outcome of perhaps 120 years of thrift, the family savings of four generations. We do not know, nor can we ever know, how the money was made. But we have the best of reasons for believing that it was made far to the north of Hadrian's Wall and that the owners were not Roman intruders. They were dwellers in Caledonia' (Macdonald 1934a, 36).

We must agree with the gist of this summary, particularly with the points made about the evidently long period of hoarding and the virtual certainty that the hoard had accumulated north of the frontier. But we can perhaps go further and suggest how the hoard was got together and who its owner or owners were. Beyond that, it may be possible to relate the hoard to one aspect of frontier studies in Britain which has not yet received the attention it deserves.

This collection of coins represents issues of silver which reached or crossed the northern frontier over a lengthy period of time, if not over the 120 years of Macdonald then certainly over at least the 70 years AD 160–230. The opening-date of the process of hoarding cannot, of course, be fixed with any certainty. Reece (1980, 125) has suggested that this is a Severan hoard, with later additions. There seems no reason why it should not be regarded as an Antonine hoard in origin, with substantial

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additions in the Severan period. After 217 there is a distinct falling away, though appreciable sums of money were still being added down to 230. It is here suggested that hoarding began about or not long after 160, that is about the date of the final abandonment of the Antonine Wall. As Macdonald argued, the pattern of currency (not to mention the position of the hoard) rules out payments to Roman troops and it is equally hard to square that pattern with trading activities or with successful raiding. There is one other possible explanation which will account for the peculiar composition of the Falkirk treasure, as well as suiting the relations between the Roman frontier and this area of southern Scotland in the later second and early third centuries. It is proposed to treat the hoard as an Imperial subsidy to a barbarian leader, or probably a succession of such rulers.

The entire question of subsidies as a means of control beyond the frontiers, and thus as a major aspect of defence, has been remarkably little studied. Yet it is clearly a major theme, since what Rome could achieve *beyond* the frontiers determined to a large extent what kind of frontiers were maintained at different times. The literary evidence for monetary subsidies and other payments to barbarians is not vast but it is very revealing. It was reviewed some time ago by C D Gordon (Gordon 1948, 1949), but a reappraisal is badly needed, particularly in the light of the archaeological evidence from beyond the Rhine and Danube frontiers, not considered by Gordon. Many of the luxury objects found beyond those frontiers, and at least a proportion of the precious metal coinage, may well be referable to diplomatic gifts and subsidies rather than to the workings of trade (for example, the great treasure from Hildesheim: Pernice & Winter 1901; Nierhaus 1969; see also Redlich 1980, 357–8). The literary sources indicate that from the reign of Claudius at least, and quite possibly earlier, the payment of subsidies to barbarian kings and other leaders was an accepted part of Roman external policy. It was, moreover, a policy which worked. Domitian's frontier-building activities may have been facilitated by payments in cash in compensation for territory lost (Frontinus, *Strategemata* 2, 11, 7) and there are other occasions on which barbarian threats were averted by a subsidy. We may legitimately suspect that in other cases peace was bought over a protracted period by means of repeated monetary and other payments.

How might the Falkirk silver hoard fit into this context? It would seem, with considerable ease. Its composition is entirely consonant with payments made to a barbarian leader or dynasty over a period that extended from the Antonines to the rulers of the earlier third century. That date range sorts well with the historical situation in northern Britain as it is reported by our sources. Marcus Aurelius resorted to subsidies to tribes beyond the Danube more than once (Dio LXXI, 11 & 19; Zonaras XII, 1) and may have enlarged on the practice. Virius Lupus bought off the Maeatae in 196 (Dio LXXV, 5, 4) and both he and his successors may have continued payments until a later time. When Severus campaigned in northern Britain, he brought with him a very large sum of money, much of it no doubt for military purposes, but some of it perhaps earmarked for subsidies (Dio LXXVII, 11, 2). After Caracalla's operations in Caledonia in 211–12, it would not have been impolitic to single out barbarian chiefs who were prepared to receive Roman money in return for the maintenance of peace and order in the lands beyond Hadrian's Wall. If this interpretation of the Falkirk hoard is accepted, it would seem that payments were continued down to the reign of Severus Alexander at least. Finally, the find spot is of interest, close to the line of the Antonine Wall. There can be no more obvious place than this situation for the striking of an agreement between Rome and a barbarian leader, perhaps when the Antonine Wall was finally given up in the 160s. Thereafter, continuing loyalty was rewarded by renewed payments of silver until about 230.

If Roman silver coins were being sent to barbarians beyond the frontier, what were they to be used for? Clearly they did not circulate as normal currency. Nor does silver appear to have been much used in the making of ornaments in the Scottish Iron Age before the seventh century AD. The most obvious use would surely have been in purchasing goods from Roman provincial traders. The

recipient of the coins was thus provided with the most flexible form of payment, enabling him to acquire whatever he wished from what traders had to offer, and the traders would have been glad to receive payment in Roman coin. To judge from the archaeological record the most accessible commodities were pottery, glass and personal ornaments, but there were probably also foodstuffs, clothing and other perishables. The recipient might also disburse some of the money to his following, thus securing its loyalty in the time-honoured way.

Some such system of gift relationship had many advantages for Rome. It was easy to establish, it was cheap, far cheaper than maintaining troops in garrison, and, by and large, it worked well. It may also have lain behind the accumulation of other hoards in Scotland, including the much discussed hoard from Rumbling Bridge Kinross-shire, which ended with a coin of 186–7 (Robertson 1957, 242–3), and the four Severan hoards, all of which have come from the very areas of eastern Scotland which Roman governors would want to control from afar: Leuchars (Fife), Cowie Moss (Kincardine), Megray (Kincardine) and Portmoak (Kinross) (Robertson 1978, 104–6), while the Pitcullo hoard, found near to that of Leuchars, may also be Severan in date rather than late Antonine. Robertson has already suggested a link between the four certain Severan hoards and the policy of buying peace (1978, 192). It seems logical to see the Rumbling Bridge and Falkirk deposits as reflections of the same efforts at control. Here is important testimony to Roman policy beyond the northern frontier, long pursued, effective at least on occasion, and generally underestimated in modern accounts of Roman Scotland. It must also be recalled that what has so far been recorded is only a tiny fraction of what passed into barbarian hands. Of the untold remainder, it is not out of the question that a substantial proportion found its way into Pictish metalwork after AD 600.

#### THE LYCIAN DRACHM OF TRAJAN

Of particular interest is the occurrence in the hoard of a Lycian drachm of Trajan, for occasional finds of these pieces (usually of Domitian, Nerva or Trajan) are also reported in a number of hoards in free Germany as well as in the coin-lists from sites within the western provinces. The instances from free German hoards include the following:

Freesenmoor	(Trajan)	Regling 1912, 236
Fröndenberg	(Trajan)	Regling 1912, 237
Jever	(Trajan)	Regling 1912, 237
Middels-Osterloog	(Domitian)	Zedelius 1980, 502–3
Sindarve, Gotland	(Trajan)	Zedelius 1980, 503n 41.

The link between these deposits and the Falkirk hoard is tenuous, but the barbarian preference for silver of high quality is usefully underlined.

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