

The Hoxne treasure

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CATHERINE JOHNS, with contributions by B. Ager, C. Cartwright, M. Cowell, D. Hook, S. Dove, P. S. W. Guest, S. La Niece, J. Plouviez and R. Tomlin; illustrations by S. Crummy and P. Dean, *THE HOXNE LATE ROMAN TREASURE: GOLD JEWELLERY AND SILVER PLATE* (The British Museum Press 2010). Pp. x + 278, many ills. ISBN 978-0-7141-1817-8.

The Hoxne Treasure is the most recent representative of a long series of Late-Roman gold and silver hoards found in Britain. It is outstanding from many points of view: in the circumstances of its discovery and recovery near Hoxne (Suffolk) in 1992; in being composed of silver tableware and toilet utensils, gold jewellery, and gold and silver coins; and, last but not least — since there are in total 124 silver table utensils and 15,234 coins —, in its sheer size. C. Johns and her team now present the final publication of this exceptional treasure.

The book consists of 15 chapters, an exhaustive catalogue, two appendices on the site in its Roman and post-Roman contexts and on the weights of the gold jewellery and silver objects, as well as a list of the inscriptions and two concordances (of catalogue numbers and contexts). It includes an exhaustive bibliography and a helpful index. Seven chapters are written by specialists on a variety of matters (excavation, inscriptions, scientific analysis, conservation, technology, coins). The section on the coins sums up the results presented by P. Guest in a separate volume in 2005.¹

Because of their specific character, hoards of precious metal are found only rarely during controlled excavations.² Most surface by accident. Often they are discovered by treasure-hunters using metal detectors; as a consequence, in most cases next to nothing is known with regard to their original setting and context. Things are different, however, for the Hoxne treasure. Despite the fact that the hoard was also a metal-detector discovery, it was possible for the local archaeological authorities to recover it almost intact on site, thanks to the attention and prudence of the finder, Mr. Eric Lawes. The careful examination of the field where the treasure was found revealed that the hoard, originally deposited in a wooden chest measuring c.60 x 45 x 30 cm, had been damaged only slightly by the plough shortly before it was discovered. A number of finds, particularly coins, were scattered over an area up to 30 m from the spot where the hoard had been concealed, but the majority of the objects were still in their original position at the moment of discovery. Thanks to the observations on site and the careful excavation of the treasure in the laboratory, it was possible for the first time to reconstruct the original setting of a Late Roman hoard of precious metal. This archaeological evidence shows that the chest was packed carefully. The silver bowls, as well as most of the spoons and ladles and the gold bracelets, were carefully fitted into each other or were bunched together before being deposited into the container. Furthermore, inside the big wooden chest there is evidence of the existence of several smaller boxes, which may have contained some of the jewellery and other small artefacts. An ivory pyxis with relief decoration was also deposited inside the wooden chest. Remains of wheat straw adhering to the silver bowls, as well as traces of textiles (linen?) on bowls 38 and 39, show that the vessels had originally been carefully packed and wrapped. The good condition of the silver bowls may hint at the fact that they were still considered useful tableware, whereas other items such as the Hercules and Antaeus pepper-pot may have been dismantled before burial. For the same reason, the lone tigress belongs to an object that must have lost its original function before being put into the chest.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the rich collection of gold jewellery, which consists of a body-chain, 6 chain necklaces, 3 finger-rings and 19 bracelets. The most exceptional item is beyond any doubt the body-chain which, because of its small size, must have belonged to a slim, adolescent

1 P. S. W. Guest, *The Late Roman gold and silver coins from the Hoxne Treasure* (London 2005).

2 A rare exception is the recently discovered hoard from a private(?) residence in the Roman town of Vinkovci (*Colonia Aurelia Cibalae*), Croatia: <http://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/potvrdeno-je-blagopronadzeno-u-vinkovcima-iznimne-je-vrijednosti.html>

woman. The fact that an *aureus* of Gratian (A.D. 367-383) was used for the construction of the clasp on the back serves as a *terminus post quem* for the manufacturing of the chain. Given the date (406-407) of the latest coins in the treasure, it is tempting to follow Johns' suggestion that the chain was treasured over several decades before it was buried with the rest. Her idea that the chain was a wedding gift to an aristocratic woman who was obliged, much later in her life, to hide her belongings in the ground is equally tempting but remains, of course, unproven.

Many interesting questions arise concerning the gold jewellery. Rightly, the author points out the fact that certain groups are conspicuously absent from the surviving jewellery. Why is it that there are no earrings, no chain pendants and no brooches in the treasure? And why is the use of gemstones limited to the breast mount of the body chain, whereas we know of a growing taste for coloured effects in the jewellery of late antiquity? The author's explanation, that the jewellery in the treasure is only part of the original possessions of the woman owning it, is convincing. Either the more up-to-date pieces of jewellery were not deposited at all, or they were deposited in a separate chest hidden elsewhere.

Similarly, the composition of the silver vessels, discussed in chapt. 4, does not correspond to any logical set of tableware. Four bowls with horizontal rims and a shallow dish, an inscribed beaker, a juglet, 4 statuette-shaped pepper pots, and the rearing tigress (possibly the handle of a large vase) were deposited in the treasure. The high quality of the figured vessels and the tigress leaves no doubt that they belonged originally to a much bigger set of tableware. Again, it seems likely that the remainder of the original set was deposited in a separate location. Among the preserved silver items the tigress is of particular interest. In its rearing position it closely corresponds to the figured handles of the amphoras from the Concești and Sevso treasures.³ C. Johns is right, however, to point out certain difficulties with these parallels, based primarily on the angle of the flexed front paws, which cannot be fitted satisfyingly to the shoulder or neck of a vessel such as a high-necked amphora. In the absence of any precise parallel, it seems best to leave the interpretation of the original object open, and to remember that it does not necessarily need to have been a vessel at all.⁴

The owner (or owners) of the treasure seems to have had a particular liking for statuette-shaped silver statuettes and vessels. Apart from the tigress, the treasure included 4 statuette-shaped pepper-castors. There is remarkable variation in the shape of the 4 containers, which include the bust of an aristocratic lady (erroneously called "the empress" since her discovery), the group of Hercules and Antaeus, an ibex, and the group of a hare and hound. The 4 Hoxne vessels add to a very restricted corpus of statuette-shaped containers of pepper and other spices, all in silver. The questions thus arise as to why these vessels are absent in most of the big treasures of silver plate of late antiquity, and why, on the other hand, they are so numerous in the Hoxne treasure. As in the case of the silver bowls and the jewellery, we get the impression of a careful selection of the items deposited. At least one of the *piperatoria*, the Hercules and Antaeus pot, clearly was not in full working order when stored. Is it possible that the pepper-pots were selected for deposition in the treasure because they were not compulsory equipment for a banquet and could be replaced by simple open containers when needed?

The most impressive of the 4 items certainly is the "empress" *piperatorium*. Johns has pointed out its iconographic relationship to the steelyard bronze weights in the form of female busts dating to the 5th and 6th c. Because of the considerable chronological gap, however, she dismisses — convincingly — any direct relationship between the two iconographic traditions. The question as to the identity of the Hoxne lady is difficult to answer. Her 'Zeitfrisur', on the one hand, implies that she is related to a particular individual of late antiquity; on the other, it is

3 Concești amphora: R. Harhoiu, "Das frühvölkerwanderungszeitliche hunnische Prunkgrab von Concesti in der oberen Moldau," *Dacia* N.F. 40-42 (1996-98) 274-79 and 294 f., pls. 3-8. Sevso amphora: M. Mundell Mango, *The Sevso treasure* (JRA Suppl. 12.1, 1994) 194-239. figs. 5-1 to 5-53.

4 Animals can be attached in a variety of ways to vessels and other silver artefacts. Note, for instance, the leopard integrated into the handle of the toilet utensil 149 from the Hoxne treasure, or the small lion figure attached to the handle of the Hippolytus ewer from the Sevso treasure: Mango *ibid.* 365-401, figs. 10-1 to 10-5, 10-12 and 10-52.

difficult to understand why any historical woman should have become the subject of a statuette-shaped pepper box. Are we dealing with an allegorical allusion to the owner's (or owners'?) wealth and capacity to offer exotic spices to his (their) guests? The book-roll held in the lady's left hand associates her with the concept of sophistication and classical education. A similar amalgamation of personal individuality and allegorical idealization can be found elsewhere, for instance in the central panel of the painted ceiling from Trier depicting an aristocratic woman, who also wears a 'Zeitfrisur' and carries a *kantharos* in her left hand.⁵ There has been much debate as to the identity of this woman, too; but, whoever she is, the vessel in her left hand points clearly to her allegorical character, referring to the enjoyment of an aristocratic lifestyle. In the case of the Hoxne lady, wine is replaced by pepper, another luxurious accessory on the late-antique dinner table. Although it cannot be ruled out that the lady is little more than a decorative image made to adorn the dinner table, as Johns has suggested, there is reason to believe that the topic of the richly-clothed elegant lady was chosen quite deliberately in order to underline the precious and exquisite nature of the pot's contents.

A more common category of Late-Roman silver artefacts is represented by 98 spoons and ladles, many of which are richly decorated with incised and gilded ornaments and figured decoration. In general, the spoons and ladles correspond to types already well documented all over the empire, and in Britain in particular. Especially noteworthy are two groups of 10 spoons carrying each the name of Aurelius Ursicinus and Peregrinus, which attest the existence of sets belonging to various owners at some stage in the history of the treasure and thereby raise the question of the treasure's genesis and composition (a question which arises on various occasions in the book and is rightly treated with great care by the author).

Thanks to the careful handling of the treasure at the moment of its discovery, it was possible for the first time to observe details of the storage of the objects in the original container. Apparently, the many relatively small silver items, as well as the gold coins, were stored in separate boxes, pyxides and purses, or wrapped in textiles in a very careful and considered manner. Given the efforts taken to protect the objects from damage, it seems safe to conclude that the packing did not happen in a hurry but calmly, with deliberation and forethought. The same considered handling of the objects might be responsible for the composition of the treasure as a whole, for it is obvious that the artefacts deposited in the box can represent only part of the owner's (or owners') original possessions of tableware, jewellery and coins in silver and gold. Johns therefore rightly assumes that the remainder of the precious belongings was either taken by the owner (owners) with him (them) when he (they) left for unknown reasons, or that it was deposited in a second chest hidden at a different spot. In any case he (they) must have selected the objects to be deposited in the Hoxne box quite consciously and with great care.

The observations on organic materials, resulting from the careful examination of the treasure in the laboratory, are also of great importance. Apart from the remains of a small ivory pyxis, strips of bone veneer prove the presence of a second container, possibly of (ash?) wood. Two more boxes are attested by small silver padlocks and hinges preserving remains of wild cherry and yew, two particularly decorative woods. Moreover, two more decorative woods, field-maple and box, are attested, along with ash, pine and willow. The treasure-chest itself was made most probably of oak, traces of which were found adhering to several of the large iron fittings attributed to it. Furthermore, traces of leather and textile, possibly linen, could be identified, the latter in association with the silver bowls. From the evidence of the organic materials Johns convincingly concludes that there was long-term domestic storage of the objects in a variety of containers, and also that there was systematic packing of the treasure-chest, rather than a hasty gathering up of valuables in an emergency.

The Hoxne treasure is among the very few Late Roman hoards of precious metal containing tableware as well as jewellery and coins. Even more exceptional is the combination of the cur-

5 H. Brandenburg, "Zur Deutung der Deckenbilder aus der Trierer Domgrabung," *Boreas* 8 (1985) 143-89; E. Simon, *Die konstantinischen Deckengemälde in Trier* (Mainz 1986) 39-46 pl. 9; W. Weber, *Constantinische Deckengemälde aus dem römischen Palast unter dem Trierer Dom* (Museumsführer 14; Trier 2000) 21 Abb. 17.

rency with jewellery of undoubtedly female character. In their publications of both the coins and the tableware and jewellery, Guest and Johns have dealt independently with the question of the identity of the owner(s), starting from the composition of the treasure. Insisting with good cause on the difficulties involved in any attempt to answer this question, the two authors develop two different lines of thought. While Guest advocates the idea that the owner was a high-ranking army official or civil servant because of the presence of 579 *solidi*, originating possibly from one or several imperial donatives, Johns more prudently favours the interpretation of the treasure as a family possession. The two interpretations, however, need not be mutually exclusive.

In his contribution to the publication of the second part of the Kaiseraugst treasure, J. Szidat pointed out that hardly any of the Late-Roman silver treasures can be considered to include the entirety of the owners' possessions of precious metal.⁶ With regard to the treasures that can be related to owners of official status (e.g., the Kaiseragust treasure), he considered the possibility that the high-ranking civil servants, and especially the military commanders who benefited from imperial donatives, may have stored in their private residences, scattered all over the Roman Empire, those parts of their property which they did not need immediately for display of their social position or for anticipated financial transactions. Could it be that the Hoxne treasure, which apparently is composed of belongings originating in official as well as private contexts, was part of the private estate of a wealthy Romano-British landowner serving in the civil administration or in the army of the Late Roman Empire?⁷ We shall most probably never know the answer to this question.

However, it is interesting to note that there is at least one Late Roman hoard with similar characteristics: the hoard from Beaurains (Pas-de-Calais) dating to the early 4th c.⁸ Being composed of numerous gold and silver coins, including some very rare multipla, silverware (a silver vessel of unknown type serving as a container, two spoons and a candlestick), and jewellery of private character, it can be attributed most plausibly to an army official or civil servant of the topmost echelon of the aristocracy of the time of Constantius Chlorus and Constantine the Great. Among the private items a wedding ring engraved with the name of Valerianus and Paterna may be compared with the body-chain from the Hoxne treasure.⁹ Because of the absence of any archaeological context, little can be said about the circumstances of the deposition of the Beaurains treasure. Given its *terminus post quem* of 315, a period when no military conflicts are reported for NW Gaul, private reasons rather than political events may be responsible for the hiding of the precious possessions.

As the hoards from Beaurains and Hoxne are separated from one another by almost a century, no direct connection can be established. Still, the earlier hoard may help us better understand the later one. Another aspect that might be worthwhile for further study is the position of the Hoxne treasure within the context of the hoarding phenomenon of the later 4th and 5th c. in Britain in more general terms. What is the relationship, for instance, of the isolated tigress and the dismantled and possibly damaged Hercules-Antaeus pepper pot with the growing importance of *Hacksilber* in hoards both within and outside the empire? The fact that two similar, albeit much smaller, isolated feline handles were found among the *Hacksilber* in the hoard of Traprain Law might hint at possible convergences with regard to the

6 J. Szidat in M. Guggisberg (ed.), unter Mitarbeit von A. Kaufman-Heinimann, *Der spätrömische Silberschatz von Kaiseraugst. Die neuen Funde* (Augst 2003) 243.

7 388 out of 579 *solidi* in the Hoxne treasure were struck in Milan, followed by Trier with 78 and Ravenna with 54 pieces. It is usually assumed that imperial donatives were distributed to the recipients at a short distance from their place of manufacture, in order to minimize the risks of transporting them. With regard to the high number of coins minted in Milan, it is therefore to be considered whether the owner spent some of his political or military career on the Continent, possibly in Italy.

8 P. Bastien and C. Metzger, *Le trésor de Beaurains (dit d'Arras)* (Arras 1977); F. Baratte, *La vaisselle d'argent en Gaule dans l'Antiquité tardive* (Paris 1993) 32; F. Reinert (ed.), *Moselgold. Der römische Schatz von Machtum: ein kaiserliches Geschenk* (exh. cat., Luxembourg 2008) 206-12.

9 Bastien and Metzger *ibid.* 170-72, B12 pl. 7.

material significance of fragmentary silver artefacts.¹⁰ Also worthy of further thought is the possibility that imperial coin donatives may be present in the Hoxne treasure, while imperial gifts including silver plate and ingots are almost totally absent in British hoards of the 4th and early 5th c.

The primary aim of the book under discussion was the presentation of the artefacts and the archaeological context of the Hoxne treasure in their own right. It will be left to future research to incorporate the new data into the more general discussion on the rôle of precious metal and jewellery within its Late Roman social and cultural contexts. What is greatly to be regretted — and what certainly does not fall within the author's responsibility — is a certain deficiency with regard to the graphic and photographic documentation of the objects. Drawings, and especially section-drawings of all items, as well as some colour photographs of the spectacular items with gilding and niello decoration, would have been most welcome. Apart from this blemish, the exhaustive and thoughtfully conducted study represents a very important contribution to archaeological research on Late Roman silverware. We must thank Catherine Johns for having accompanied the Hoxne treasure from its discovery to final publication with her personal perseverance and scholarly acumen.

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I wish to express my gratitude to Kenneth Painter for improving my English text.

10 A. O. Curle, *The treasure of Traprain: a Scottish hoard of Roman silver plate* (Glasgow 1923) 79-80 pl. 31.