

Roman coins in a Barbarian context

At the 10th International Congress of Numismatics at London in 1986 my predecessor, the late Anne Kromann, gave an overview of the then recent coin finds from Denmark (Kromann 1990). In her introduction she noted that the number of Roman coin finds from Denmark had almost doubled in the period 1976-1986. This enormous rise in the number of finds since the 1970's has now found a stable level.

Roman coins are found on 35 to 40 sites every year. The actual number of Roman coins found each year varies more (an average of 130 coins pr. year), but in total the number of Roman coins found in Denmark has doubled again during the last two decades (Fig. 1). Today, the total number amounts to c. 4500 coins – a small number, one should think in a European perspective, but still a significant and important artefact type in a Danish Iron Age context.

The significant rise in the number of finds during the last decades is mainly due to the use of metal detectors by professional archaeologists as well as amateurs. A very large number of coins of course derives from hoards, found either *in situ* or scattered, but also a significant number of single finds from settlement or workshop areas should be mentioned. This large new and well-documented material – of which much is still to be analysed – calls for a reassessment. In my paper today I will concentrate on coins from four important areas: Gudme on Fuen, Hørup and Østervang on Sealand and the island of Bornholm, and focus on the coins as archaeological objects and on their contexts.

In many ways the new material repeats previously known patterns. The by far most common type is the denarius, and among these coins from the Antonine period dominate, followed by denarii from the periods from the Flavian to the Hadrianic periods. But the study of the Roman coins in the local Germanic context extends and refines our knowledge, both of the local cultures and of their contacts to the Roman empire.

Within settlement archaeology there has been a growing awareness of the importance of the diversity in the settlement types. There have been discussions of site hierarchies closely connected to the interpretation of an Iron Age society transforming from a society built on a local level and led by chieftains to larger –regional– units governed by kings.

The refinement of site typologies has revealed that Roman coins have appeared in abundance in the central places, and in less but still significant numbers in the work-shop sites that are normally interpreted as part of the *elite* sphere. And it is also very important to note that the overwhelming majority of Danish Iron Age sites have yielded no coins at all.

During the last decades extensive surveying and excavation in Gudme on the south-east of the island Fuen has generated a new look on the state formation process in modern Denmark in the 3rd to 6th century AD. Among the many finds of building remains are the remains of the largest hall so far known from Iron Age Denmark –47 metres long it is popularly known as the “King’s hall”. The important finds from Gudme now include more than 1000 Roman coins. The majority of them are denarii that have been found in scattered hoards (for example the Præstemosen hoard –cf. Horsnæs 2000), as single finds in ploughsoil, and *in situ* in culture layers. Furthermore, there is a siliqua hoard consisting of c. 300 coins found partly *in situ* (Kromann 1988). A very interesting mixed denarius and siliqua hoard consisting of c. 55 coins has been found in the so-called Gudme IV area in secondary position in and around a pit that was filled in during the late Iron Age.¹

The status of the site is underlined by many gold finds from both Gudme and neighbouring areas: 25 solidi have been found at Gudme itself. 10 of them

1. A full publication of the extremely rich material from Gudme is being prepared by a number of scholars connected to the National Museum.

probably belong to a dispersed hoard in Gudme, area I, while three came from a hoard containing also fragments of a broken silver plate from the Late Roman period found at the Bjørnebanke site. Moreover, several gold hoards, including hoards with bracteates and/or solidi have been found in other sites in Southeast Fuen, such as Brangstrup (Henriksen 1992; Storgaard 1997) and Elsehoved.

Close to Gudme is the coastal site Lundeberg (Thomsen, *forthcoming*). This site has yielded another 167 Roman coins. As is the case in Gudme some of the coins were found in the plough soil by amateur detectorists, but the majority – a total of 101 coins – came from archaeological layers that can be independently dated within the Late Roman and Early Germanic Iron Ages (Fig. 2). Thus Lundeberg forms one of the most important volumes of Roman coins with a good independent archaeological date of the deposition.

Lundeberg has been interpreted as a site with two important aspects: As a place of call for coastal trade, and as a workshop area. It is no doubt closely connected to the centre at Gudme only 5 km away.

The places of call are an emerging site type in the Germanic Iron Age and Viking Period, but so far Lundeberg is the only identified place of call that goes back to the Roman Iron Age (Ulriksen 1998).

The other aspect of Lundeberg, the workshop site, has a number of parallels in Sweden and Germany as well as in Denmark. Among these, two sites on Sealand should be mentioned: Hørup and Østervang, but several other sites with similar characteristics have been identified.

Excavations were undertaken at Hørup in 1994-1996 (Sørensen 2000). They revealed a number of ovens (the function of which unidentified) and smith's hearths, traces of fences and postholes, and a number of pits. As was the case in Lundeberg, the numerous small finds indicated that several crafts were undertaken on the site: among other things iron smelting (bog iron ore), bronze working, work in bone and antler, and probably textile and/or leather production. The period of activity is given by a sequence of fibulas, according to the excavator ranging in date from c. 70 AD and into the 5th cent.² The Roman coins from the site were all found during detector surveying of the plough soil of the site.

Within a radius of 10 km from Hørup a number of contemporary sites have been located (Sørensen 2000, 61-62). They include: settlements, burials, roads, a (probable) blocking of the entrance to the Roskilde Fjord, three C14 dates within the first half of the first millennium AD, and a number of sacrificial deposits. The most important of these in this connection is the hoard of 48 denarii that was found scattered in plough soil on the Lærkefyrd site, that has yielded also a number of other valuable offerings (Sørensen 2000, pp. 68 and 70).

Fieldwork at Østervang took place in 1999-2003 (Tornbjerg 2002). Remains of almost 30 long houses and a number of smaller outhouses were found. They represent 10-15 phases of a continuous occupation of the same site through 600 years from the Early Roman Iron Age to the Late Germanic Iron Age, and there are indications for the same crafts as at Hørup. The site has yielded only 8 denarii, but the presence of hack-silver, ingots and probably locally produced silver objects, leads us to the inevitable question whether the 8 coins that were found, were the few that escaped the furnace.

The presence of a handful of Roman coins on a site may not seem significant. Still, it is important to stress again that sites with finds of Roman coins actually form a minority – they are an exception from the rule. Only a handful of the numerous Iron Age settlements dating from the period c. 200-600 AD that have been explored in Denmark have yielded finds of Roman coins. And the sites *with* Roman coins are the ones that also stand out from the ordinary also by other measures (i.e. by finds of other luxury/rare objects, traces of crafts etc.).

The area that is now modern Denmark was not a unity during the Iron Age (cf. for example Hedeager 1992). A number of cultural units can be distinguished in the archaeological material, and these differences are reflected in the numismatic material. This calls for a balanced evaluation of the material, taking into consideration *both* the various regions of Denmark and their individual characteristics *and* the rapid changes that took place during the centuries in question and that were brought about, no doubt, by the interaction with the Roman Empire.

2. Early Roman Iron Age (period B2) to Late Roman Iron Age (periods C1-C3) and perhaps into Early Germanic Iron Age (period D).

Bornholm is one particular region that I should like to highlight, as it forms a picture that differs greatly from the other Danish regions. The island is situated in a strategic position in the Baltic Sea, which probably accounts for its special history. The choice of Roman coins found on Bornholm is comparable to the Swedish islands of Öland and Gotland, and to Poland,³ rather than to the remaining parts of Denmark. Also the sheer number of Roman coins found on Bornholm is remarkable: this relatively small island has yielded almost 2000 coins, almost half the total of Denmark.

The coins are found over most of the island, both in hoards and as single finds, but particularly large number of finds derive from the so-called Black Soil areas, that is: areas where animal droppings through centuries of continued settlement have darkened the soil. Amateur detectorists survey many of these areas in close collaboration with the local museum, and their many finds are continuously being plotted, today by the use of GPS. This enables the Museum authorities to undertake rescue excavations in case the detector finds indicates special concentrations of material (Watt 1998). This happened in 1983 where a number of denarius finds led to the discovery of the Smørenge hoard (almost 500 Roman denarii of the period from Vespasian to Septimius Severus) still partly *in situ* (Kromann & Watt 1984). Today, 20 years later, amateur detectorists are still surveying this site, and every year more information is gained from the plough soil – and more Roman coins are found. The same applies to the largest central place on Bornholm, the agglomeration of sites at Sorte Muld (literally “Black Soil” and thus the name place for this particular type of sites). Here one of the most famous finds of recent years in Danish archaeology was made in early 2001: a silver plate folded around a necklace consisting of bracteates and Late Roman solidi (Horsnæs 2002).

A real assessment of the material from Bornholm is hard to give. A monograph on the Black Soil sites is under preparation by Dr. Margrethe Watt, who is a pioneer in this work, but even her work will hardly be comprehensive, as many of the finds, both coins and other artefact types, are still being studied, and the material is growing steadily.

The massive presence of Roman coins on central places such as Gudme on Fyn and the Black Soil sites of Bornholm is of major importance. This would indicate that the Roman coins belonged in an *élite* culture. A

similar impression can be gained from the negative evidence from many other Iron Age settlements and single farms: it seems safe to say that the Roman coins belonged among luxury items, and they never penetrated into the ranks of “ordinary” people.

The many coins from Lundeberg should be seen in connection with the central place at Gudme, with which it is closely connected. It is debated whether Lundeberg should be interpreted as a “place of call” or as a “port of trade” – the latter interpretation indicating a higher level of sophistication in the organization of the site. Still, there is no reason to believe that the Roman coins functioned as coins in Danish Iron Age society. They may at the most have been seen as pre-weighed silver with a reasonably well-known value.

The presence of denarii on workshop sites is interesting. From an archaeological/historical point of view it has traditionally been maintained that the Roman denarii is *the* main source of silver in Roman and Early Germanic Iron Age Denmark. To test the validity of this theory, we hope to obtain funding to analyses of the metal of coins, ingots and melted silver droplets found at Østervang, within a research project concentrating on this site that has been launched in 2003.⁴

Traditionally, the Roman coins have been seen as indicating Romano-Barbaric contact in a generic sense, and they have been used for *post quem* dating of the local material.

Today, however, the Roman coin finds from Denmark must be addressed from a “Barbarian”, as well as from a Roman, perspective. Many of the recent finds of Roman coins are the direct result of the development of metal detectors and their today habitual employment in Danish archaeology – by amateurs as well as by professionals. New types of sites have emerged, and the majority of the recent finds of Roman coins now derive from high status sites that can be interpreted in light of a theory of early state formation in Iron Age Denmark. Thus the deposition date and circumstances in this particular Barbarian context are in many cases more important than the date and place of issue of the coins themselves, and the coins finds must be treated accordingly.

3. Recent research carried out by Renata Ciolek.

4. Directed by Svend Åge Tornbjerg, Køge Museum.

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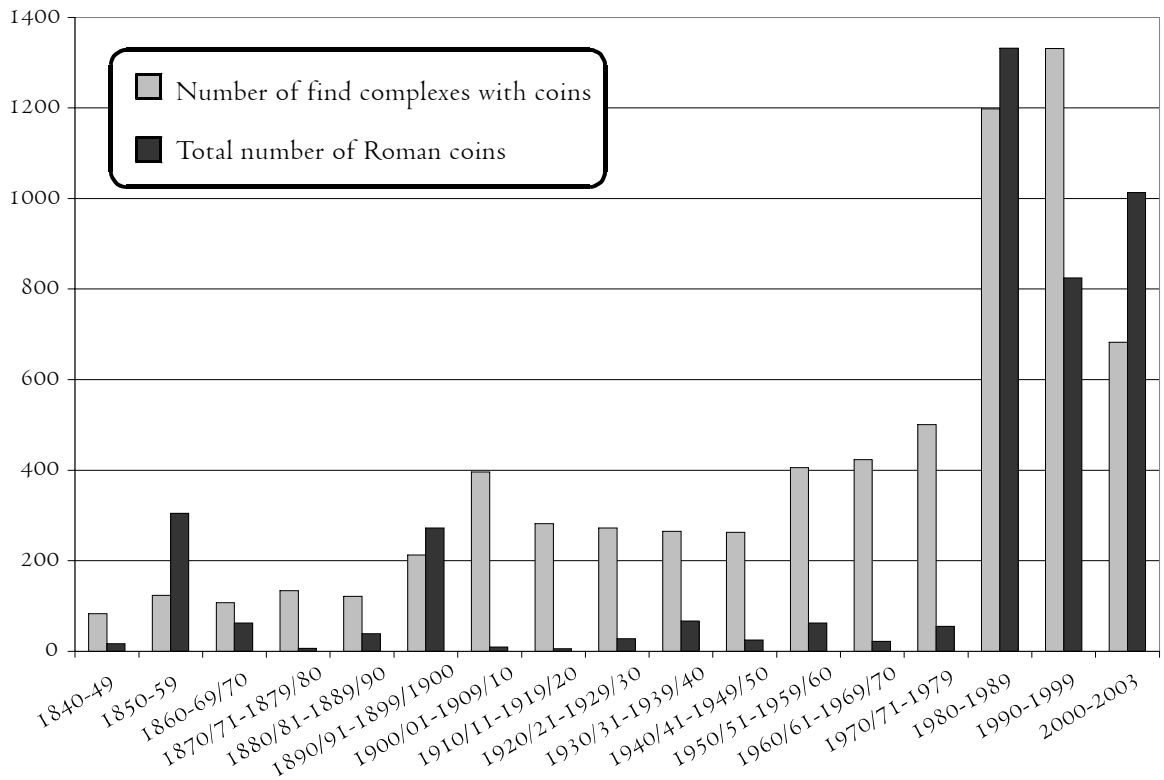


Fig. 1. Number of Roman coins found in Denmark from 1840 to August 2003

Deposition date of the Roman coins from Lundeborg

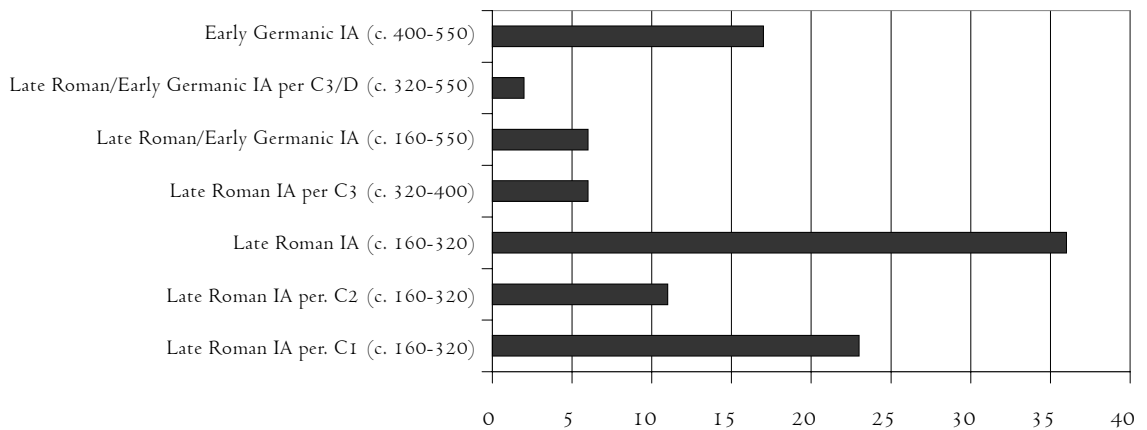


Fig. 2. Deposition date of the Roman coins from Lundeborg
 Horizontal axis indicates the number of coins found in layers from each phase dated by independent archaeological finds