

Stoke Lyne coin hoards and the Roman Crisis of the Third Century

Oxfordshire Museum and Oxfordshire Museum Services are pursuing the possible acquisition of two Roman coin hoards found by a metal detectorist in 2016 near Stoke Lyne (near Bicester). The total number of coins in the hoards is approximately 2200 and the majority of the coins date from the late third century AD. The earliest coins have a higher silver content but the bulk of the hoard is made up of a debased copper alloy coinage. The earliest coins would seem have been struck between 271 AD and 284 AD. The coins are not of high commercial value but help to consolidate and extend our knowledge of the Roman presence in North Oxfordshire. The coins in the hoards were struck in one of the most chaotic periods of the later Roman Empire.

The Roman period, 235 - 284 AD, has been called, by later historians, 'The Crisis of the Third Century'. For a short time, the Empire became ungovernable as a single unit and split into three components under three or more different leaders and warlords. After this short period of instability, the Empire was temporarily re-united under Aurelian (284 AD) and then formally split by Diocletian (293 AD) into a Western half to be centred on Rome and an Eastern half to be centred on Nicomedia and other eastern cities. Simply put, the Empire had become too big with too huge borders to be governed centrally from Rome in an age of increasing barbarian activity and economic complexity. The Crisis period also corresponds roughly to the change from opposition to Christianity to its acceptance (324 AD) and is generally taken to mark the Empire's transition from 'classical antiquity' to 'late antiquity'.



260 – 274 AD Fragmented Roman Empire

We can see that the coins in the proposed Stoke Lyne hoards originate towards the end of this Crisis period. Some of the coins have the marks of Emperors Valerian (253 – 260 AD), Gallienus (253 – 268 AD) (son of Valerian) and Aurelian (270 – 275 AD) all central Roman Emperors during the Crisis.

Other names on our coins cannot be found in the same central empire list – these are the names of the warlords in control of the temporary Gallic Empire in the West: Postumus (260 – 269 AD), Victorinus (269 – 271 AD), Tetricus I (271 – 274 AD) and Tetricus II (274).

The Crisis had many causes. There were no defined rules of imperial succession; it became clear that whoever controlled the armies could make a bid for ultimate power. This led to internal, devastating civil wars as ambitious army generals aspired to become emperor. Another factor was a succession of plagues and climate changes. The Antonine and Cyprian plagues led to a reduction in manpower both on the land and in the military, leaving farms abandoned and less army manpower to defend against barbarian invasion. Climate change also led to drier and warmer summers reducing agricultural productivity which, in turn, led to patches and periods of famine. With a weakened centre, the empire also became more of a target for barbarian re-settlement or invasion, a threat which was contained only in the 4th century and then not permanently.

The possible economic impact was dire but local. With the onset of the Crisis, the vast internal trade network, built up since the days of Augustus, started to break down. Goods were harder to find, it was too dangerous for merchants to travel, money was wasted on war chests and army bribes by ambitious commanders. This was partly paid for by debasing the currency, and allowing high levels of inflation set in. This did not occur generally but only in the areas of contention and subsequent devastation. In these areas, for example our north-west, there was an increased tendency to hoard against unsettled times. Commerce became narrower and more localized, a feature which was to be passed on to the European Middle Ages.

For a short period, from 260-274 AD, the empire split into three competing states under different leaders: the Gallic Empire (including the Roman provinces of Gaul, Britannia and, briefly, Hispania); the Palmyrene Empire (including the eastern provinces of Syria Palaestina and Aegyptus); and, between them, the Italian-centered independent Roman Empire proper. In 274 AD, the empire was re-united by Aurelian.

Two later, named coins are found in the hoards, one from the time of Carausius and one from the time of Allectus. Marcus Carausius (died 293) was a military commander of the Roman Empire. He usurped power in 286, during the Carausian Revolt, declaring himself emperor in Britain and northern Gaul. He did this only 13 years after the Gallic Empire was ended in 273. He held power for seven years, fashioning the name "Emperor of the North" for himself, before being assassinated by his finance minister Allectus.

The **central Roman emperors** during this period were:

(red = names found in these two coin hoards)

Valerian	253 – 260
Gallienus (son of Valerian)	253 – 268
Claudius Gothicus	268 – 270
Quintillus	270
Aurelian	270 – 275
Ulpia Severina (wife)	275
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Diocletian	284 – 305
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Constantine the Great et al	306 – 337

The **Gallic emperors** during this period were:

(red = names found in these two coin hoards)

Postumus	260 – 269
Marcus Aurelius Marius	
Victorinus	269 – 271
Tetricus I	271 – 274
Tetricus II	274
Re-assimilation under Aurelian	274



Selection of coins from the Stoke Lyne coin hoards

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