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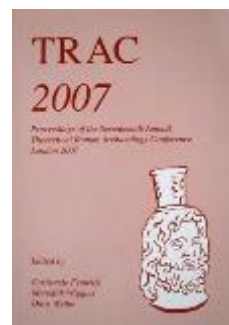
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Charon's Obols? A Case Study in the Role of Coins in Roman Burial Ritual

Lisa Brown

The study of coins in Roman burials is often limited to their dating value, with interpretation traditionally assumed to be payment to Charon, the ferryman, for safe transportation across the river Styx to the afterlife (Toynbee 1971: 49). One of the first references to the Charon myth is in Aristophanes' *Frogs* (140), where the fee of two *obols* is mentioned by Heracles. This, combined with the beginning of the appearance of coins in Athenian burials in the Hellenistic period (Kurtz and Boardman 1971: 166), led to the supposition that these coins were payment to Charon. The subsequent inclusion of coins in Roman burials was considered an adoption of the Greek practice. There has been frequent discussion of the role of Charon and coins in Roman and Greek burial ritual (Sullivan 1950, Grinsell 1957, Toynbee 1971, Kurtz and Boardman 1971, Philpott 1991 and Stevens 1991) but few attempt a more specific analysis of this practice (Gorecki 1975 being a notable exception). Yet, across the space and time of the classical world, variation in the uptake and interpretation of this idea might be expected and therefore should be investigated.

As an initial step towards examining this issue, this pilot study has systematically analysed the coins and their context in the burial from selected areas in the north-west provinces. The aim is to see if any patterns emerge when one analyses the geographical and chronological spread of this practice. By gathering a range of data from the burials, I aim to analyse the frequency, differential adoption of, and variability in the custom. Although this initial work is inevitably limited geographically, significant variability in the habit over time, in metal type compared to other contexts, and in coin location in the grave have been identified, which show that this was not a unitary, unchanging phenomenon. It is not my intention to deconstruct the Charon's obol myth but to present the argument that if one looks closely at the practice of placing a coin in the grave, the patterns that emerge are much more complex.

Methodology

The main focus is Roman Britain, as the contextual data are readily summarised by Philpott (1991). This is compared with the evidence from the Rheinhessen and Pfalz regions of Germany, and with the more limited evidence from outside of the Empire, specifically Denmark and

parts of NE Germany (Niedersachsen, Mecklenburg–Vorpommern, Brandenburg and Berlin). Analysis concentrated on the period up to the middle of the third century A.D., a time of rapid devaluation of silver coinage (Abdy 2002: 33), when the decrease in the precious metal content had a major effect on the usage of coins. The following aspects of the coins and burial were investigated: burial type, sex and age of the occupant, burial date, number of coins in each burial, date of issue, the position of the coin in the grave, metal type, denomination, obverse and reverse type, evidence of use (e.g. wear, piercing) and association with other grave goods. Data for Britain were gathered from Philpott (1991); for Germany the series '*Die Fundmünzen Der Römischen Zeit in Deutschland*' (Chantraine 1955, Franke 1960, Laser and Stribny 2003) was used, supplemented by some more recent publications. For Barbaricum, the '*Corpus der Römischen Funde im Europäischen Barbaricum*' (Laser and Ulrich 1994, Laser and Schultz 1995, Ulrich 1998, Erdrich 2002) and Nielsen (1987–88) were used. This gave a dataset of 158 burials from Britain, 305 from Germany and 44 from beyond the frontier.

This dataset was then analysed to provide information on a number of questions. Firstly, the variability in coin deposition over time was examined in order to determine how the selection of coins for burials correlates with coin loss on settlements. Secondly, metal type was analysed to investigate whether higher or lower value coins were found in burial contexts. Thirdly, the location of the coin in the burial and possible reuse is explored, to consider the range of symbolic significance. In each case, the central concern was to ascertain whether the practice of coin deposition is constant or shows variability both within and between provinces. My hypothesis is that variability in depositional practices should provide insights into variations in the interpretation of the custom in different regions.

A number of problems must be taken into consideration. Publications often provided insufficient information about the archaeological context of coins in graves. For instance, the FMRD does not give contextual information, while for Britain, the numismatic detail was limited; within the constraints of this project it was not possible to chase all the original material / publications. Furthermore, there was a lack of detailed information from older excavation reports.

Coin deposition over time

Focussing first on the British data, their chronological distribution was compared to Reece's British average (Reece 1991), to see if the deposits of coins in burials mirrored general patterns of coin loss. The issue of how long coins were in circulation before burial is considered below. Of course, neither reflects the coinage in circulation, and the taphonomic pathways are very different, with one representing losses and the other deliberate deposition, but the site finds provide an initial benchmark to throw up the contrasts between the two.

The graph illustrates that the burial data loosely mirrors the overall trends noted by Reece; however, there are irregularities (Fig. 1). Throughout the first century, coins are preferentially deposited in burials, with the habit being proportionally less common throughout most of the second century. Chi-squared testing of this data has shown it to be significant (see appendix 1).

The German evidence shows some differences from the British (Fig. 2). It does of course start earlier, with a substantial early peak indicating, as with Britain, a rapid adoption of the habit. After the early peak, the two graphs follow similar trends, with only slight differences.

The number of coins from burials in Free Germany and Denmark are rather few, and must be used with caution. Subtle differences are unlikely to be statistically significant, but overall a

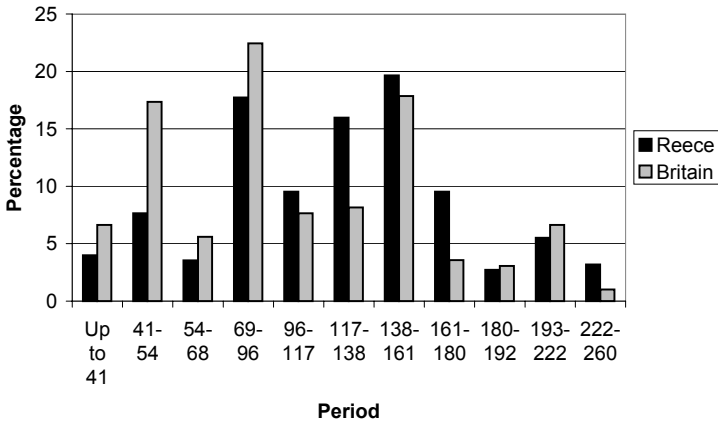


Figure 1. Britain – Percentage of coins in burials compared to average site loss (data from Philpott 1991).

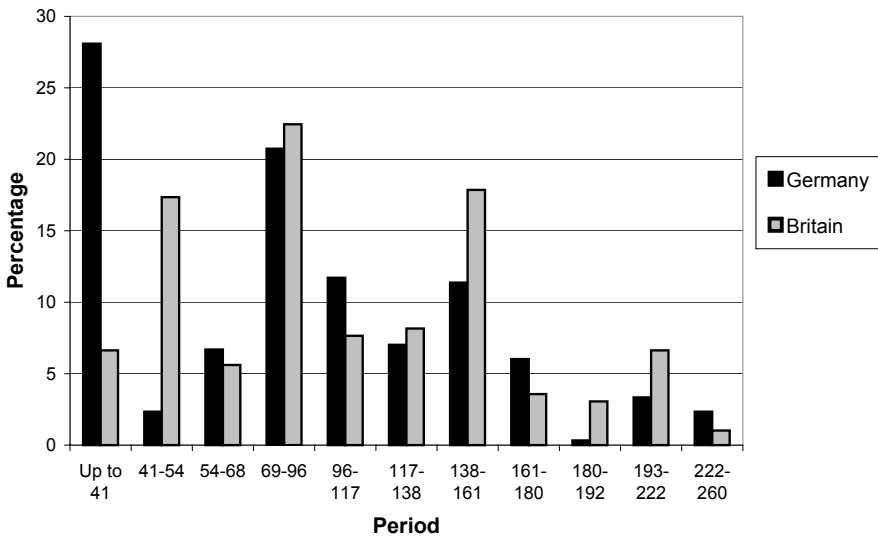


Figure 2. Germany – Percentage of coins in British burial compared to Germany (data from Chantraine 1955, Franke 1960, Laser and Stribrny 2003).

great deal of the examples are second century in date: 49% for free Germany (data from Laser and Ulrich 1994, Laser and Schultz 1995, Ulrich 1998, Erdrich 2002) and 56% for Denmark (data from Nielsen 1987–88). This may be comparable to the other evidence of coins from these areas, notably the hoard data, as the evidence for hoards stops in this period (Berger 1993).

The graphs show that within the provinces there is a notable early adoption of this practice, which declines in the second century. In Barbaricum, the practice is concentrated in the second century, probably linked to the availability of coins at this time.

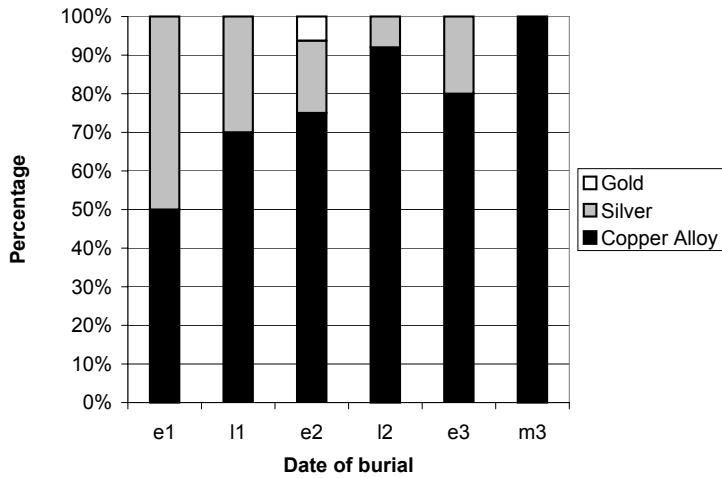


Figure 3. Metal type of coins used in burials in Britain (data from Philpott 1991).

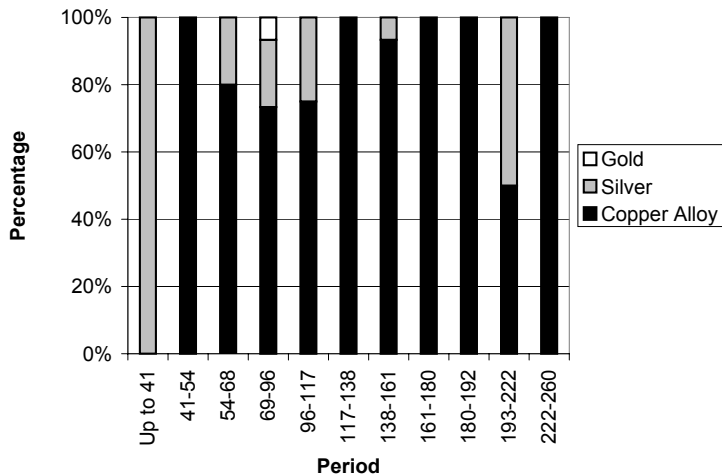


Figure 4. Metal type of coins used in each period in Britain (data from Philpott 1991).

Metal Type

The metal type of the coins in the burials was analysed for trends and anomalies. Two graphs were created using the British data; one dividing the coins by the date of the burial (e1 is early first century, l1 is late first century etc.) and a second dividing the evidence by coin date.

The graph using the burial dates clearly shows a steady increase in copper alloy coins through time (Fig. 3), which could represent attempts to retain the silver coinage at the beginning of the period of devaluation.

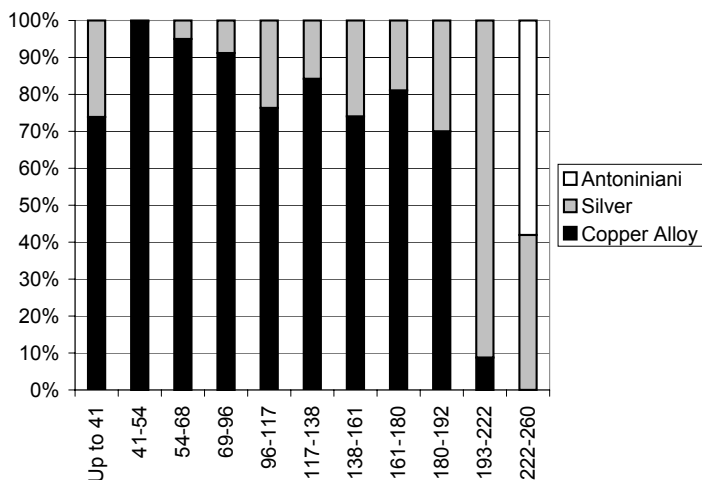


Figure 5. Metal type of coins from Richborough (data from Reece 1968).

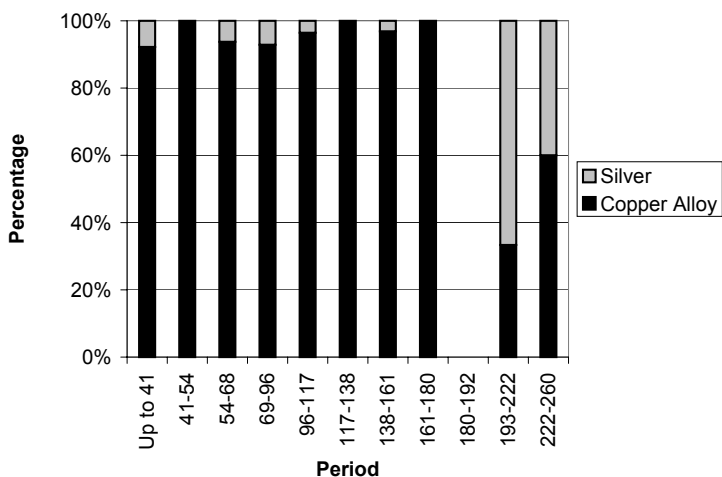


Figure 6. Metal type of coins used in burials in each period in Roman Germany (data from Chantraine 1955, Franke 1960, Laser and Stribrny 2003).

Although sample sizes are rather small for certain periods, the graph dividing metal type using the date of the coin (Fig. 4) shows a dominance of copper alloy coins from each period, with the notable exception of some Republican *denarii* from the period up to 41A.D. This was compared to coins from Richborough to see if the metal types from burials follow a similar pattern to site finds (see Fig. 5). There is a clear contrast in the lack of any substantial increase in silver use in the later periods. In Germany (Fig. 6), on the other hand, copper alloy coins dominate until the early third century when silver was more readily available.

Figure 5 shows that copper-alloy coinage dominates the Richborough sequence until the late second century but, as is common in British sites, there is increasing loss of silver (and thus presumably increasing use of silver) from the late second century. This is in marked contrast to the burial data: while both datasets are dominated by copper-alloy, in the burials the use of silver drops in the late second century.

Outside of imperial boundaries, the numbers are too few to consider change through time but copper alloy coinage is markedly rare. In Denmark all the coinage within the period of study is silver, with one gold exception (data from Nielsen 1987–88). In free Germany, the metal type was more diverse but still with a high proportion of silver (50%) – although there is evidence for copper alloy coins (45%) (data from Laser and Ulrich 1994, Laser and Schultz 1995, Ulrich 1998, Erdrich 2002).

It seems clear that valuable coins were being placed in the graves outside of the imperial boundaries. This contrasts to my study areas within the Empire – here it was the presence of the coin, not its value, which was significant. This argument is supported by a comparison with the range of grave goods in the burial: coins show no clear correlation with wealthier graves, and represent a habit unconnected with any expression of status.

Deposition of old and new coins

One key issue is how old were the coins when they were deposited in the grave: were they current coinage or heirlooms? Using the British data, table 1 plots the date of the burial (divided into early and later first, second and third century) against the issue date of the coins. As not all of the coins have been accurately dated, they have been divided into possible (P) and definite (D).

The trend in the table shows that, whilst most coins come from the expected circulating average of 30 to 50 years (Sutherland and Carson 1984: 10), there are some exceptions that may be significant. The burials dating to the late second and early third century show a broader chronological range of coins, with the continuation of earlier examples being placed in the grave. The later the burial, the wider the range of coins are available for deposition. However, it can be noted that the earliest two examples from burials dating to the early third century are pierced (a Claudian copy and a post-reform coin of Nero) and therefore may indicate that the coin had more than simply a monetary value. Is it possible that the older examples are representative of a symbolic or sentimental value attached to the coin, perhaps, as a family heirloom? This hints

Table 1. Table comparing coin issue date with burial date for Britain (data from Philpott 1991).

	<i>Up to 41</i>		<i>41–54</i>		<i>54–68</i>		<i>69–96</i>		<i>96–117</i>		<i>117–138</i>		<i>138–161</i>		<i>161–180</i>		<i>180–192</i>		<i>193–222</i>	
	D	P	D	P	D	P	D	P	D	P	D	P	D	P	D	P	D	P	D	P
e1	1		1																	
II	1		4	2	4		6	9												
e2					2		4	6	3	7	2	3		2						
12					1		2	1	1		4	1	16	5	3	2		1		2
e3					1			2		2	1	1		4		1	1	4	4	2

they were worn for aesthetic and/or for protective or symbolic purposes. One example is burial 278 from Butt Road in Essex, which contained two coins of Claudius that were connected to other charms on a chain link, including a head of an African male, a pierced dog canine and a phallic amulet (Philpott 1991: 368). Another example of a similar practice is grave 81b from the Joslin collection, Essex, where the coin was suspended on an armlet with beads and a phallic amulet (Philpott 1991: 289). In such examples, it appears that the coin was not present as a payment, but perhaps was believed to offer protection to the wearer.

Specific coin choice?

An intriguing but difficult area to analyse is that of specific coin choice. This topic was touched upon earlier when analysing the issue of possible heirlooms; were particular coins being selected? There are occasional clear examples such as a child cremation from Colchester, dating to the early first century, which contained 36 coins of only two types, 11 of Agrippa and 25 of Claudius (Philpott 1991: 289; Eckardt 1999). Hilary Cool suggested that if the coins are viewed as ‘discs with images, the striking feature is how many of the reverses have single standing figures’ (Cool 2000: 37). This does reflect the data from the areas studied, although it could also be argued that overall there is a greater frequency of single standing figures on coins. Further study on this issue is required.

Another interesting route of analysis was suggested by MacDonald (1979). He proposes that the eye visible on the profile of the Emperor on the obverse may have had apotropaic powers (MacDonald 1979: 409). This could be tested if the side of the coin that was facing upward was recorded during excavation.

Conclusions

Although these are preliminary results, a number of initial conclusions can be presented. A key one is that the burial evidence does not appear to mirror the site loss. Both Britain and Germany show a rapid early adoption of the habit, which then declines in the late second century. An analysis of metal type in Britain and Germany shows that copper alloy coins were preferred – comparison with site coin loss indicates this is significant, and it seems the important thing was the inclusion of a coin rather than its value. In Britain, it appears most coins were drawn from circulating currency, although occasionally long-lived heirlooms can be noted. The location of the coin around the mouth is often linked to the Charon beliefs and in Britain, 50% (56% if including those on the chest) were found in this position. However, the other locations may represent other roles, or different stages of the funerary rite, while the presence of pierced coins indicates a more general amuletic or protective role.

Although this practice is rare outside the Empire, the patterns are very different. Principally, it was silver and gold coins that were deposited, suggesting status was a key issue. In addition, many coins were circulating for a long time before burial.

Further work

This paper represents the preliminary work of a much larger study. It would be valuable to look at the origins and spread of this custom from Greece and early Italy into the rest of Europe, analysing the evolution and adaptation of this custom by the different groups that adopted the

practice. Further work should assess what percentage of burials contain coins and, provide a more detailed analysis of specific coin types to see if the suggestions made by Cool and MacDonald about the symbolism of coin imagery hold true. There is no suggestion here that the Charon interpretation needs to be discarded; but although it is a large part of the symbolic function of the coin, it cannot account for all instances of coins in burials.

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Appendix 1

The chi-squared test showed a chi-squared value of 50.4, with a degree of freedom of 10 and giving a p-value of 2.2×10^{-7} . This is very strong evidence that two underlying distributions are significantly different and warrant further investigation.

A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was also attempted. However, as my data are categorical and presented in a contingency table (i.e. counts within a specific groups/time periods), this was not effective.

Table 3. Total numbers of coins in each group used for the chi-squared test.

	<i>Reece</i>	<i>Britain</i>
Up to 41	991	13
41–54	1902	34
54–68	883	11
69–96	4407	44
96–117	2367	15
117–138	3970	16
138–161	4886	35
161–180	2367	7
180–192	679	6
193–222	1618	13
222–260	780	2