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An Accumulation Find in Berlicum (Aa River) – TPQ 163

Liesbeth CLAES & Janis OOMEN

Summary – In November 2017 the brothers Wim and Nico van Schaijk, using a metal detector, found 107 Roman coins. They were scattered over a wider area, near the Aa river in Berlicum, North Brabant, the Netherlands. Two additional coins were discovered in situ during excavations of the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE) in October 2018, totaling 109 coins. The find consists of four silver and 105 bronze coins. The silver denarii are well-preserved. The bronze coins, however, are worn, damaged and corroded to varying degrees. Several of them are no longer readable and identifiable. In addition, no container was found. Before we discuss these coins and interpret the whole find, we sketch its archaeological and historical context.

General historical and archaeological context

ALL COINS WERE FOUND NEAR THE AA RIVER. They were not deposited in open water but in a relatively wet zone where the river had cut through an elevated deck sand back (Fig. 1). Furthermore, the coins were discovered in an area of 50 × 50 m², of which 60 to 70% was concentrated in a smaller area of several square meters. There are no indications of earthworks or other disturbances, and it seems that recent reconstructing efforts to restore the natural flow of the previously canalized Aa river has not disturbed the excavation site.¹ The coins themselves were situated in a 5 cm thick layer of grey, moderately silty sand with iron concretions. Further chemical research by the RCE team members demonstrated that the process of iron oxidation around the Berlicum coins had already taken place shortly after the coins were deposited (Fig. 2).² Atop of this layer lay two more layers of grey sand.³

The coins were found in an area that is known for its archaeological remains dating from the Neolithic period to the late Middle Ages.⁴ For example, in earlier excavations an urn field dating to the Iron Age and the remains of a late medieval castle were discovered within a 1 km radius.⁵ Roughly 2.7 km north-west of the coin find the nearest Roman settlement can be located. However, it is distinctly possible that other settlements – closer to our coin find – have not yet been discovered.⁶

¹ De Groot & De Kort (eds.), 2021: 25-26, 79, 82.

² See also Huisman *et al.* (2023) for the corrosion processes of these coins.

³ De Groot & De Kort (eds.), 2021: 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*: 18.

⁵ De Groot, De Kort & Claes, 2019: 51.

⁶ De Groot & De Kort (eds.), 2021: 19-20.

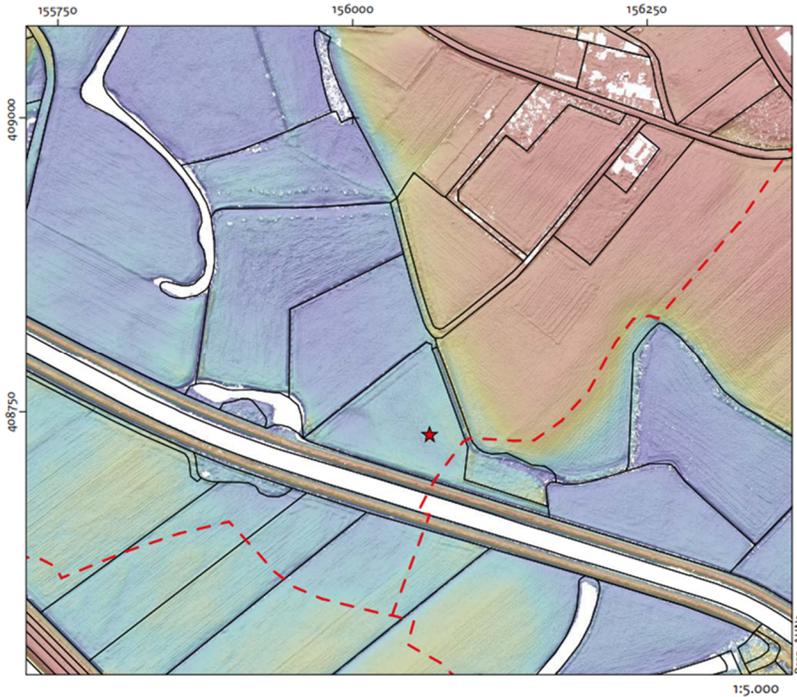


Fig. 1 – Height map AHN² of the Aa valley in Berlicum in 2017, before the reconstruction works of the Aa valley and river flow. The brownish part is the elevated deck sand back, which during the reconstruction works was levelled. The star shows the find place of the Berlicum find. The dotted red line marks the walking route as shown on the cadastral minute of 1832. (Reproduced figure 2.11 of De Groot & De Kort (eds.), 2021: 24)

Coins dated to the time of Vespasian and Hadrian were found in the surrounding area during earlier (amateur) excavations. At our site, the brothers Van Schaijk also discovered part of a bronze hair pin. The head of the pin showed resemblance to a key-handle, and was furnished with two elliptical formed handles, through which experts date this hair pin to the middle Roman period (AD 70-269) (Fig. 3).⁷ Moreover, during the RCE excavation another 136 archaeological remains were found. These include pottery (81), brick (13), glass (4), metal (7), natural stone (28) and flint stone (3). Eight pieces of pottery can be dated to the Roman period, seven others might be from the Roman era as well. One work of glass is possibly Roman, but a medieval dating is more likely. None of the flint stones are Roman. Of the natural stones found, six pieces of tephrite probably date to the Roman era. Two extra coins were also found *in situ* during the excavation. One is probably a sestertius of the emperor Hadrian, the other is uniden-

⁷ *Ibid.*: 25; Keizer & Heeren, 2022.

tifiable. A bronze pendant of a horse bridle dating to the Roman period was discovered as well. The pottery and natural stones seem to suggest that we are dealing with domestic refuse, which, in turn, makes it likely that a Roman settlement was located near the excavation site. At the same time, they are probably not part of the same deposition. The bronze pendant of the horse bridle and the iron hair pin, however, may have been part of the coin deposition, either being sacrificially deposited or lost by passersby.⁸



*Fig. 2 – Photograph of how the coins came out of the soil
(Credit: Nico & Wim van Schaijk)*

Accompanying botanical research has not produced much evidence pointing to the Roman era. Only one find – that of various seeds and foliage – potentially dates to the Roman period, but a medieval dating is also viable. Micro-morphological research shows that washout of the soil in vertical direction, resulting in the movement of the coins, is a possibility. However, many other signs, such as the observation that these relatively heavy coins are not found in lower residue layers of the river, suggest that the coins were found at the location near the river Aa where they were originally deposited.⁹

⁸ De Groot & De Kort (eds.), 2021: 45-47, 79.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 51-52, 79.



Fig. 3 – Hair pin, h = 2.5 cm (Credit: Portable Antiquities of the Netherlands: NAALDKOP – PAN-00035231; scale 200%).

The coin find itself

The coin find consists of 109 coins (see appendix), of which four are silver coins (all *denarii*) and 105 are bronze (mostly asses, but also some *dupondii* and *sestertii*).¹⁰ All of them have been photographed and inventoried by Portable Antiquities of the Netherlands (PAN).¹¹ The oldest silver coin dates to the Republic. It is a *denarius* of Lucius Calpurnius Piso Frugi, who was a moneyer (*triumvir monetalis*) in 90 BC. Two silver *denarii* were minted during the reign of emperor Vespasian, the other dates to Trajan's emperorship. The three imperial coins show less signs of wear than the Republican coin, suggesting that they were deposited near the river bank when they were relatively new.¹²

Of the bronze coins, 39 can safely be categorized as asses, most of which date to the reign of emperor Trajan. Almost one fourth of all bronze coins can either be an as or a *dupondius* – more exact identification is not possible due to their poor shape. After all, the coins were found in an area where the groundwater level varied drastically. Thus, many coins show signs of corrosion. Roughly one fourth of all bronze coins are heavily damaged or fragmentary. Nevertheless, we are able to identify figures and/or letters on over 70 coins. Nearly a fourth of all coins show a portrait of an emperor on the obverse, and gods, personifications, attributes or buildings on the reverse.¹³

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 67.

¹¹ BERLICUM 2017-2018 PAN-S-00053 by Van der Veen (b).

¹² De Groot & De Kort (eds.), 2021: 67-68.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Excepting the Republican *denarius*, the coins date from the reign of Vespasian (AD 69-79) to Marcus Aurelius' emperorship (AD 161-180). Note that the dating of the coins does not have to be equal to the dating of the deposition. There is a significant possibility that at least some of these coins were deposited near the river bank after the second century. Previously, Aarts has noted such longer lapses of time between the closing coin and the deposition date of accumulation finds.¹⁴ Furthermore, the production of lower bronze denominations ceased during Marcus Aurelius' reign, causing second-century bronze coins to circulate into the mid third century.¹⁵ Similarly, the Republican coin – showing signs of wear – may very well have been deposited during or after Vespasian's reign. Indeed, it is likely that the depositing of coins near the river bank of the Aa only started with the advent of Vespasian's emperorship. This is in line with the circulation of currency after the Batavian Revolt in AD 68-69, after which bronze coins started to circulate much more intensively than before.¹⁶

Interpretation of the find and its religious implications

Regarding the coin metals, a few silver coins and the majority of bronze, we are not dealing with a find of precious valuables, such as savings (saving hoard) or silver and gold hidden during a crisis (emergency hoard), but with a coin find of low value. The combination of the geographical spread of the coins over a larger area, the absence of a container, and the fact that multiple coins have been found individually in iron concretions points to the conclusion we are dealing not with a onetime deposition, but with a coin find that accumulated over time. This interpretation is reinforced by the long interval of time between the coins in the find, starting from the reign of Vespasian (AD 69-79) and ending during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. The oldest coin dates from AD 162-163. In addition, it is worthwhile to note that when people lose coins during their daily activities, these tend to mostly be of low value. The Berlicum coins might have been lost during a longer stretch of time by more than one person, yet, 109 coins remains an abundant number to be lost at one particular spot where there was no habitation and where no kind of (labor) activity took place.¹⁷ Low value coins, accompanied with some *denarii*, found scattered over a larger surface area, and deposited over a longer period instead implies accumulated votive acts.¹⁸ Wetlands

¹⁴ Aarts, 2000: 20-21.

¹⁵ Van Heesch, 1998: 94, 97-99 and the coin hoard of Sint Anthonis (De Groot *et al.*, 2012).

¹⁶ De Groot & De Kort (eds.), 2021: 67-69.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 82-85. Typical places where coins in antiquity (and probably this counts for the present day as well) were lost is the market place or working places, such as the docks at Cuijk (see Seinen & Van den Besselaar, 2016: 13-25.)

¹⁸ Check also the excavation report De Groot & De Kort (eds.), 2021: chapter 7 for a more detailed argumentation on the interpretation of this find, which also includes an explanatory model for nine different kind of coin hoards. A good summary of these nine explanatory models can be found in Möhring, 2021: 185-186.

closely situated at an elevated deck sand back, such as Berlicum (Fig. 1), were often home to ritualistic coin depositions. In such cases, we speak of so-called “sacrificial landscapes”.¹⁹

Furthermore, the later Dutch Cadastral Minute of 1832 shows a footway, crossing the Aa near the location of the finds (Fig. 1). It is, however, not clear from this map whether there was a bridge or a ford. On later maps, the footway disappeared, most likely because the construction of the canal the Zuid-Willemsvaart in the south of the Aa blocked the route. Although there is no evidence of a ford dating to the Roman period, it remains possible that there was one.²⁰

In conclusion, we seem to be dealing with a sacred water context, the coins being continuous votive depositions. It is likely that a person who safely wanted to cross (or had crossed) the Aa offered one or more coins, hoping (or giving thanks) for protection.²¹ This kind of act of reciprocity by which a person entered a relationship with a deity was quite common in the Graeco-Roman world.²² The coins deposited here are to be perceived as “passage offerings”, when crossing the Aa river.²³ Notable is the fact that none of the coins were broken in half – a phenomenon observed in earlier accumulated coin assemblages.²⁴ However, this practice was actually not that common anymore during the later Empire.²⁵ Apart from this, it is also a possibility that the deposition site was marked, telling passersby where to leave or throw their coins.²⁶ Whatever the case may be, we can interpret the location of the coin find near the Aa in three, not mutually exclusive, ways. First, the presence of a body of water in antiquity that needed to be crossed almost automatically resulted in offerings. In the Netherlands examples range from the rivers the Waal in Nijmegen (near De Winseling) to the Meuse in Cuijk.²⁷ Second, the composition of the Berlicum

¹⁹ Cf. Roymans, 2005: 37-42; Roymans, 2008: 60. De Groot & De Kort (eds.), 2021: 25, 27, 29.

²⁰ De Groot & De Kort (eds.), 2021: 37, 39, 82.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 83, 85-86.

²² See e.g., Jim, 2014: 59-96. In the Netherlands, the votive altars for Nehelennia are such expression of reciprocative relationship.

²³ Cf. Thüry, 2016: 72. In his review on De Groot & De Kort, Möhring, 2021: 186 gives the perfect description of this coin’s find place as “a sacred location people encountered during travels, not a destination of ritual”.

²⁴ See e.g., Bath (Walker, 1988) and Saint-Léonard (Besombes & Barrandon, 2005).

²⁵ One of the most often given explanations for the absence of this habit is the fact that the portrait of the emperors was perceived to be sacred, and subsequently, should not be cut or broken in two or more parts.

²⁶ For a comparison, at the ford over the Sambre at Namur a marking pole was identified by Lallemand, 1956: 56-58; yet, we need to be cautious here as a recent discovery at this place urges for a new interpretation of this ford site.

²⁷ For the ford crossing the Waal, see Enckevort & Thijssen, 2001: 88-91 and for the Meuse, see Van der Meulen & Van der Veen, 2015: 33-45.

find closely resembles the Dutch ones from Nederwetten I (*TPQ* 183) and Meierijstad (*TPQ* 180), both also identified as ritual depositions associated with water. All testify that this ritual to deposit coins into waterish places is quite a common ritual in the Netherlands.²⁸ And finally, the Berlicum offerings could be related to earlier Celtic ritual practices, during which different kind of (metal) valuables, such as weaponry, but also coins, were deposited near bodies of water, demonstrating that this habit was a natural undertaking to the people living in the ancient world.²⁹

The selection of some particular iconographical types such as military and religious types, but also types related to monetary activities, could also point toward an intentional deposition of these coins. Type selection is observed in other religious accumulation finds as well, such as in Bath, United Kingdom (*Salus* type) and in Plautila, Bulgaria (*Hygieia* type).³⁰ Yet, research does not present us with an abundant number of examples, given that the research angle after type selection is a more recent development in numismatic research. Roughly one third of the Berlicum coins include an identifiable reverse image or legend. The imagery does not vary greatly and includes: military iconography (13), coins depicting the personifications of *Abundantia*, *Aequitas* and *Moneta* (9), and religious imagery (6). Other coins depict the personifications *Pax*, *Salus* and *Spes*. The limited variety of the iconography suggest that these coins could have been deliberately chosen for their imagery.³¹ Moreover, the dominance of the military iconography (figure 4) can also be explained by examining the religious waterish context. It is possible that this imagery was chosen because of pre-existing pre-historic and Celtic ritual conventions, where it was normal to offer weapons and armor to waterish places.³²

²⁸ For Nederwetten I, see Prins, 1991 and 1993; for Meierijstad, see Van der Veen (a). In addition, the book of Chameroy & Lambot, 2014, also published several ford depositions of coins from France and Germany with a composition comparable with that of the Berlicum find. Cf. Kropff, 2022: 232-233.

²⁹ De Groot & De Kort (eds.), 2021: 82-89. See, in particular, Haselgrove & Wigg-Wolf (eds.), 2005.

³⁰ For Bath, see Walker, 1988, and for Plautila, see Grigorova-Gencheva & Grozdanova, forthcoming. For some more examples see also De Groot & De Kort (eds.), 2021: 86.

³¹ De Groot & De Kort (eds.), 2021: 69, 71. Of course, we may not forget that the e.g. Trajanic walking *Victoria* coins seem to be a more common type circulating in the Netherlands, cf. the *NUMIS* database. Yet, no study exists after the frequency of the Trajanic types in the Netherlands, obstructing us to draw any further conclusions.

³² De Groot & De Kort (eds.), 2021: 89-90; cf. Fontijn, 2003. Here, the hypothesis that the martial coins are anchored in the pre-Roman tradition of offering weapons needs further comparable research with other reverse types of ritual depositions in relation to water. Cf. Kropff, 2022: 233.



Fig. 4 – Denarius from emperor Trajan, depicting a prisoned Dacian with various arms on the ground (Rome, Trajan, denarius, RIC II 99). (Credit: Portable Antiquities of the Netherlands: MUNTEN – PAN-00034536, scale 150%)

A final note should be made about the metallurgic analysis of the Berlicum coins performed by the RCE. The most significant result of this analysis was the tentative suggestion that the choice to change the material of messing in the *dupondii* and *sestertii* started earlier than previously thought with leaded bronze and gunmetal (i.e., copper with tin and zinc). Most likely, this development was caused by the gradual devaluation of the silver, but also bronze, coins during the second century, during which this alloy of leaded bronze and gunmetal proved to be easier to process for production, but also for re-melting purposes.³³

The full report on this find and its excavation has been published by Tessa de Groot and Jan-Willem de Kort as report no. 267 in the series Rapportages Archeologische Monumentenzorg (RAM) of the RCE, titled: *Veilig naar de overkant. Onderzoek naar een muntvondst uit de Romeinse tijd in het dal van de Aa bij Berlicum (gemeente Sint Michielsgestel)*. As this coin find and its surroundings has been analysed in quite detail by the RCE, this article only summarises the results of the official excavation report. Whenever possible, this article added extra possibilities regarding the identification of this coin find. The excavation report no. 267 is to be downloaded free of charge at: https://www.cultureelerfgoed.nl/binaries/cultureelerfgoed/documenten/publicaties/2021/01/01/ram-267-veilig-naar-de-overkant/RAM267_Veilig+naar+de+overkant.pdf

Biographical notes

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³³ De Groot & De Kort (eds.), 2021: 71-77. Cf. Kropff, 2022: 232.

Appendix: Table of the coins of the Berlicum find³⁴

No.	PAN-0003#	RRC/RIC	Denomination	Short description of reverse	Die axis	Mass (g)	Ø (mm)
L. Calpurnius Piso Frugi							
1.	4579	340.1	denarius	Horseman on horse, holding palm & torch (?)	↑↓	3.44	20
Vespasian							
2.	4578	II ² .1.43	denarius	Priestly attributes	↑↓	2.29	19
3.	4537	II ² .1.772	denarius	Pax seated holding branch	↑↓	2.55	19
4.	4816	II ² .1.322 or 1237	as	Eagle on globe	↑↓	8.09	29
5.	4842	cf. II ² .1.322 or 1168	as	Eagle on globe	↑↓	3.71	23
Vespasian for Titus							
6.	5218	II ² .1.630	as	Decorated altar	↑↑	6.33	26
Vespasian							
7.	5083	II ² .1.1161 or 1199	as	Aequitas stg. holding sceptre and scales	↑↓	11.13	27
Vespasian or Titus							
8.	5096		dupondius or as		↑↓	5.93	26
Domitian							
9.	4837	II ² .1.207	as	Moneta stg. holding scales and cornucopiae	↑↓	8.09	28
10.	4860	II ² .1.207	as	Moneta stg. holding scales and cornucopiae	↑↓	8.88	28
11.	5088	Cf. II ² .1.208	as	Square altar with SALVTI AVGVSTI		8.1	28
12.	5080	Cf. II ² .1.221	as	Moneta (or Aequitas) stg. holding scales and cornucopiae	↑↓	10.79	28
13.	4864	II ² .1.309	as	Virtus stg., feet on helmet, holding spear and parazonium	↑↓	3.31	23
Domitian?							
14.	4827		dupondius or as			7.36	27
Flavian emperor							
15.	4852		as	Spes stg. holding flower and lifting dress	↑↓	8.72	26
Nerva							
16.	5206	II.53 or 95	as	Shaking hands		5.49	23

³⁴ Some coin identifications alter with the PAN database.

Trajan							
17.	4536	II.99	denarius	Dacian with hands bound in front of him, various arms on ground	↑↓	2.91	19
18.	4790		sestertius	Figure (?) stg. holding cornucopiae	↑↓	16.14	33
19.	4844		sestertius	Figure (?) stg. holding ?		7.73	33
20.	5077	cf. II.382	dupon- dius	Abundantia seated, holding cornucopiae and sceptre	↑↓	12.11	28
21.	4830	II.385 or 428	dupon- dius	Abundantia seated, holding cornucopiae and sceptre	↑↓	6.79	25
22.	4833	II.516	dupon- dius	Salus seated, holding patera, sacrificing at altar	↑↓	10.22	28
23	5081	II.676	dupon- dius	Trajanus in military uniform stg. between two trophies	↑↓	9.66	28
24.	4851	cf. II.395	as	Victoria walking holding shield SPQR		6.18	25
25.	4861	cf. II.395	as	Victoria walking holding shield SPQR		4.08	24
26.	4857	cf. II.395	as	Victoria walking holding shield SPQR	↑↑	5.28	26
27.	5079	II.402	as	Victoria walking holding shield SPQR	↑↓	9.2	29
28.	4845	II.402	as	Victoria walking holding shield SPQR	↑↓	9.52	28
29.	4794	cf. II.402	as	Victoria walking holding shield SPQR		3.66	28
30.	4838	cf. II.402	as	Victoria walking holding shield SPQR	↑↓	8.57	28
31.	5208	cf. II.459	as	Pax stg. holding cornucopiae and branch	↑↑	8.47	25
32.	4815	II.492	as	Abundantia stg. holding two corn-ears in right hand over modius with corn-ears, and cornucopiae in left hand; to right, prow of ship	↑↓	9.08	27
Trajan?							
33.	4814		as			9.13	28
Hadrian							
34.	4825	II ² .3.432 or 437	sestertius	Moneta stg.		11.49	32
35.	4835	cf. II ² .3.2420	sestertius	Salus stg. holding patera, sacrificing at altar, feeding snake	↑↓	20.42	34
36.	5209		dupon- dius or as	Figure (?) stg., arms stretching out		5.04	26

37.	4834	II ² .3.829	as	Salus stg. holding patera, sacrificing at altar, feeding snake	↑↓	7.02	26
38.	5085		as	Figure (?) stg.	↑↓	11.28	27
Hadrian?							
39.	/ (RCE 20)		sestertius	Figure (?) seated		10	25
40.	4913		sestertius?			2.67	26
41.	4823		dupondius or as			4.37	23
42.	4853		as	Figure (?) seated holding patera	↑↓	11.96	28
43.	4800		as			6.11	29
Antoninus Pius							
44.	5105	III.951	sestertius	Fides Exercitus stg., holding two standards	↑↓	22.68	34
45.	5063	III.704A or B	as	Priestly attributes	12	8.94	26
46.	5076	cf. III.525	as	Aequitas? or Moneta? stg. holding scales	↑↓	7.42	26
47.	5067		as			8.29	29
Marcus Aurelius							
48.	4820	cf. III.846 (dup) or III.847-850 (as)	dupondius or as	Salus stg. holding patera, sacrificing at altar, feeding snake	↑↓	8.89	24
Antoninus Pius or Marcus Aurelius							
49.	4805		as			6.33	27
Antoninus Pius, M. Aurelius or L. Verus							
50.	4811		dupondius or as			8.38	26
Unidentifiable							
51-55.			sestertius				
56.	5087		sestertius?			11.32	32
57-59.			dupondius?				
60-74.			dupondius or as				
75.	4865		dupondius, as or semis ³⁵			10.59	27
76-79.			as				
80-85.			as?				
86-109.			?				

³⁵ The ternary diagram of this coin find (see De Groot & De Kort (eds.), 2021: 75, afb. 6.15) suggests that this coin was more likely another as.

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