

A SMALL DEPOSIT OF BRONZE COINS FROM KENCHREAI

DISCOVERY

DURING the campaign of 1963, a small deposit of bronze coins was uncovered in Area E, a section on the north side of the harbor of Kenchreai, the eastern emporium of ancient Corinth.¹ With the exception of one early imperial coin, all of the 34 coins discovered were Late Roman (fourth-sixth century). As is often the case with metallic objects found in the Corinthian area, the coins were poorly preserved.² Only 16 of the coins survived cleaning.³ This total in turn yielded 10 specimens that could be identified with some certainty.

The find was made in one of two trenches cut in Area E in an attempt to define this portion of the port complex.⁴ The coins were discovered individually scattered in a restricted concentration on a packed earth and gravel surface, which may have been a section of an ancient road or plateia, and adjacent to some structural remains. The fill in which the coins were found was distinguished by evidence of a conflagration. Two other notable objects, small metal clasps, probably from a fabric or leather purse, were also found in this section of the trench and in association with the coins. While the exact size and shape of the find-spot were not recorded in the excavator's

¹ For a preliminary report of the investigations at Kenchreai, see Robert L. Scranton and Edwin S. Ramage, "Investigations at Corinthian Kenchreai," *Hesperia*, XXXVI, 1967, pp. 124-186 and other accounts there cited. I would like to thank both Professors Scranton and Ramage for permission to study the excavation coinage and particularly Professor Scranton for reading this note and for his valuable suggestions and assistance. I must also thank the National Endowment for the Humanities for awarding me a Summer Stipend for 1968. This generous fellowship enabled me to continue my study of the Kenchreai *corpus* of excavation coins. Special abbreviations used in this note are:

BMC—W. Wroth, *Catalogue of the Imperial Byzantine Coins in the British Museum*, Vol. I, London, 1908.

BMC Vandals—W. Wroth, *Catalogue of the Coins of the Vandals, Ostrogoths and Lombards (and of the Empires of Thessalonica, Nicaea and Trebizond) in the British Museum*, London, 1911.

LRBC—R. A. G. Carson, P. V. Hill and J. P. C. Kent, *Late Roman Bronze Coinage, A.D. 324-498*, London, 1960.

² The corrosive qualities of the soil of Corinth have long been recognized. See Earle R. Caley, "The Corroded Bronze of Corinth," *Proc. Phil. Soc.*, LXXXIV, 1941, pp. 689-761. Although a study of soil conditions at Kenchreai was not conducted, one suspects that owing to the proximity of the sea, the concentrations of soluble chlorides would be at least as great as in neighboring Corinth. The presence of soluble chlorides in the soil and ground water would tend to produce a situation unfavorable for the preservation of bronze objects.

³ Electro-chemical reduction was employed to clean the coins. Procedures approximate those outlined by H. J. Plenderleith, *The Conservation of Antiquities and Works of Art*, London, 1956, pp. 191 ff.

⁴ Scranton and Ramage, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

journal, all the coins and the clasps were assigned similar reference data, indicating discovery in the same context. The coins, then, do not form a hoard in the strictest sense of the term. Rather, the circumstances of discovery of this pocket and the trivial value of the coins suggest the accidental loss of a small amount of cash in hand.

COMPOSITION OF THE DEPOSIT

Weights are given in grammes. However, individual coins are in such poor condition that weights may be misleading. The same applies to the size of the coins, given in millimeters for the maximum diameter.

1. IMPERIAL ISSUE, wt. 4.07, 17 mm., ↑.

This coin is too badly defaced to permit positive identification. The obverse type, a female head right with hair knotted behind head, may be a portrait of Livia. The reverse type, a standing figure right, probably is the representation of a deity or imperial virtue. No details of type or portions of legend remain.

2. ARCADIUS, A.D. 383, Nicomedia, wt. 1.04, 14 mm., ↓; *LRBC*, nos. 2378-86, p. 94.

3. A.D. 383-395, wt. 1.42, 13 mm., ↓.

The only discernible feature of this coin is the reverse type, SALVS REIPUBLICAE, 1 or 2.⁵ According to *LRBC*, both variants of

this type were struck at eastern mints during the years A.D. 383-395. (Since very few coins struck in the West from any period were uncovered at Kenchreai, an eastern mintage is likely.) This obverse type is a bust facing right. All details of type and legend on both obverse and reverse are obliterated.

4. A.D. 383-395, wt.—, 14 mm.

Same as above, but obverse too defaced to permit determination of die position.

5. THEODORIC, A.D. 518-526, Ravenna, wt. 1.21, 13 mm., ↓; *BMC Vandals*, nos. 41-51, pp. 52-53.

This piece has a V signet, five *nummia*, as a reverse type. The obverse legend is illegible. On the basis of size and weight, I have assigned this specimen to Theodoric rather than to Theodahad, cf. *BMC Vandals*, nos. 9-14, pp. 73-74.⁶

⁵ I here follow *LRBC*, p. 109, where the two variants are described.

⁶ Miss Margaret Thompson has challenged W. Wroth's contention that coins such as this one (and 6 and 7), rendered in an imperial style but crudely executed, were struck by Vandals or Ostrogoths. In light of the large quantity of these "barbarian" issues found in the excavations of Corinth and Athens, Miss Thompson suggested that during the crisis of the late empire such coins may have been struck by eastern imperial mints or locally, perhaps at Corinth or Athens. See Margaret Thompson, *The Athenian Agora*, II, *Coins*, Princeton, 1954, pp. 101-102. See also Philip Grierson, "The *Tablettes Albertini* and the Value of the *solidus* in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries A.D.," *J.R.S.*, LIX, 1959, p. 77, note 25, who states that "Vandalic" coins no longer need be assigned to any specific region of the empire. More recently, Professors Howard L. Adelson and George L. Kustas, "A Sixth Century Hoard of *Minimi* from the Western Peloponnese," *ANSMN*, XI, 1964, p. 171, have suggested that small bronze coins, *minimi*, continued to be minted in some regions of the empire even after the reform of Anastasius. They place the end of the issuance of *minimi* during the reign of Justinian. Although many questions remain concerning the circumstances of issuance of late fifth and early sixth century small bronze coins, it does appear certain that Wroth's original assignment schemes must be revised. Perhaps at this time it would be better to refer to "Vandalic" coins simply as irregular issues, thereby acknowledging their extraordinary mintage but allowing for the possibility of local, quasi-official, origin.

6. THEODORIC, A.D. 518-526, Ravenna, wt. 1.18, 11 mm., ↓; *BMC Vandals*, nos. 37-40, p. 52.

The reverse type of this coin bears the value mark of E, five *nummia*, with a long cross to the right. The legend on the obverse cannot be determined. The obverse portrait is in high relief.

7. THEODORIC, A.D. 518-526, Ravenna, wt. 0.53, 10 mm., ↑; *BMC Vandals*, nos. 37-40, p. 52.

Same as above, but this specimen is extremely worn.

8. JUSTINIAN, A.D. 547/8 or 548/9, Constantinople, wt. 3.98, 14 mm., ↓; cf. *BMC*, no. 132, p. 38.

The date of issuance, which appears on the reverse of this 10 *nummia* piece in the right field, is not clear. The year is either XXI or XXII.

9. JUSTIN II, A.D. 570/1, Thessalonica, wt. 4.61, 21 mm., ↓; cf. *BMC*, nos. 112-113, p. 85.

This particular 20 *nummia* coin, issued in year 6 of Justin's reign, is not cited by Wroth.

10. JUSTIN II, A.D. 575/6, Constantinople, wt. 13.27, 30 mm., ↓; *BMC*, no. 77, p. 82.

The *BMC* specimen bears AI as the ultimate honorific on the obverse legend. Kenchreai specimen reads AVG.

OBSERVATIONS

Coin 10 provides a *terminus post quem* for the formation of this deposit. Sometime after A.D. 575/6, the year in which this 40 *nummia* piece of Justin II was struck at Constantinople, a purse containing small change apparently was dropped on a road or in a market in Area E. The contents were scattered and never recovered. The reason for the loss probably is related to the signs of burning found in the fill with the coins. This evidence of burning and the closing date of the find suggest that at some point in the last decades of the sixth century, a fire ravaged at least a portion of the buildings of Area E. In the confusion which resulted from this disaster, some inhabitant or visitor to Kenchreai lost a small amount of petty cash which for some reason he was unable to recover, either then or later.

The extent and cause of this conflagration are not known. Since the exploration of Area E was limited to two trial trenches, it cannot be determined whether the destruction indicated by the evidence of burning in the fill where the coins were found was widespread or limited to one or two structures in this particular area.⁷ The cause of the fire may have been accidental, perhaps the result of one of the frequent earthquakes that still plague the eastern Mediterranean basin.⁸ The agency of destruction

⁷ Evidence of various kinds, indicating damage to other buildings in other parts of the harbor area at about this time, has been observed but has not yet been fully coordinated.

⁸ Professor Glanville Downey cites two earthquakes in Asia Minor that approximate the closing date of this deposit. One, according to Evagrius, occurred about A.D. 580 in Constantinople and Antioch. The other, mentioned by Theophanes, was on 10 May 583. Either or both may have caused damage in Greece. See Glanville Downey, "Earthquakes at Constantinople and Vicinity, A.D. 342-1454," *Speculum*, XXX, 1955, pp. 596-600. Evidence from Corinth suggests that an earthquake did damage that city in the 580's; see Robert L. Scranton, *Corinth*, XVI, *Mediaeval Architecture in the Central Area of Corinth*, Princeton, 1957, p. 8.

may, however, have been human. It is well-known that during the final decades of the sixth century northern invaders moved into Greece. While the identity of these marauders, the extent of their devastation and subsequent occupation, and the chronology of their movements are points not completely understood, the archaeological record for the presence of these barbarians at near-by Athens and neighboring Corinth is incontestable.⁹ It seems unlikely that Kenchreai completely escaped the pillage which Corinth, the metropolis this port served, appears to have suffered in the 580's. The burning of some structures in Area E and the subsequent loss of the coins may have resulted from a raid of the same tribes that sacked Corinth.

The exact circumstances surrounding the loss of these few bronzes, however, cannot be recovered. It is not clear whether the find offers testimony to a natural disaster or to a barbarian incursion. But regardless of the origin of the destruction indicated by this discovery, this small deposit of coins offers another glimpse of the calamitous times in central Greece in the late sixth century and a chronological clue to the last moments of classical Kenchreai.

The find also provides some evidence regarding the nature of the currency in circulation in Late Roman Kenchreai. The 10 legible coins present a great chronological range. Four of the 10 coins were struck before the currency reform of Anastasius I.¹⁰ Such a percentage of "old" coins is high but deceptive. It is probably due to an accident of survival. There is no way of ascertaining the dates of the coins which did not survive cleaning or of the totally illegible coins in the deposit. However, the composition of similar late sixth century deposits discovered at Isthmia and Athens suggests that most of these undateable issues would have been of post-reform mintage.¹¹ If so, the percentage of older coins in the deposit could be as low as 12%.

⁹ The appearance of Slavic invaders at Athens in the decade of the 80's of the sixth century is mentioned by Homer A. Thompson, "Athenian Twilight: A.D. 267-600," *J.R.S.*, XLIX, 1959, p. 70, and discussed at length by D. M. Metcalf, "The Slavonic Threat to Greece circa 580: Some Evidence from Athens," *Hesperia*, XXXI, 1962, pp. 134-157. The presence of barbarians, perhaps Slavs or Avars, at Corinth in the 580's is discussed by Robert L. Scranton, *Corinth*, XVI, pp. 8, 27 and Gladys R. Davidson, "The Avar Invasion of Corinth," *Hesperia*, VI, 1937, pp. 227-240. But the identity of these invaders and the chronology of their incursions remain uncertain. For a review of these problems and the pertinent literature, see Gladys R. Davidson, *Corinth*, XII, *The Minor Objects*, Princeton, 1952, p. 5, note 8.

¹⁰ On the coinage reform of Anastasius, see Robert P. Blake, "The Monetary Reform of Anastasius I and its Economic Implications," *Studies in the History of Culture: The Discipline of the Humanities*, Menasha, Wisconsin, 1942, pp. 84-97. Also A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602*, Norman, Oklahoma, 1964, I, pp. 443-444.

¹¹ Sixth century deposits found during the excavations of the Agora are discussed by Metcalf, *op. cit.*, pp. 136 ff. A late Roman deposit uncovered at Isthmia is described briefly by Oscar Broneer, "Excavations at Isthmia, 1954," *Hesperia*, XXIV, 1955, p. 136, and in more detail by David W. MacDowall, "The Byzantine Coin Hoard Found at Isthmia," *Archaeology*, XVIII, 1965, pp. 264-267. An important sixth century hoard from the Peloponnese is analyzed in detail by Adelson and Kustas, *op. cit.*, pp. 159-205, where hoards dating from this century from other areas of the empire are cited (pp. 161-162, note 4).

The presence of an imperial issue in a purse of Late Roman coins is unexpected.¹² This coin may be simply an intrusion or perhaps was a keepsake of the owner of the purse, somewhat carelessly carried about with his petty cash. But there is also the possibility that the coin may still have been in circulation centuries after its issuance.¹³ It, and more probably the three fourth century coins (2-4), may have circulated intermittently over the years and survived inflationary times and coinage reforms to continue to serve as small change in Kenchreai in the late sixth century.

It would appear from this find that pre-reform coinage, irregular issues (5-7, the five *nimmia* pieces of "Ostrogothic" provenance), and post-reform coins could all be found in the currency of Kenchreai in the late sixth century. The circulation of unofficial, "barbarian" coins and the continued use of pre-reform coinage must have complicated the financial activities of local inhabitants. How these diverse issues were absorbed into the port town's commercial life is not certain. Presumably, regardless of their original tariffed values, such coins would have assumed new values, based most probably on their weight in relation to current monetary standards.

The diversity of currency indicated by this find suggests that a shortage of petty change, a condition widespread in the fifth century, was apparently also a problem in the late sixth, at least at Kenchreai.¹⁴ Old and "barbarian" coins circulated and were accepted because such issues still filled a monetary need. Local requirements for small denominational coinage apparently were not being satisfied by regular issues from imperial mints. One cannot yet say with certainty whether or not such a situation was endemic to Greece or was common throughout the empire at this time. Nor is it yet known whether the failure of sixth century emperors to acknowledge the small coinage needs of communities such as Kenchreai provides an example of ineptness, indifference, or conscious policy in the field of imperial economics.

ROBERT L. HOHLFELDER

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO

¹² Cf. the oldest coin in the Isthmian deposit discovered in 1954, a Pegasos-Trident bronze of Hellenistic Corinth, Broneer, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

¹³ See Professor Jones' comments on the circulation of old coins in the Late Roman Empire, A. H. M. Jones, "Inflation Under the Roman Empire," *Economic History Review*, V, 1953, pp. 314-315.

¹⁴ It is generally assumed that the amount of bronze coinage issued in the fifth century was small or at least insufficient to meet local commercial needs. See Blake, *op. cit.*, pp. 90, 91, 95; also Jones, *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, V, 1953, p. 316.