

CONTEXTUALISING FOUR COINS FROM BREAN DOWN TEMPLE

by

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ABSTRACT

Coins, alongside artefacts such as jewellery, figurines, models, tools and weapons, figure prominently in ritual sites assemblages. More often than not, coins from such sites have been studied and published as if they had been found in secular contexts. The coins are treated as statistics, which reveal the chronology of activity on the site or the pattern of coins in local circulation. Very little, if indeed any, attention has been given to the role of coins in respect to their function as votive offerings or as gifts to the gods to pay for favours expected or received. This paper contextualises four coins recovered from the UBSS excavations at Brean down, building upon recent theoretical advances to highlight the plethora of alternative meanings, biographies, and characteristics of coinage deposited at sanctuaries.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the four coins that have been recovered from the excavation of a Roman-British temple at Brean Down. The coins range from barely worn, to heavily modified examples. The sanctuary itself is located on the eastern of two summits of Brean Down, a rocky headland projecting into the Bristol Channel just south of Weston-super-Mare (Figure 1). For modern visitors, the site can be reached at the top of the first high point, you arrive at once you have climbed the concrete steps. Just beneath the ground between the path, and the mound of a Bronze Age round barrow, known as 'The Potter's Mound', lie the remains of a Romano-British temple. The first indication of Roman activity on the site, was the discovery of Romano-British potsherds adjacent to the Bronze Age barrow in 1921. Trial trenches to investigate these remains were conducted in the Easter of 1956; and were followed by open area excavations in 1957 and 1958 directed by Arthur ApSimon on behalf of the UBSS, and Weston Borough Museum. See ApSimon, 1965, for full details of the excavation.

The construction of the sanctuary at Brean Down, adjacent to a pre-historic burial mound is not unique. Certainly the re-use of burial mounds in the Romano-British period as foci, for temples, shrines, as burial sites, and as locations for the deposition of votive offerings, is a well-documented phenomena (Williams, 1998: 71; Blake, 1997; Roymans, 1995; Vermueulen, 1997; Hutton, 2011: 9-14). At Haddenham (Evans, 1985), and at Stanwick (Neal, 1989: 156-7) the temenos boundary was deliberately constructed around bronze age barrows, whilst at Brean Down (see Figure 2) the main temple building was situated adjacent to a barrow (Apsimon, 1964). A similar arrangement was also observed at Maiden Castle (Wheeler, 1943). The site of Snow's Farm Haddenham (Cambs), so far provides the only conclusive evidence of a Roman shrine erected directly upon a Bronze Age mound (Evans and Hodder, 2006); although the presence of Bronze Age cremations at Harlow, (France and Gobel, 1985) and Lancing Down (Bedwin, 1981: 37), possibly indicate a similar, though unconfirmed relationships with Bronze Age barrows.

Why Romano-British sacred sites were constructed in proximity to prehistoric features is unknown- But it has been suggested that the Roman conquest of Britain, created a break with the past in the minds of some of its inhabitants, provoking a renewed desire to relate to past



Figure 1. Map showing the location of the Brean Down Roman Temple.
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human activity (Hutton, 2011: 16). This desire to associate with the prehistoric past, appears to have intensified during the Roman period, as datable finds recovered at pre-Roman sites are overwhelmingly from the mid-third century onwards, becoming more prevalent towards the fourth century (Darvill, 2004: 228.) This desire may have represented the renewal of interest in local deities, or even heroic ancestors, that were believed to reside in these barrows (Drury, 1980: 57; Darvill, 2004: 228). Consequently rituals, conducted within close proximity of ancient monuments, potentially sought to secure, or even maintain the benign influence of the ancestors or spirits. Perhaps, these ancient monuments were also regarded as a source of fertility and regeneration for the community (Bloch and Parry, 1982: 7-9); we simply do not have an answer. But it is certainly true that the material remains of the past, through their incorporation into Romano-British ritual practice, were an important symbolic resource (Bradley, 1987: 1993).

The excavations by ApSimon revealed a Romano-Celtic type temple measuring 10.48 m x 10.22 m, and consisting of a central cella enclosed by an ambulatory. Symmetrically positioned on the east side were two square annexes, while on the south side stood a small building (see Figure 2).

The Temple apparently saw little activity after it was built in c.AD 340, as around 50 years later it was pulled down, and the stone either re-used to construct a small building beside the barrow (the Southern Building), which may have been used by an early Christian Hermit, or carried away for use elsewhere (ApSimon, 1965: 195). Four hundred and sixty-eight coins were recovered during the course of the excavation. A particularly interesting feature of the Brean

Down assemblage is the number of counterfeit¹ and imitation coins recovered. Imitations, amount to exactly 50% of the total coins recovered, the largest portion of which are struck *Fel Temp Reparatio* imitations dating to c.AD 354-64. The excavation however, also produced nine first and second century bronze issues, one imitation *As* of Claudius I, and five second century *sestertii*. Of these second century issues, two have been defaced/altered, possibly for re-use as weights, and the remainder are heavily worn, suggestive of a date of deposition in the late third century is most likely. Secondly as no structural deposits can be dated prior to the fourth century, and very little pottery of a second century date has been recovered from the site (ApSimon 1965, 249-251), it is unlikely there was any considerable Roman occupation prior to the construction of the temple² (Boon in ApSimon, 1965: 236).

'Official' Roman coins were produced in mints across the empire and were struck using engraved coin dies, which stamped blank metal discs, to produce double-sided coins. Official Roman mints were present in Britain, for short periods of time during the reigns of the usurpers Carausius and Allectus (c.AD 286-96) with the mint of London operating under the tetrarchy, and their successors, until its eventual closure in c.AD 325.

However, imitations coins were produced in Britain, throughout the Roman period (Hall 2014a, 167-169, Ellis 1999, 224-5.) Several hoards, connected with the striking of coins using dies have been found across Britain, however the simplest method of producing imitations was to cast the coin in a clay moulds. Research by Brickstock (2022, 128-9) into several collections of coin moulds, indicates that this method characterises the production of imitations during the period c.AD 238 to around 260 to 270, before and after this date imitations were produced using struck using iron dies (Hingley 2023, 192-3). A conclusion which is supported by the Cunetio Hoard (Mildenhall Wiltshire); indeed, of the 54,951 coins dating from c.AD 250-274, deposited as part of the hoard in the late third century 2,085 were struck imitations, whilst only 63 were cast from moulds impressed from original coins³. The struck imitations were produced



Figure 2. Plan of the Brean Down Temple showing its location in relation to Potter's Mound barrow and the cliff edge.

After ApSimon, 1965: Figure 41.

¹ Counterfeit here refers to coins created with the intention to deceive the user, and generate a profit by their manufacture e.g. plated denarii, which were tariffed at the same rates as official coins, and replicated the designs of official issues containing 95%-98% silver, but actually have a copper core, clad in a thin silver foil (often less than 0.1 mm thick), thus making considerable profit for the counterfeiter.

² Eight fragments of Gallic Samian ware were recovered from the site, and are of Antonine date.

³ The Cunetio hoard was contained in a large ceramic Savernake ware storage jar and a lead box; but the finders mixed the coins together. The jar contained the larger of the two hoards and deposited no earlier than AD 266; the suggested date of deposition is AD 270-1 (Bland *et al.* 2018). The lead box contained both the earliest and latest groups of coins in the hoard and was deposited c. AD 275.

on pre-prepared blanks, which were either cut from a rod (Zeepat *et al* 1994) or on blank discs cast from a mould.

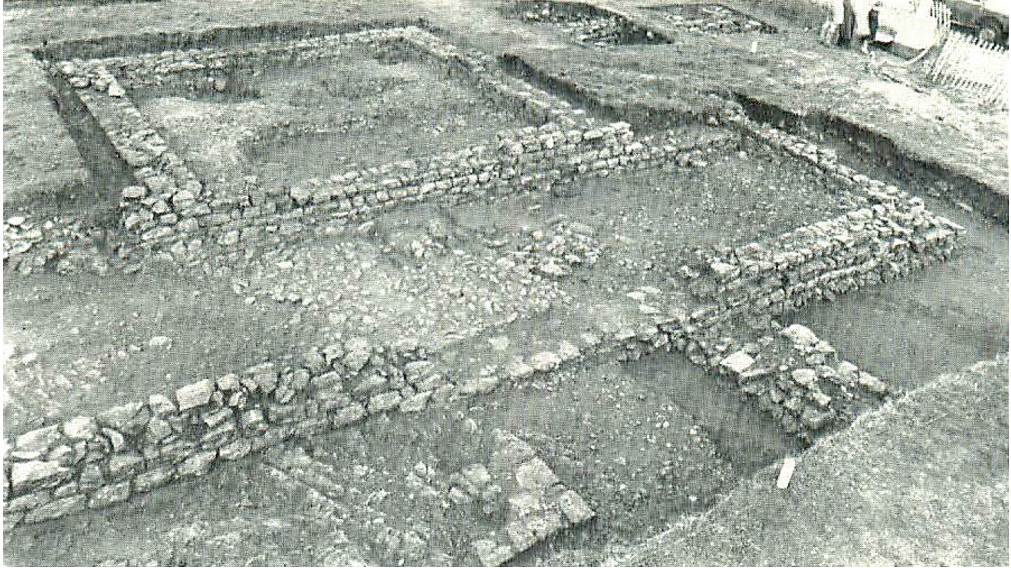


Figure 3. *The Brean Down temple during excavation, showing the plinths of the porch, vestibule and cella.*

From ApSimon 1965: Plate 11a.

Although the production of imitation coinage may sometimes have been considered a serious criminal act (Boon, 1988: 1-2), at least some of the imitations produced during the third century appear to have been produced as an official response to alleviate a shortages of available coinage (Hall, 2014a: 171-2; Kemmers, 2020: 201-2; Eckardt and Walton, 2021: 137; Walton and Moorhead, 2016: 842-3). Whilst 65% of the discoveries of coin moulds are from forts, towns and civil settlements (Hingley, 2023: 218), 11% derive from rural settlements and 25% from field systems/boundaries. Perhaps, these finds suggest that communities in rural areas of Britain had a greater need for coinage, in particular the small change needed to conduct everyday transactions. The association of rural settlements and the production of imitations is seemingly evidenced by the two most well documented sites that have produced materials for the striking of imitations; the Iron Age and Roman hillfort at Coygan Camp, Carmarthenshire (Boon, 1967) and the cave White Woman's Hole, Somerset⁴ (Boon, 1972). Although Boon, interpreted the contexts of these deposits, as clandestine operations designed to keep the production of imitations hidden from the authorities; the rural location being distinctly advantageous in this regard, it is also true that caves and hillforts are not uncommon contexts for the deposition of coin hoards and are usually interpreted as locations with heightened ritual associations (Zeepat *et al*, 1994); so, it is equally possible that these artefacts were deposited in a ritually charged location well away from their context of use, and consequently the production of imitations was carried out elsewhere. If we assume that these coin copying materials

⁴ The deposit at White Woman's Hole, alongside the evidence of counterfeit coin production included 400 Bronze coins, as well as eight coins not connected with the deposit, the latest of which dates to c.AD 400 (Branigan and Dearné, 1992: 31; Barrett and Boon, 1972).

were ritually deposited (Hingley, 2023: 220-222), then perhaps the data available overexaggerates the rural focus of imitation production. The discovery of coin blanks and coin manufacturing materials at Magiovinium (Fenny Stratford, Bucks), demonstrates that coin manufacturing did occur in small towns, and certainly suggests that further research is required to produce a more detailed comprehension of the communities involved in the production of imitations.

We have already seen that the materials used to manufacture imitations, could be ritually deposited, but what of the coin produced from them? It is equally possible that imitation coins were produced deliberately as votive objects for deposition at sacred sites, or ritual contexts (Walton and Moorhead, 2016: 841; Bland *et al* 2020: 66, 229)⁵ as a cheaper substitute for an official coin. In some instances, the object deposited need not be a coin *per se* but merely coin shaped; the discovery of coin blanks in certain contexts, such as the river finds from Piercebridge, Durham, and at the sanctuary at Uley, indicates that blanks may sometimes have been produced to deposit in place of stamped or cast coin (Eckardt and Walton, 2021: 137). Coins, then have their own vocabulary of meaning, being at once the symbols of human authority and cultural reference (Creighton, 2000); and as artefacts that bear images and symbols of divine power (Cool, 2000), they are uniquely suited for ritual deposition.

COINS OF PARTICULAR INTEREST

1. SF 551, Layer 3a, Southern Building interior, Issue of Gratian, c.AD 367-75, mint of Arles. Obverse: D N GRATIANVS AVGG AVG, Bust of Gratian, pearl-diademed, draped and cuirassed, right, Reverse: GLORIA NO-VI SAECVLI, Emperor, head left, standing facing, holding labarum in right hand and resting left on shield, **MintMark:** -/-//TCON, RIC IX (Arles) no 15, subtype xivc, **coin appears to have been bent.**

2. SF 437, Layer 3a, Southern building interior, House of Valentinian, c.AD 364-78, Reverse: SECVRITAS REIPUBLICAE, Victory advancing left, holding wreath and palm, **MintMark:** Uncertain, **coin appears to have been cut down to 13mm.**

3. SF 22, Layer 2b demolition layer in Ambulatory, core of plated denarius of Caesar, reverse filed smooth.

4. SF566, layer 3a Southern Building interior, issue of Gratian c.AD 367-75, mint of Arles, Obverse: D N GRATIANVS AVGG AVG, Bust of Gratian, pearl-diademed, draped and cuirassed, right, Reverse: GLORIA NO-VI SAECVLI, Emperor, head left, standing facing, holding labarum in right hand and resting left on shield, **MintMark:** uncertain, RIC IX (Arles) no 15, uncertain subtype, **coin appears to have been clipped.**

⁵ Imitations form a particularly high percentage of the assemblage at certain ritual deposits, for example the sacred spring at Bath, Piercebridge and Coventina's well (Eckardt and Walton, 2021: 137-9), as well as at the nearby sanctuary at Uley (Reece, in Woodward and Leach, 1993: pp 80-87, esp. 86-87).



Figure 4. Roman coins from Brean Down Temple. A) SF551. B) SF 437. C) SF22. D) SF 566. The obverse is shown for each coin. SF is the 'small find' number from the excavation catalogue.

Imitation *denarii* (as **coin 3**) were cast either in a high-tin bronze, that mimicked the appearance of silver, or cast in a base metal, and then plated (as **coin 3**). The process involved the wrapping of an individual copper blank in silver foil. The composite blank, was heated to 800°C, so that the silver and copper harden together, then struck using a die. Markus Peter has demonstrated experimentally that an official denarius could be hammered directly into hot iron to create a transfer die used to strike plated coins. (Stribny, 2003: 63–64.) There is however considerable uncertainty about the extent to which recent coins were used to produce the impressions, and stratified examples of moulds suggest that old coins, could be utilised (Hingley, 2023: 202). The observed wear on the obverse legend of coin 3, in an area where the plating is largely intact is certainly suggestive of the use of a curated coin that had seen some

considerable wear in circulation prior to be used as a model for a transfer die⁶. That Coin 3 represents an otherwise anachronistic survival from the first century on a site where the vast majority of coinage dates to the fourth century; is certainly suggestive of a coin manufactured utilising a very old, curated coin. Unfortunately, any conclusions must remain tentative, as the location and circumstances of its manufacture, remain unknown.

It is not entirely clear whether these imitation *denarii*, were produced directly as counterfeits, or as a surrogate coin in times of insufficient coin supply; or even as a substitute for small change, with a nominal value that fell somewhere below that of the official coin. In any case, it is certain that these were not created by private individuals, as this would result in a more even spatial distribution of the phenomenon throughout the empire and not the concentrations observed in the militarised provinces of *Gaul*, *Germania* and *Britannia*. As the archaeological evidence of workshops at Kaiser Augst, so far demonstrates no signs of deliberate concealment, it suggests that cast *denarii*, were fabricated to circulate on an equal footing with the official prototypes alongside real coins, as an addition to a depleted coinage pool (Peter, 2001: 244).

Nonetheless, plated *denarii* are frequently recovered in ritual contexts, indeed thirty-six plated Roman *denarii*, were recovered during the excavations of the temple at Hayling Island (Briggs, Hasselgrove and King, 1992: 1-62); whilst, a large number of the *denarii*, from the Piercebridge river assemblage, were also plated or silver washed copies. It appears that these imitations were deliberately selected for deposition in the river, as only two Severan plated imitations (SF 4797 and SF 4116) were recorded from the settlement at Piercebridge (Walton, 2012: 282.) Whilst the imitations were deliberately selected, their presence within the river assemblage does not mean that they are necessarily votive deposits. It may be that they were simply recognised to be counterfeit, and were offered up to the Gods, in preference to genuine issues. Whilst watercourses, have been recognised as good places for the deposition of waste material (which these coins if recognised as counterfeit may have become), it must be considered that water was often also associated with classical thoughts about the underworld (Kemmers 2020, 197), and water features are known to have been widely used as contexts for the deposition of special objects during the Roman period in Britain (Smith, 2018: 144-7). The discovery of plated *denarii*, in these contexts, therefore, strongly hints at a ritual element to their deposition; that **coin 3** has evidence of mutilation (see below) further emphasises, its votive character.

Three of the coins from Brean Down demonstrate intentional mutilation. The intentional mutilation of artefacts deposited at sanctuaries is a well-documented phenomenon. Indeed, middle to Late Iron Age deposits from sanctuaries in northern France, frequently yield swords and shields which have been bent, twisted or broken (Derks, 1998; Rapin and Brunaux, 1988, Cadoux, 1984). Whilst less frequently recorded, on Romano-British sites, ritual mutilation of objects, is still evidenced at Uley (Woodward and Leach, 1993: 133) and Hayling island (Briggs, Haselgrove and King, 1992.) Examples of bent, scratched and otherwise mutilated coins are common on French sites, but are less well documented on British sites (Aubin and Meissoner, 1992; Sauer, 1999; Kiernan 2009). Various types of mutilation have been recorded, including slashes to the coins' surface, cuts into the edge of the coin, portioning, hammering, and as with **coin 1**, bending.

The marks observed on the Brean down coins are distinct from naturally occurring dents and scratches, which are usually shallower, and consist of broken and irregular lines. Whilst such cuts and slashes on coins, have been recorded to test whether or not the coin was a

⁶ The obverse legend reads [...]SAR[...], the missing letters suggestive of a coin that had been worn in circulation.

plated forgery (Aubin and Meissonner, 1992: 144), the deliberate filing down of the reverse, on **coin 3** would have been unjustified, and would certainly have reduced the acceptability of the coin in question. That one of the plated coins from Hayling Island (HI 201) demonstrates a similar degree of mutilation that does not penetrate the silver plating of the coin, suggests it is unlikely these marks represent test cuts, used to establish whether a coin was a plated forgery or official issue. Further, the lack of restriction of the practice to plated issues, and occurrence of similar marks on even the very smallest denomination copper alloy coins, seems to confer an non-economic function for the practice. That mutilated coins are frequently recovered amongst deposits of other coins in ritual contexts in late Iron Age and Roman Britain and Gaul (Wigg-Wolf, 2005:372) and rarely from secular contexts, seemingly confirms a ritual association. These coins, were probably mutilated in order to remove them from secular usage thus ensuring their perpetual status as gifts to the Gods (Aubin and Meissonner, 1992.) In that respect, mutilated coins should be seen as analogous to the ritually destroyed weapons and artefacts within Gallo-Roman, and British sanctuaries (Henig, 1988: 5).

The remaining two coins **coin 2** and **coin 4** appear to have been modified for an economic purpose. **Coin 2** has been clipped to a smaller module issue, whilst **coin 4** is clipped. The cessation of the Bronze striking in the Gallic mints in c.AD 395, and the Italian mint of Aquileia soon afterwards does not of course mean that circulation ended overnight: the existing pool of currency could to some extent have continued to support a monetary system of exchange. It is possible that in the absence of any new bronze coinage the population of *Britannia*, resorted to the cutting down of existing, and demonetised bronze issues, to a size that matched the metrical standard of the last commonly circulated bronze issue. It is certainly the case that the examples known from Uley and Brean Down, are cut to a module of 12-13mm and 1.00-1.25g, and in that respect, emulate the metrics of the bronze coins issued in c.AD 388-402 . That such cut down issues appear in layers dating to the late fourth century to early fifth century, somewhat substantiates this theory. Further, given that the *Gloria Novi scaevli* issues of Gratian, contained a small percentage of silver (Cope, 1974: 246-7), **coin 4** was possibly clipped to remove the silver by gravitational segregation, either to produce new imitations, or as hacksilver to be recast into other artefacts, or simply as bullion (Guest, 2008).

The Brean Down temple assemblage, is thus particularly important in elucidating ritual practices in the Romano-British period, especially in relation to the use and deposition of imitation coinages on sanctuary sites, and certainly warrants further in-depth study .

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