

Anna Flückiger/Jan Bemmman (eds.): *Coining Values. Bronze between Money and Scrap in Late Roman and Early Medieval Europe*. Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag 2025 (Limes und Legion 2). 224 p., 149 ill. € 69.00. ISBN: 978-3-7520-0816-6.

In the last decades, several coin hoards comprising large numbers of poor-quality small Theodosian bronze coins have been found in the former Roman Northwest. These coin finds portray remarkable similarities in their composition, consisting of official Roman coins but also cut-up and clipped coins, third and fourth-century imitations, blank flans, and sometimes even fused masses of melted coins. These remarkable ‘hoards of small change’ have been interpreted in various ways by numismatists and archaeologists, but have not yet been considered in the broader landscape of bronze coin and base metal recycling in this region and the adjacent Barbaricum. The volume under review here is a first attempt to bring together various disciplines to answer a simple question: what happened to bronze coins after ca. AD 400 in the Roman Northwest and the adjacent Barbaricum?

This volume follows the conference “Coining Values. Bronze Between Money and Scrap in Late Roman and Early Medieval Europe” held in Bonn from 26 to 28 October 2023 during which scholars from various disciplines came together, attempting to explain the use and reuse of bronze (coins) in Late Antiquity. The book is structured in two parts: the first (“Overviews”, pp. 9–70) deals with conceptual approaches to the phenomena in the late Roman period of ‘scrap metal’, ‘hackbronze’ and the so-called “End of the Small Change”.¹ The second part (“Thematic Studies”; pp. 71–223) comprises nine articles that introduce specific case studies on hoarding, bronze coin recycling, or ‘barbaric’ imitations. Many of the case studies include recent archaeological finds or ongoing projects like the “Roman and Early Medieval Alloys Defined” (REMADE) project. While the first part of the book offers a strong thematic approach to various parts of this complex phenomenon, like hackbronze and disappearing small change, some articles in the

1 For this conceptualisation see the title of a recently published article on the disappearance of bronze coinage in Late Antiquity in Northern Gaul, see: J. van Heesch: *The End of the Small Change Economy in Northern Gaul in the Fourth and the Fifth Centuries AD*. In: J. Mairat/A. Wilson/C. Howgego (eds.): *Coin Hoards and Hoarding in the Roman World*. Oxford/New York 2022 (Oxford Studies on the Roman Economy), pp. 294–312.

second part are difficult to relate to the larger discussion concerning the re-use of bronze coins and metals in the fifth century and beyond. That being said, other case studies fit the topic perfectly and therefore offer enlightening and recent examples of archaeological finds that could provide answers to the conceptual issues outlined in the first part of the book. It is, however, unfortunate that the connection between the two parts of the book is not made explicitly by any author, nor is there a conclusive chapter that unites the various case studies with the thematic approaches and therewith attempts to answer the provoking questions formulated in the introduction.

The first article written by Fleur Kemmers (“Money, Metal and the Social Construction of Value”, pp. 9–14) analyses the use of standardised bronze objects as “money” in the second half of the first millennium BC in Italy and the fifth century AD in the Roman Northwest. Kemmers describes four functions of money (store of value, unit of account, means of exchange, and method of payment) and applies these functions to the uncoined bronze phenomena in both periods. Uncoined bronze in Iron Age Italy functions mostly as money according to the given functions. Much like the *Aes Rude*, scrap bronze had no link to the (disappearing) Roman authority and seemed to have functioned in a similar manner, namely as a practical and socially acceptable solution to the lack of small change in short-term transactions. Kemmers’ article provides an important starting point by indicating that scrap bronze could function as (para)monetary objects even without a central authority to validate these fiduciary objects. Other studies in the book, such as the articles of Anna Flückiger and Marcus Zagermann, provide examples in which scrap bronze works as money, but others, such as the article by Holger Komnick, indicate where it does not, indicating the relevance of this thematic approach.

The article by Ralph W. Mathisen (“The Value of Base Metals in Late Roman Law, Administration, and Economies”, pp. 15–24) analyses the appearance of base metals and their value in literary sources to provide a historical background in which the value of these metals can be understood. Literary sources indicate that base metal was always important and could function as a means of payment even in the monetised society of Rome. Anna Flückiger (“Hackbronze – Coining a Term for Late Antiquity”, pp. 25–42) considers the idea of “hackbronze” as a bronze equivalent to the phenomenon of ‘hacksilver’ which is well-known to have occurred between the fourth and sixth centuries. By transferring the paramonetary ‘hacksilver’

concept onto the scrap bronze of the late Roman period, Flückiger demonstrates that these bronze fragments might have functioned as a middle way between coins and bullion. Fragmenting and reusing Roman copper alloys with standardised weights could have functioned as a replacement or addition to the shrinking number of circulating late Roman bronze coins. Both articles, therefore, indicate the value of base metal and their (re)use in both a Roman and a post-Roman society.

David Wigg-Wolf (“What happened after Coins? The Collapse of a Coin-Using Economy in the Late-Roman Northwest”, pp. 43–60) discusses the end of the supply of Roman bronze coins to this region by arguing that the withdrawing armies and administration resulted in the fact that fewer people needed to be paid in this region. This effect trickled down to the markets and the rural villas that sold their products at these markets because there was a decreasing demand for goods. Wigg-Wolf rightfully points out that a massive imitation phenomenon does not occur contrary to the situation in the late third and mid-fourth centuries, indicating a lesser demand for coins. The cutting and melting of coins indicate that these objects were repurposed and revalued in early medieval society. This article is especially relevant when considering the Theodosian hoard finds that could be considered symptoms of this ‘end of small change’.

A curious addition to the set of overview articles comes from Fraser Hunter (“‘Scrap Silver’? Changing Perspectives on Silver’s Transformation in the Late Roman and Early Medieval Periods”, pp. 61–70) discussing ‘hacksilver’ as a ‘barbaric’ re-use of material. Hacksilver concerns the careful cutting of silver in regular forms and weights, mostly in Roman weight standards. Hacksilver transforms items into bullion, the author ends his article by asking whether the same concept could be transferred to the bronze scraps found in fourth-century hoards. This question has, however, already been answered in the article by Flückiger. The author himself also notes that “bringing the topic of silver to a conference focused on bronze might seem a curious choice” (p. 62). This would have been less of a curiosity if this article had been presented as the first of the overview articles to familiarise the reader with the concept of ‘hacksilver’ before discussing the end of bronze coinage and the ‘hackbronze’ concept. In the current order, however, this article feels a bit redundant and out of place, even though the conclusions are relevant for the consideration of the way bronze scraps might have functioned in the late Roman period. Overall, the five articles in the first part

of the book perfectly lay out the conceptual framework in which the archaeological finds discussed in the second part should be placed. This happens only to a degree, however, sometimes because of a lack of coherence between the case studies and the central topic or because the author might not have consulted the articles that appear in the first part of the book.

The second part of the book starts with two case studies of coin use in Italian cities, far removed from the Northwest or Barbaricum. The study by Giulia Bison (“The View from the City: the Social Aspects and Value of Copper Alloy Recycling in Late Antique Rome”, pp. 71–82) focuses on copper alloy recycling in Rome, considering the phenomenon in this city in Late Antiquity from economic, cultural, and technological perspectives. Concerning the latter, the author introduces the results of archaeological excavations that attest to the presence of metallurgical furnaces, cut vases, and dozens of bronze coins in parts of Rome, indicating that metal recycling even occurred in the Eternal City itself. This seems somewhat at odds with other scrap metal interpretations that focus specifically on the Roman Northwest or the adjacent Barbaricum; unfortunately, nowhere in the book is there a reflection upon this interesting and somewhat surprising parallel. The second case study concerns the monetary circulation in Mediolanum during the fifth century by Alessandro Bona (“Traces of Complexity. Monetary Circulation in *Mediolanum* during the Fifth Century AD: Persistence and Change”, pp. 83–110). By analysing a large number of coin finds in Milan between the late fourth and early sixth century, the author concludes that coins kept circulating in this period without being replaced by metal scraps or other para-monetary objects, the only indication of a lack of small change is the appearance of cut-up coins and some imitations. With respect to the preceding article, the reader is left with the question of why the recycling of bronze coins did occur in Rome, where coins were still struck/produced, but not in Milan?

One case study is specifically focused on one of the recent Theodosian hoard finds, including the earlier-mentioned late bronze circulation characteristics. This study, presented by Rahel Otte (“Coins without Value? The Hoard from Rheindahlen and the End of Monetisation in the Rhineland”, pp. 141–158), introduces the late Roman Theodosian hoard find of Rheindahlen together with an analysis of coin finds from the hinterland of the Rhine frontier. The combination of these two datasets sheds a new light on the end of coin use in the Rhineland. Otte indicates the end of coin supply to this region in the early fifth century, but she simultaneously mentions that the end of

coin use is significantly more complicated. The Rheindahlen hoard indicates that these Theodosian coins were still in use in the 410s and 420s in this region, however, the coin find dataset from the same region conveys another pattern. In the cities and fortresses on the Rhine, no coin use after 403 has been attested, much unlike the Germanic settlements. Because of the end of small change in this region for the same reasons that were also discussed by Wigg-Wolf in this volume, locals hoarded these worthless coins either for external trade or for melting purposes which highlights the transfer from a monetary to a barter economy, as Otte concludes: the smallest Theodosian bronze coins were precisely “between money and scrap” (p. 155).

Another set of articles discusses the use of coins and scrap bronze in various post-Roman or ‘barbaric’ contexts. The article by Marcus Zagermann [“Die spätantike Höfensiedlung von San Martino (Lomaso, Trentino) als sicherer Aufbewahrungsort von Metallen”, pp. 111–128] analyses various bronze scraps in a hillside settlement in the region of Trentino. The finds here contain many old coins, sometimes cut or clipped, that seem to have re-entered the market because of a lack of bronze coinage. Besides these coins, hammered-down fibulae and bronze crosses and nails have also been found. The author notes that an extensive weight analysis could indicate if there is coherence that could indicate a ‘hackbronze’ use of these objects (p. 123), although the archaeological location seems to exclude a place for reworking or melting because of limited resources. The article does, however, not answer whether these objects could be seen as hackbronze, likely because of the lack of a weight analysis. Anna Zapolska (“Is Bronze the ‘New Gold’? The Role of Roman Bronze among the West Balts’ Societies in the Late Roman Period”, pp. 183–198) considers coin finds in the western Baltics in the late Roman period as grave gifts and potentially ‘grave hoards’. Besides coins, large numbers of bronze artefacts are also found in these graves. Zapolska argues that the formation of local Baltic elites seems to be indicated by the amount of (raw) bronze in a grave. This bronze was retrieved by melting down the incoming *sestertii* via the sea trade with the Romans. In this case, bronze became an indicator of social status and prestige, demonstrating the relevance of the base metal in this region. The article by Ellen Swift (“The Uses and Values of Copper Alloy Artefacts in the Late to Post-Roman Transition Period in Britain”, pp. 199–212) discusses the use of copper alloy artefacts in the late to post-Roman transition period in Britain. Copper alloy objects transitioned in this period in use and value because

of political turmoil and economic collapse. Some objects were curated because they were no longer produced, while others fell out of use and were modified and transformed. Coins specifically were either melted down, pierced for votive uses and/or functioned as an iconographical inspiration for copper rings. Finally, the contribution of Holger Komnick (“Kein Geld oder Kleingeld? Römische Bronzemünzen des 4. Jahrhunderts n. Chr. und fragmentierte Bronzeobjekte aus Brandenburg, Berlin und Sachsen”, pp. 159–182) discusses coin and bullion metal finds in the Barbaricum, specifically in modern Brandenburg, Berlin, and Saxony, concluding that coins were not used in this region, and neither does it seem that the bronze hoarding had a paramonetary form. It seems more likely that everything was meant for melting to distract the valuable base metal. This is attested by finds of coins that were cut, clipped, or melted, as well as other bronze bullion finds. Moreover, the coins found come from the first to the third century and are therefore not representative of contemporary circulation.

The article by Peter Bray (“Chemical Eddies: An Introduction to the REMADE Project’s Approach to Coins, Chemistry and Recycling”, pp. 213–223) concerns the Roman and Early Medieval Defined project (REMADE), which aims to perform chemical analysis on the metal use in Britain in the first millennium AD. Copper alloys are mutable and could undergo complex patterns of reuse and recycling, which could be uncovered by chemical analysis. The present article only gives a very broad overview of the copper alloys in Britain in the Roman period, as also acknowledged by the author (p. 217). It would, however, be especially interesting to consider the results of this chemical analysis of ‘hackbronze’ and other repurposed bronze items, including melted coins. This is not explicitly mentioned in the present article, but seems to be part of the aims of this ambitious project, which has received funding until 2029. Finally, Eckhard Wirbelauer’s (“*Argentei minuti* aus dem elsässischen Niedernai: Überlegungen zur Interpretation einer Fundmünzengruppe”, pp. 129–140) study is a bit of a strange inclusion because it concerns silver imitations in a specific grave find, which seems the most unrelated article to the general topic of the volume. Wirbelauer showcases an interesting case of extremely light silver ‘barbaric’ imitations that did not have a monetary role but were rather used for grave rituals. Apart from the fact that the coins are silver, they can also not be considered as an example of the re-use of Roman coins in a ‘barbaric’ context because the coins are contemporary imitations of fifth-century silver types.

The result of the above-described collection of articles is a volume that presents various approaches and case studies concerning the use of bronze coins, ingots or objects in the late Roman period. The book itself is richly illustrated with 149 illustrations, including helpful figures, tables, and high-quality images of the various bronze objects, imitations, and bronze coins. The structure of the book is, moreover, easy to follow with a helpful footnote system followed by a bibliography after every article. This volume is of particular interest because it combines various disciplines to answer questions about the economic, cultural, and practical uses of bronze as a metal and for the striking of coinage. The introduction's (pp. 7–8) ambitious aims are, perhaps logically, only partly fulfilled by the present volume. Not all of the articles seem to fit perfectly with the aims of the volume, especially those on silver coinage, and because of the lack of a concluding chapter, some readers could have trouble connecting the various case studies to the general topic. Nonetheless, the book offers a comprehensive and modern introduction to the transition period from a bronze monetary to a base metal barter economy in North-Western Europe and is an interesting read for archaeologists, numismatists, and historians studying the early medieval economy.

Jehan Hillen, Leopold-Franzens-Universität Innsbruck
Doktoratskolleg „Entangled Antiquities“ – CoE EurAsian Transformations
Doktorand der Alten Geschichte
Johann.Hillen@uibk.ac.at

www.plekos.de

Empfohlene Zitierweise

Jehan Hillen: Rezension zu: Anna Flückiger/Jan Bemmman (eds.): *Coining Values. Bronze between Money and Scrap in Late Roman and Early Medieval Europe*. Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag 2025 (Limes und Legion 2). In: Plekos 27, 2025, S. 395–401 (URL: https://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2025/r-flueckiger_bemmann.pdf).

Lizenz: Creative Commons BY-NC-ND
