



NEW ROMAN COIN FIND IN ESTONIA

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INTRODUCTION

In 2012, half a dozen hoards of different periods¹ reached Estonian museum collections. The oldest one, acquired by Pärnu Museum, was discovered in the village of Kastna in the former Tõstamaa parish and consists of 17 Roman bronze sestertii (Figs 1; 2: 1), struck by Marcus Aurelius (161–180 AD) and his wife Faustina Junior. The Kastna hoard is the largest Roman coin complex preserved in Estonia from this period.

The hoard from the Kastna peninsula fits well into the pattern of discovery of Roman coins. Some finds have been reported from Tõstamaa and Pootsi villages situated in the neighbourhood (Seeman 1922, 2, 3), near the coastal area. On the basis of the information and a photo from the finder, the author of the present article was able to study briefly a Roman bronze coin, which had been also found from the vicinity of Kastna (Fig. 2: 2) a few years ago (*ca.* 0.5 km to the north-west). The coin, which is in private possession, can be dated to the time of Faustina Junior (died in 175 AD).

FORMER RESEARCH

Estonian archaeological literature records that at different times the total of a little under fifty Roman copper and silver coins have been found here (e.g. Tallgren 1922, 116; Moora *et al.* 1935, 139; Jaanits *et al.* 1982, 232; Lang 2007, 257). Yet, no up-to-date catalogue of the Roman coins found in Estonia exists; the last one was published in 1961 (Kropotkin 1961). The Estonian numismatist Ivar Leimus is rather sceptical about the finds of Roman coins reported by the Baltic German historians of the 19th century (see Leimus 1996, 40). It is well known that Roman coins have been collected since the Renaissance and some of them have been lost or discarded, some ending up as ‘finds’ in a museum (Horsnæs 2006, 53).

Arkadi Molvõgin commented on the four 2nd century sestertii found at Juminda in North Estonia in 1974 as the first ‘entirely credible’ hoard² of Roman coins from Estonia (Molvõgin 1976, 77–78). The Juminda hoard, however, which could have been hidden on the seashore of the time (Molvõgin 1976, 77–78; Tamla & Kiudsoo 2005, no. 5), is not the only one from the period. Study of the earlier find reports suggested that although some of the reports of coin finds from the north-western part of Estonia until the first quarter of the 20th century (Ebert 1913, 531; Tallgren 1922, 117) do not have an archaeological context, the report concerning the hoard of Roman coins found from the Lubja farm on the Viimsi peninsula in 1865, at least, may be reliable (Kiudsoo 2009, 106–107).

¹ Puru (AI 7072), Edise (AI 7025), Kurna I, II (AI 7077), Rannu II (AI 7118), Kastna (PäMu 25343 / A 2665).

² On the other hand, it has been suggested that for base metal coinage the word ‘hoard’ should be used only in cases where five or more coins have been found together (Horsnæs 2010, 35).



Fig. 1. Kastna hoard.

Jn 1. Kastna aare.

(PäMu 25343 / A 2665.)

Photo / Foto: Tarvi Toome

0 1 cm

BRONZE COINS

Roman coins were produced in gold (*aureus*), silver (*antoninianus* and *denarius*), bronze (*sestertius* and *dupondius*), and copper (*as*). There is clear evidence of monetary economy in the Roman establishments of the Limes area, and some evidence of monetarization in the area along the Limes. But the more distant parts of Barbaricum normally only imported coins in good silver and gold (Horsnæs 2010, 188). Gotland has the highest find density in Scandinavia. Its coin material consists almost exclusively of denarii (6500) (Lind 2006, 44); there are furthermore 274 Late Roman solidi; hardly any base metal coins (bronze coins) have been found (Horsnæs 2010, 177). It has long been observed that Roman bronze coins rarely travelled far from the Limes, the most important exception from the rule being the prevalence of large Roman base metal coins (*sestertii*) in the West Balt culture (Ciolek 2003, 29; Horsnæs 2010, 188–189), the area of which is located on the north-east periphery of Barbaricum. It covered the Lake District of Mazury, Sambian Peninsula, the basin of the Lower Neman River and the Curonian Lagoon. At present the region is divided between Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Russia. It is noteworthy that the distribution range of *sestertii* is limited even within the Empire, mainly to northern Italy (Bursche 2006, 222).

We may connect the presence of bronze coins in the West Balt culture with the amber trade. The area inhabited by the West Balt tribes was rich in deposits of this valuable resource; the Romans presumably paid for amber in *sestertii*. The inflow of

sestertii to West Balt territory, however, was of a short duration; it began during the period of the Marcomannic wars (166–180 AD) and lasted until the mid-3rd century. Among grave inventories which included coins a decided majority is dated only to the period 200–250 AD (Zapolska 2011, 1123).

Contacts between areas around the Gulf of Finland and the south-eastern coast of the Baltic Sea (mainly the area between the mouths of the Vistula and the Neman Rivers) that had intensified during the Late Pre-Roman Iron Age were further strengthened in the 1st century AD. There is evidence of communication by sea from the mouth of the Vistula River to the coast of north-eastern Estonia (and Finland) because new types of items appeared first in the graves of the north-eastern coastal zone of the country, from where they later spread to inland regions. There were also close and mutual contacts between Estonia and south-western Finland during the Roman Iron Age, although evidence indicates that main influences moved from the south to the north (Lang 2007, 256–257). At the same time it has been also suggested that the finds of single bronze coins from Finland reflect direct imports from East Prussia (Talvio 1982, 44–46).

Attention has been drawn, and quite justifiably, to the fact that Saaremaa Island and western Estonia were not part of the communication network of the time, although the linking routes must have passed between them (Lang 2007, 256). During recent years at least fourteen single Roman bronze coins have been discovered in Estonia, which mostly came from the western and northern coast of the land, thus clearly marking out the main linking route with the West-Balt area. Some specimens of those have been discovered from the territory of the catchment basin of the lakes Peipsi and Pskov (Fig. 2). From the latter region also a Roman bronze lamp has been discovered, which is probably the only real Italian import item discovered in Estonia (Štšogoleva 2009, 6–8 and references). An important long-distance trade route to the River Dniepr at least since the Migration period ran exactly along Lake Peipsi – Lake Pskov – the Velikaya River (Kiudsoo 2013). It has even been suggested that the River Turunt, mentioned by some ancient authors among large rivers flowing into the Baltic Sea, might have been identical with the waterway which ran south from the Gulf of Finland along the Narva River (Aleksandrov 2009, 65–66 and references cited). A part of artefacts of Roman origin in Latvia may have also arrived from the eastern part of the Roman Empire via cities of the Black Sea and along the Dniepr – Daugava waterway (LSV 2001, 212–214). The Dargeliškė hoard from Lithuania, which can be dated to the middle of the 3rd century, confirms long-range direct contacts of Baltic tribes with eastern provinces of Rome (Michelbertas 2010, 56). Presumably inflow from



Fig. 2. Recent Roman coin finds from Estonia.
1 – Kastna hoard, 2 – Kastna single find.
Jn 2. Viimaste aastate rooma müntide leiukohad.
1 – Kastna aare, 2 – Kastna üksikleid.
Drawing / Joonis: Mirja Ots

the east started to become more dominant in the late 3rd and during the 4th centuries of our era. At this time coins mainly reached the eastern part of the Balt cultures (Zapolska 2011, 1117, 1123).³ The latter hypothesis seems to be supported by the dating of some Latvian hoards consisting of Roman coins, which fall into the 3rd and 4th centuries (Ducmane & Ozoliņa 2009, 69–74).

SILVER DENARII

Finds of Roman silver denarii from the territory of the West Balt settlement are exceedingly rare and their number is negligible compared to the more dominant sestertii. The generally accepted view is that the presence of denarii on West Balt territory was not connected with direct exchange of the Balts with the Roman Empire, but was the result of the influence from and contacts with their southern neighbour – the people of the Wielbark culture, who at this time inhabited also the basin of the lower Vistula (Zapolska 2009, 139–140 and references cited). Actually, in the entire area of Poland we note a considerable domination of silver coins over bronze and gold issues (Dymowski 2009, 198). It is also possible, at least in theory, that denarii came to the area in question from the north, from Gotland (Zapolska 2009, 150), which has produced a rich trove of Roman denarii (Lind 2006, 44).

In Estonia Roman silver denarii have been found in very rare cases. Actually there are only three with more or less reliable data about them. Three coins (2+1) were discovered in the vicinity of Pöide (Snellman 1896, 14; Ebert 1913, 530) and one specimen was brought to light in the Vee village near Pärnu-Jaagupi.⁴ Although links with Scandinavia were the weakest during the Roman Iron Age and the culture of Estonia was mainly oriented towards the Baltic (see Jaanits *et al.* 1982, 222; Lang 2007, 257, 263), it can be assumed that those few coins reached the western coast of Estonia via Gotland. The Roman denarii struck *ca.* 69–193 AD were first deposited in Scandinavia during the third century, but were also available there much later (Horsnæs 2010, 180, 186).

VIKING AGE CONTEXT

The Norwegian numismatist Svein Gullbekk has gathered information on the number of Roman coins found in Viking Age contexts in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Bornholm. He suggests that the long-lasting circulation of these coins might be explained by the discovery of hoards in later times (Gullbekk 2009, 174–175). Sometimes Roman silver coins were also found in Viking Age deposits on the eastern coast of the Baltic. For instance, the Latvian deposit of Nāvēssala contains, along with around 300 Arab dirhems, also five Roman coins; the deposit of Eversmuiža at Ludza dating back to the 1020s contained two Roman coins among Arab dirhams and West European denarii (Ducmane & Ozoliņa 2009, 31). Although the north-western corner of Russia bears only four single marks on Kropotkin's map, one of them stands for a fragment of a silver Roman coin which was included in an early 12th-century hoard (Kropotkin 1961, 45, fig. 23).

Bronze coins are known from several Viking Age contexts: not only from Scandinavian trade centers like Kaupang, Hedeby, Ribe, Tissø, Birka, etc., but also even from Iceland (Feveile 2006, 158; Horsnæs 2006, 59, 61; 2010, 116, 171; Wiechmann 2007, 37;

³ This hypothesis needs to be substantiated by more detailed studies of the composition of hoards from these regions. This aspect will be a subject of future research (Zapolska 2011, 1123).

Blackburn 2008, 59 and references cited; Gullbekk 2009 and references cited). It is significant that on the Danish Viking Age sites with Roman bronze coins, no denarii have appeared, although they normally outnumber by far the Roman bronze coins and therefore should be expected to turn up (Horsnæs 2010, 161). There are relatively few finds of Roman coins from Norway. Denarii are particularly rare in comparison with other parts of Barbaricum. Nevertheless, again some Roman bronze coins have been found in firmly dated Viking Age contexts, as is the case also in Denmark (Blackburn 2008, 58–59; Horsnæs 2010, 176). Anton Holt has been reinterpreting the small number of Roman bronze finds from Iceland, some of which have been found in Viking Age contexts, and these can only have been brought to Iceland after its colonization in the late 9th century (Blackburn 2008, 59).

While the coins from the Iron Age sites are easily explained as imports following other material from the Roman Empire (in this connection the mass of the 2nd century AD denarii from these sites should be specifically mentioned), the finds from Viking Age contexts seem more difficult to explain (Horsnæs 2006, 65). Were they a source of bronze for metal-working or luxury items? In theory, anything small and heavy could be used as a weight – a fragment of an ingot or even a stone. Researchers mention several artefacts in addition to bronze weights that have been used for weighing silver (see Kyhlberg 1980, 224–227; Rispling 2004, no 30; Pedersen 2008, 127; Kiudsoo & Russow 2011, 229; Tamla *et al.* 2012, 232). The use of such artefacts as weights could hardly be recognized in settlement material unless they are found in association with regular weights, for instance in a purse. Heiko Steuer (1997, 12 with references) has interpreted two Roman coins found in purses as weights, and a similar interpretation of Roman coins was also proposed by Anton Wilhelm Brøgger (1921, 108). It is theoretically possible that some of the Roman bronze coins found from Estonia might have been used as weights in the Viking Age. Unfortunately the lack of specific information about those find spots and find circumstances makes more detailed research difficult.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of Estonian archaeological finds and the parallels from the neighbouring countries we may assert that the first single coins (sestertii) reached Estonian territory in the 3rd century AD. A special study of Roman coins found in Estonia in earlier times, analysing their ‘veracity’, is urgently needed. Since imported goods from Rome resp. Roman provinces occur in Estonia only in small quantities, the analysis of find spots of Roman coins in Estonia may confirm or, on the contrary, disprove the former hypothesis about communication routes between Estonia and southern lands. It would also provide a considerable contribution to the study of our settlement pattern of the Roman Iron Age.

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UUS ROOMA MÜNDILEID EESTIST

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2012. aastal Eesti muuseumikogudesse laekunud kuue aarde hulgast väärrib eraldi esile tõstmist Pärnu Muuseumi jõudnud Kastna peitleid endisest Tõstamaa kihelkonnast. Vähemalt seitsmeteistkümnest mündist koosnenud kompleksi näol, mis sisaldas pronksist sestertse keiser Marcus Aureliuse (161–180 pKr) ja tema abikaasa Faustina noorema ajast (jn 1; 2: 1), on tegemist läbi aegade suurima Rooma rahadest koosneva Eesti leiuga. Kastna aare sobib hästi Rooma rahade leidmist puudutavasse üldisesse konteksti. Nimelt on just Tõstamaa kihelkonna maadelt ka varemalt taolisi üksikuid verminguid avastatud.

Eestist viimastel aastatel leitud Rooma mündid (jn 2) osutavad peaaesjalikult kontaktidele Läänemere kaguranniku piirkonnaga. Kui Rooma keisririigi piiridest väljaspool kohtab arheoloogilises leiumaterjalis reeglina üksnes hõbemünte, siis Lääne-Balti kultuuriruumi muististes domineerivad selgelt pronksist sestertsid. Tõenäoliselt merevaiguga kauplemise tulemusel omandatud müntide maapõue jäämise aega seostatakse seal suletud hauakomplekside põhjal otsustades perioodiga 200–250 pKr.

Eesti leiumaterjalis puuduvad Skandinaaviamaadele nii omased hõbemündid – denaarid. Saare- ja Läänemaalt avastatud üksikud Rooma hõbemüntide eksemplarid, mis on meile jõudnud arvatavalt Gotlandi vahendusel, võivad naabermaade paralleelidele tuginedes kuuluda tegelikult ka hulga hilisemasse aega. Teoreetiliselt võivad ka mõned Eesti rannikualadelt päevavalgele tulnud sestertsid olla maapõue ladestunud alles viikingiajal. Taolisele võimalusele osutavad Põhjamaade kauplemiskeskuste viikingiaegsetest kihtidest leitud Rooma pronksmündid, milliseid on vähemasti mõningatel puhkudel kasutatud kaaluvihtidena.

Kuigi tänu viimastel aastatel leitud Rooma müntide leiukohtade kaardistamisele on juba praegu täpsustunud varemalt esitatud hüpoteesid Eesti ja lõunapoolsete piirkondade vahelistest peamistest suhtlus- ja ühendusteedest, seisab suur töö varasemate leiuteadete kontrollimisel meil alles ees. Uurimus, mis analüüsiks Eestist leitud Rooma müntide “tõepärasust”, täiendaks oluliselt pilti ka tollase asustuse levikust tervikuna.