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Introduction: coin hoards and medieval archaeology

On a winter's day in January 1448 three men met at Towcester, the appointed executors of the late parish rector William Sponne, former Archdeacon of Norfolk. Their task was not entirely straightforward, for Sponne was a man of some means and planned to be remembered as such. According to the terms of his will, the men were to commission a memorial chantry in the south aisle of Towcester's church of St Lawrence, which would be staffed by two priests sustained using income from property eventually bequeathed to the parish in 1451 (Cox 1906, 181). His funeral, meanwhile, was to be an elaborate event in its own right. Thirteen men robed in white were to carry Sponne's shrouded corpse to the chancel, where it would be interred on a bed of white sand inside a large, fashionable cadaver tomb of white stone, topped with a painted wooden effigy robed in ecclesiastical garments – a grand design more befitting a cathedral than a parish church (Giggins 2010, 26; Bailey, Pevsner, and Cherry 2013, 621). Memorials like these were costly, and had to be financed with the cash left behind in Sponne's personal coffers. It was for this reason that the executors made their way towards the rectory house, where, having prised open a crevice in an interior wall, they uncovered £2000 in gold coin, money apparently hidden by the late minister for safekeeping (Knighton 2003, 127, no. 212).

Sponne's cache is an early example of what would now be termed a coin hoard, a class of archaeological assemblage usually defined as a group of two or more coins deposited together (Grierson 1975, 130; Casey 1986, 51; Grinder-Hansen 1992, 26; Moesgaard 2015, 6). Under the guise of 'buried treasure', hoards of coins and other objects have long excited public interest, and remain an enduring element of modern pop culture: treasure hunts are central plot devices in blockbuster films, and genuine discoveries of archaeological hoards routinely excite press coverage in print and television media. Within the modern imagination, hoards tell romantic tales of lost fortunes, of plunder and unrest, and of the thrill of discovery; they speak, therefore, to the concerns and desires of the present as much as they do to the affairs of the past.

Within the twin disciplines of medieval archaeology and numismatics, however, coin hoards have often assumed a more muted interest. To numismatists, hoards have a primary value insofar as they provide specimens of coins, sometimes in great numbers, that can be individually classified, measured, and weighed to shed light on the structure and technical organisation of medieval coinage and coin production (e.g. Petersson 1969; Archibald 2001; Archibald and Cook 2001, 69-91; Churchill and Thomas 2012). Moreover, as 'closed sets' of synchronous objects, coin hoards offer useful pegs in numismatic dating sequences, mirroring a common application of cemetery evidence in studies of other artefact classes (e.g. Brooke 1916, cxciv-cxcv; Allen 1951, lx; cf. Petrie 1899, 297-300; Bayliss et al. 2013). Associated non-numismatic artefacts like personal jewellery or ceramic containers arouse archaeological interest for similar reasons, providing well-dated objects that can be integrated into typo-chronologies (e.g. Sarfatij 1979, 492-95; Hinton 1982, 7; Röber 1989, 107-11; Theune 2010).

While these issues have been the primary focus of medieval hoard scholarship for the past two centuries, there have also been parallel attempts to apply the evidence of coin hoards to higher level discussions within the historical sciences. Working from the premise that the coins in hoards represent samples of currency abstracted from circulation, numismatists have used hoard evidence to address problems within the discipline of monetary history; in this fashion, coin hoards have been employed as source material for reconstructions of the composition and size of medieval currency at specified dates, and as evidence for the varied impacts of monetary policies and political reforms on medieval economies (e.g. Spufford 1970, 56-73; Jonsson 1987; Archibald 1988, 286-93; Allen 2007, 202-06; 2012, 317-45; Svensson 2017). Efforts to apply coin hoard evidence to wider questions in medieval archaeology, however, are few and far between, and in a British context fall into two camps: either hoards are sparingly presented as illustrations of phenomena otherwise studied from non-hoard sources (e.g. Platt 1978, 101; Hinton 1990, 209; Roesdahl and Verhaeghe 2011, 197), or they are entirely absent from the archaeological narrative (e.g. Clarke 1984). This disconnect between the perceived archaeological and numismatic potential of medieval coin hoards is by no means a uniquely British problem (Kemmers and Myrberg 2011, 87-88), and, where not reflecting prejudices about the interest or utility of numismatic evidence (Laing 1969, xv; Casey 1986, 7), reveals unspoken assumptions about the uniform function and meaning of coins in cross-cultural contexts (e.g. Grierson 1975, 2-5). If coins are thought to relate principally to monetary and political issues, then it follows that hoard evidence is best directed to answering questions of a similar character.

To some extent, however, a singular focus on the potential of medieval coin hoards as economic or monetary evidence presumes an ability to run when in fact we are still learning to walk. For most parts of Europe, the nature of coin hoarding as an independent socio-economic phenomenon of the medieval period remains poorly understood, and consequently key questions remain unresolved: who composed coin hoards, what did they put in them, how and where did they bury them and, ultimately, why did they do it? While answers have often been sought in later historical analogies, the most significant evidence surely consists of patterns in the hoards themselves. In this respect, the dearth of modern archaeological and numismatic syntheses of medieval European coin hoards is a major disciplinary stumbling block (but cf. Grinder-Hansen 1992 and Gullbekk and Sættem 2019), and indeed many basic matters of fact – relating, for instance, to patterns in the chronological and spatial incidence of coin hoards, their numismatic and non-numismatic contents, and their depositional circumstances – remain entirely unresolved. The situation in England and Wales is no exception to this trend; previous reviews of medieval coin hoard evidence by Thompson (1956, xxiii-xlix) and Allen (2002; 2015a) are brief and of limited scope, the former being primarily concerned with the relationship between coin hoards and documented political events, and the latter with specific aspects of their numismatic contents and spatial distributions. Without a basic knowledge of the pattern of coin hoards, we cannot hope to achieve a rounded understanding of hoarding as a socio-economic phenomenon, and without this, it is difficult to see how anything but the most banal historical conclusions can be drawn from hoard evidence.

This study seeks to address the lacunae in medieval hoard studies through a systematic archaeological and numismatic analysis of the evidence for coin hoarding in England and Wales during the period c.973-1544. At one level, its appearance reflects a groundswell of archaeological and numismatic interest in hoarding as a socio-economic phenomenon pursuant on the ever-growing number of hoards uncovered by members of the public, and in particular by hobbyist metal detectorists, in Britain and in other European countries (Östergren 2009, 14-15; Scholz 2011; Bland 2013, 214; Ghey 2015). From a methodological perspective, however, it is also a particularly opportune moment at which to examine hoard evidence. Advances in computer technology have simplified the collation, storage, and analysis of large and complex archaeological datasets, and consequently allow us to ask ever more sophisticated questions of hoard data; moreover, the proliferation of comparative digital datasets permit cross-examinations of archaeological and historical sources in ways that were inconceivable to previous generations of scholars. In the present context, therefore, a thorough examination of the archaeological and numismatic evidence for medieval coin hoarding, informed by modern cross-disciplinary scholarship and using sophisticated methods of data analysis, has the potential to not only set our understanding of hoarding phenomena on a firm empirical footing, but might also offer entirely new insights into the practices and mentalités that underpinned the hoarding process in a peculiarly medieval context. On this basis, it becomes possible to not only re-evaluate the potential of hoards as source material for economic and monetary history, but to also employ hoards as a more general source of information relating to the people and societies that produced them; in this way, coin hoards might be 're-membered' into wider discourses in contemporary medieval archaeology (Myrberg 2009, 170-71; Kemmers and Myrberg 2011, 104).

The aims of this study, therefore, are to identify, characterise, and interpret archaeological and numismatic patterns in coin hoards deposited in England and Wales during the period c.973-1544, paying particular attention to the behaviour and motivations of individuals involved in the hoarding process. In order to direct study, six principal research questions have been designed:

1. Where and when have coin hoards been recovered, and what factors condition these distributions?
2. What do patterns in the temporal and spatial incidence of coin hoards tell us about hoarding behaviour?
3. What patterns, if any, are visible in the numismatic elements of medieval coin hoards, and what do they tell us about hoarding behaviour?
4. What non-numismatic objects, if any, are found in medieval coin hoards, and what do they tell us about hoarding behaviour?
5. What types of containers, if any, were used to store coin hoards, and what do they tell us about hoarding behaviour?
6. What patterns, if any, are visible in the archaeological contexts of coin hoards, and what do they tell us about hoarding behaviour?

The study is structured around seven chapters. The present chapter has set out the underlying rationales, aims, and questions behind the research project. The second chapter, meanwhile, reviews theoretical and methodological issues of relevance to the study of medieval coin hoards, drawing conclusions that inform interpretations of the evidence advanced elsewhere in the study. The third chapter addresses specific problems relating to the production and analysis of the hoard dataset, delineating core research parameters and frameworks, outlining data sources, and employing source-critical methods to explore the impact of post-depositional processes on data coverage and representativeness. The fourth chapter outlines macro-scale patterns in the incidence of coin hoarding in England and Wales c.973-1544, exploring the relationship between hoarding and underlying chronologies and geographies of commerce, conflict, population, and wealth derived from external archaeological and historical sources. The fifth chapter refocuses attention towards the compositional dimensions of hoard deposits, analysing their numismatic and non-numismatic elements as a means of understanding hoarding behaviour; the sixth, meanwhile, extends this study to the containers and archaeological contexts that hoards were deposited in, a hitherto unexplored dimension of the English and Welsh hoard dataset. A concluding chapter draws together key research findings and explores their implications for an understanding of hoarding phenomena and for wider issues in archaeology and numismatics. This is followed by a bibliography and an appendix containing a fully-referenced gazetteer of English and Welsh coin hoards deposited during the period c.973-1544.