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Ways and Phases, Contexts and Functions

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Roman Gold and Hun Kings: the use and hoarding of solidi in the late fourth and fifth centuries

Peter Guest*

“When he [Attila] saw a painting of the Roman Emperors sitting upon golden thrones and Scythians lying dead before their feet, he sought a painter and ordered him to paint Attila upon a throne and the Roman Emperors heaving sacks upon their shoulders and pouring out gold before his feet.” (*Suda* M. 405)

This account of Attila’s reaction to seeing the decorative frieze in one of the *basilicae* in the city of Mediolanum, the one-time imperial capital in northern Italy captured after a short siege in 452, neatly encapsulates the changed balance of power between the Roman emperors and their most feared barbarian antagonists of the fifth century, the Huns. Whether this event actually took place or not is less important than its allegorical message regarding the realities of the contemporary political situation: the predominant position of Rome and her empire, represented by dead barbarians beneath enthroned emperors, replaced by the image of Attila receiving golden tribute from the newly subservient Romans. The relationship between Rome and the barbarians beyond the imperial boundaries had been turned on its head, and the compiler of the tenth-century *Suda* used Attila’s reaction to the painting in Mediolanum to relate this pivotal moment in the history of the ancient world.¹

From this time, Romans and barbarians knew that a new world-order existed in which the role of patron and client had been redefined, and also that the survival of the emperors in Italy and Constantinople depended on their ability to transfer vast quantities of their accumulated wealth into the hands of rulers such as Attila. Such a dramatic renegotiation of Roman and barbarian relations did not occur overnight, but had been taking place, albeit gradually, since before the empire’s ability to defend itself militarily was weakened following the destruction of the eastern Roman army and the death of the Emperor Valens at the Battle of Adrianople in 378. The sack of Rome itself in 410 by Alaric’s Goths proved that both the eastern and western emperors were almost incapable of defending themselves and that the survival of Roman civilization itself was at stake.² The appearance of the Huns on the lower Danube in the late fourth century and the capability of these people to defeat the Roman armies sent against them, led many to fear that they were living through the end of the world. The loss of large swathes of Pannonia, Moesia and Thrace in the 430s and 440s, followed by the invasions of Gaul and Italy in the early 450s, appeared to herald the break-up of the Roman Empire, while death or enslavement seemed to be the likely destiny of anyone who stood in the Huns’ path.³

* This article is dedicated to the memory of Kaelyn MacGregor.

¹ The *Suda*’s author(s) relied on the fifth century historian Priscus for this event. Priscus used the term ‘Scythian’ to denote any barbarian group, including Huns (for whom he would use the term ‘Hun’ too). Thompson E. A. 1948, p. 11.

² Previously, Alaric had demanded and received payment of 4,000 Roman pounds (*librae*) of gold as compensation after being left to wait for Roman troops in Epirus (407). In 409 the Roman senate paid Alaric 5,000 lb of gold, 20,000 lb of silver, 4,000 silk tunics, 3,000 scarlet-dyed skins and 3,000 lb of pepper to lift the blockade of Rome and withdraw his Goth army (the payment also included a commitment that the senate would pursue the renewal of the alliance between emperor and king). Hendy M. 1985, p. 261; Jones A. H. M. 1964, p. 185–186.

³ Fifth and sixth century accounts of the Hun invasions describe the terror and suffering of the Roman population in those areas fought over, particularly along the lower Danube. Predictably, Roman authors described the Huns as ‘animals’ (Ammianus Marcellinus and Procopius), ‘wolves’ (Priscus), ‘wild beasts’ (Jerome), and ‘a race almost of men’ (Jordanes). The empire was under pressure from many different

Despite fears that Attila's ambition was to be crowned emperor himself, his dealings with the imperial court indicate he was more concerned with the accumulation of wealth than assuming the formal trappings of Roman authority and power. However, as the story of the paintings in the Mediolanum *basilica* illustrates, the transfer of wealth in the form of gold was merely the physical manifestation of Attila's real legacy, namely the establishment of a new political structure in which the Roman Emperor paid homage to the king of the Huns. Gold was, in effect, the means by which this new world-order was defined, and Attila was determined that the Romans should accept and honour their subservient status by the payment to him of large sums of gold as tribute. The treaty between Theodosius II and the Hun kings Attila and Bleda in 434 stipulated that the Romans should pay 700 Roman pounds of gold each year to the Huns (an increase from 350 lb set in 431), while the treaty signed in 447 increased the annual tribute payments to 2,100 lb of gold. These were huge sums and even the emperor in Constantinople had difficulty in raising the extra supplies of gold required to maintain these annual payments.⁴

Tribute and the giving of gifts: Attila the Hun and Priscus of Panium

Much of the evidence for the nature of the relationship between Roman Emperors and Hun kings comes from the historian Priscus, who was a member of the embassy sent by the imperial court in Constantinople to Attila's royal encampment beyond the Danube in 449 and whose account is one of the most remarkable documents to survive from Late Antiquity. Priscus was born in Thrace, probably between 420 and 430, during the reign of Theodosius II. He had received a formal Roman education, became a civil servant in the imperial administration in Constantinople, and accompanied the Roman envoy Maximinus on his embassy to Attila (the king had demanded Theodosius II send representatives to discuss the failure of the Romans to fulfil the conditions of the treaty signed in 447). After returning from this mission Priscus travelled in an official capacity (possibly as *rhetor*) to Rome, then to Damascus with Maximinus again, before returning to Constantinople in time to witness the rioting in the city in 453. Priscus recorded his travels and experiences in an eight-volume contemporary history (sometimes referred to as the *History of Byzantium*), which was popular at the time. Unfortunately, only fragments of this invaluable account survive, though Priscus' history was used as a source by many other writers such as Jordanes and John Malalas (and the compiler of the Byzantine *Suda*).⁵

Like many ancient authors, Priscus generally avoided quantifying things that he described, or he would measure time, distance and size in the most ambiguous terms (for instance, military forces are often described as "great hosts"). Despite such vagueness, Priscus is a most useful source for the historian concerned with understanding the use of gold in

sides in the early fifth century and Roman armies fought against Persians, Goths, brigands and usurpers as well as Huns. Jones A. H. M. 1964, p. 182–194; Liebeschuetz J. H. 2007, p. 102–106; Thompson E. A. 1948, p. 24–95 and p. 125–143.

⁴ Priscus complained that the increased tax burden to pay these tributes fell particularly hard on the senatorial classes: "... formerly wealthy men were selling on the market their wives' jewellery and their furniture". Blockley R. C. 1983, fr. 9.3, p. 21–38. Eastern Roman senators could not compete with the wealth of their contemporaries in Italy, where it was not unusual for individual senators to receive annual incomes of 1,000 to 4,000 lb of gold, though Constantinople witnessed its fair share of luxury and extravagance (A. H. M. Jones estimated the senate in Constantinople numbered 2,000 members by the late fourth century). Henty M. 1985, p. 201–203; Jones A. H. M. 1964, p. 527–556.

⁵ For references to the surviving fragments of Priscus' *History*, see Blockley R. C. 1981 and Blockley R. C. 1983. E. A. Thompson was critical of Priscus, but acknowledged the great value of his work: "The history of eastern Europe in the middle of the fifth century is a subject of great difficulty: without the fragments of Priscus we would be lost. Other writers tell us isolated facts pertaining to secular affairs in that age: Priscus alone gives us a history". Thompson E. A. 1948, p. 9–12.

international relations in the late Roman world because he did quantify the details of treaties between Romans and Huns, particularly those dealing with the return of fugitives and the payment of tribute. Tribute payments are always quantified by weight in pounds and the significance of Hun fugitives and Roman prisoners-of-war becomes clear when the financial penalties for their non-return are described. These were two important elements of the diplomatic negotiations between Theodosius II (later Marcian) and the Huns that were Priscus' main interest, and in recording events he actually witnessed he is also unique in describing Attila and his Huns as experienced through the eyes of a Roman.

On the treaty between Theodosius II and Attila and Bleda, probably in signed in 434, Priscus wrote: "that the treaty should be maintained and last as long as the Romans paid 700 pounds of gold each year to the Scythian kings (previously the payments had been 350 pounds of gold)."⁶ In 447 the treaty signed after the battle at Chersonese included the following terms: "fugitives should be handed over to the Huns, and 6,000 pounds of gold be paid to complete the outstanding instalments of tribute; that the tribute henceforth be set at 2,100 pounds of gold per year; that for each Roman prisoner-of-war who escaped and reached his home territory without ransom, twelve solidi were to be the payment."⁷

Some years later the terms of this treaty were causing frustration to Attila who: "sent letters to the Emperor concerning the fugitives and the payments of tribute, commanding that all that had not been handed over under the pretext of the present state of war should be sent to him with all speed."⁸ Priscus' thoughts on the moral character of Attila who, in a time of war, demanded the continued payment of tribute that was legally bound to conditions of peace, have not survived (if they were ever recorded), but he does make it clear that he considered the Huns were greedy for gold and gifts of all types.⁹

The distinction between tribute and gifts is repeated on several occasions in Priscus' history, indicating that these represented different levels of exchanges between Romans and Huns. For example, in Attila's royal compound Priscus saw one of the Hun noblemen, Onegesius, leaving his palace and he went forward: "and said that the ambassador of the Romans [Maximinus] sent him greetings and that I had come bearing gifts from him and gold sent by the Emperor."¹⁰ After a heated argument with their barbarian companions on the journey to meet Attila, Priscus and Maximinus won over the (allegedly drunk) Huns: "with gifts of silk garments and pearls."¹¹ Later the Roman embassy found itself caught in a storm and was forced to take shelter in a Scythian village. The 'queen' of the village sent food and attractive women, and the following day the Romans repaid her: "with three silver bowls, red skins, Indian pepper, dates and other dried fruits which the barbarians value because they are not native to their own country."¹²

The cultural rules that regulated the exchange of gifts between individuals are largely lost to us today, though in common with other late Roman writers Priscus describes a pattern of behaviour in which gifts were considered according to their appropriateness, while the individuals engaged in gift-exchange often were concerned to maintain their dignity¹³. The suitability of such personal gifts depended on their value both to the giver as well as to the recipient: Roman gifts tended to be expensive because of their intrinsic value (for instance,

⁶ Blockley R. C. 1983, fr. 2, p. 35–38.

⁷ Blockley R. C. 1983, fr. 9.3, p. 1–10.

⁸ Blockley R. C. 1983, fr. 9.1.

⁹ Blockley R. C. 1981, p. 63.

¹⁰ Blockley R. C. 1983, fr. 11.2, p. 511–522.

¹¹ Blockley R. C. 1983, fr. 11.2, p. 20–35.

¹² Blockley R. C. 1983, fr. 11.2, p. 306–12.

¹³ Or so Priscus tends to describe Romans receiving gifts from Huns, whereas the Huns were said to be greedy for gifts from Romans. Also see Guest P. 2005, p. 24–26.

the silver bowls given to the Scythian ‘queen’) or their exotic origins (such as Indian pepper, silk garments and pearls). On the other hand, Priscus described the Hun gifts to the Roman embassy as valuable because of their associations with Hun royal traditions, so that when Anatolius and Nomus were sent on a later mission to Attila, the king: “having given them gifts of horses and skins of wild animals, with which the Scythian kings adorn themselves, he dismissed them...”¹⁴

Unlike the Roman practice, where even the most important and wealthy classes of society were prohibited from using gold in gift exchanges, the Hun aristocracy emulated their king and royal traditions by giving horses. When Maximinus was about to leave Attila’s compound he received gifts from the Hun nobles: “For Attila had ordered each of his leading men to show friendship to Maximinus with gifts and each of them ... had sent him a horse. Maximinus had kept a few of these, but had sent back the rest, since he was eager to show his restraint by his temperate behaviour.”¹⁵

Payments of gold from the Roman emperor to the king of the Huns also appear to have involved some shared principles of exchange, though both sides in the 430s and 440s seem to have applied their own interpretations of the rules (occasionally leading to unfortunate consequences for all concerned). Attila understood, or pretended to understand, that the payment of tribute in return for peace was a demonstration of Hun supremacy over the Roman emperor, while Theodosius II presented the transfer of gold to Attila as a form of patronage in which he was the dominant partner in the patron-client relationship. At moments of diplomatic tension the divergent Hun and Roman perceptions of what the payment of gold to Attila actually meant would often become apparent. For instance, after Attila learned of the plot to assassinate him (of which Maximinus and Priscus apparently were ignorant), he berated the Roman ambassador and, according to Priscus, angrily claimed that: “whereas he [Attila] had preserved his noble lineage, Theodosius had fallen from his and was Attila’s slave, bound to the payment of tribute.”¹⁶

Theodosius and his advisors would have denied these accusations and they claimed that the transfer of gold to Attila was not the payment of tribute, but a normal part of the relationship between the emperor and an imperial official of the highest rank in Roman society. During his time with the ambassador to Attila from Theodosius II in Constantinople, Priscus met and talked to a senior envoy from Italy who had been sent to negotiate with Attila on behalf of Valentinian III, the emperor of the western Romans. According to Priscus the western ambassador, Constantiolus, stated that: “Gold is brought to him because of his rank”, later explaining that: “the rank which Constantiolus mentioned was that of a Roman general, which the Emperor had granted to Attila, thus concealing the word tribute. As a result, the payments were sent to him disguised as provisions issued to generals.”¹⁷ And: “Constantiolus said that after the Medes, Parthians and Persians (who the Romans hoped were Attila’s next victims), Attila would reject the title by which the Romans wished to call him and the rank which they thought they had honoured him and would force them to address him as king [*basileius*] instead of general.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Blockley R. C. 1983, fr. 15.4, p. 13–16.

¹⁵ Blockley R. C. 1983, fr. 14, p. 66–77.

¹⁶ Blockley R. C. 1983, fr. 15.2, p. 10–12.

¹⁷ The rank that Priscus refers to as a Roman general was probably the *magister utriusque militiae* (master of soldiers).

¹⁸ Blockley R. C. 1983, fr. 11.2, p. 620–636. Priscus sometimes used *basileius* when referring to Theodosius II, so the term could mean ‘emperor’ as well as ‘king’. The historian did not support Theodosius II’s strategy of buying peace with the Huns.

The role of gold in Roman and Hun societies

By the later fourth century gold had become the most valuable commodity in the Roman Empire. The value of this metal was partly intrinsic, based on its rarity, but mainly cultural: gold was pure and incorruptible and was seen as an attribute of the emperor's sacred nature. Access to gold (and perhaps to some extent silver too) was tightly controlled by the Roman bureaucratic machine and various laws were constituted in the fourth and fifth centuries that attempted to restrict the giving of gold to the imperial household alone¹⁹. The distinction between owning and giving is important because an individual's status in the late Roman world was defined by their ability to give gifts, either to individuals or to larger groups of people. Emperors in Late Antiquity were as keen to record their generosity to the Roman people as Augustus had been in the *res gestae*, though by this time imperial liberality was measured not in marble-clad temples, but in the giving and spending of gold. The Roman elite emulated the imperial practice of gift-exchange and wealthy members of the senatorial class, as well as others of lower status, needed to display their position and express their dignity through the giving of valuable objects. As we have seen, however, the Roman aristocracy had to achieve this while refraining from using gold in such exchanges.²⁰

This close association of gold with the Roman emperor developed during the early decades of the fourth century, but reached its characteristic Late Antique form in the joint reign of Valentinian I and Valens in the 360s when two significant reforms completed the imperial monopoly on the production and supply of gold: the creation of the office of the Count of the Sacred Largesses (*Comes Sacrarum Largitionum*) and the issuing of solidi of guaranteed fixed weight and fineness. The Count of the Sacred Largesses was one of the most senior posts in the imperial court and the holder of this office was responsible for the production, supply and, as the title suggests, the distribution of imperial wealth, primarily gold in various forms, but particularly in coin.²¹ The solidus was the standard gold coin issued during the late Roman period and its production was one of the Count's main responsibilities. The solidus was struck at 72 to the Roman pound (at a theoretical weight of 4.48 g) and from its introduction at the beginning of the fourth century was produced from very pure gold. The solidus was reformed under Valentinian I and Valens when its fineness was increased from 95% to 99%, and new coins included the letters OB in the mint-mark (abbreviation for *obryzum*) to indicate their improved purity. From this time, solidi were struck exclusively by the *comitatus*, or court, mint, which was abbreviated to COM on their mint-marks. The court often travelled between imperial capitals and the comitatensian mint would accompany the emperor, striking gold solidi with a variety of COM mint-marks that record the city where the imperial court happened to be resident at the time.²²

The solidus served three main functions: to bear the emperor's image, to be distributed as imperial largesse, and to be returned to the treasury in taxes.²³ The Roman aristocracy and

¹⁹ These constitutions usually stipulated what different classes of society could give as gifts, limiting items of gold to consuls alone among imperial subjects. Other laws attempted to control the use of gold in commerce, for example by prohibiting the payment of gold to barbarians beyond the empire. Hendy M. 1989, p. 193–194 and p. 257.

²⁰ MacMullen R. 1988, p. 96–119.

²¹ Delmaire R. 1989; Guest P. 2005, p. 22–26; Hendy M. 1985 p. 386–395; Hendy M. 1989a; Hendy M. 1989b; Jones A. H. M. 1964, p. 427–435.

²² Guest P. 2005, p. 36–40.

²³ Cassiodorus' commemoration of the appointment of a new Count of the Sacred Largesses in the reign of Theoderic (490–526) includes the following description of the solidus' primary function:
“And so, you decorate this Our Liberality with another service, that the shape of Our face is imprinted on metals in use, and you issue coin in Our time to inform future ages. Oh great invention of wise men! Oh praiseworthy institution of Our ancestors! That the portraits of emperors should be seen by the

the army were the main beneficiaries of the emperors' liberality and enormous quantities of solidi were issued on imperial accessions, anniversaries and other special occasions. Often this transfer of wealth took place very conspicuously, at formal state ceremonies recorded by court officials, though the *donativa* to soldiers must have occurred on a far larger, and equally conspicuous, scale.²⁴ The mines could not have produced a fraction of the new gold required by the imperial government to fulfil these cultural obligations that defined and held together Roman society in Late Antiquity, and most of the solidi issued by the comitatensian mint would have been struck using recycled gold (the third function of the solidus). Taxes were the primary means by which gold returned to the emperor's coffers and the Roman taxation system from the late fourth century appears to have been extremely effective at extracting gold in the form of solidi from the population. Measures were taken against those believed to be defrauding the emperor and numerous laws were introduced prohibiting the circulation of forged and light weight solidi, or stipulating how weight should be measured when paying taxes (with scales and balances and not, for example, by the size of the imperial portrait), and enforcing the use of all solidi which ever emperor was shown on the obverse.²⁵

Theoretically, therefore, the later Roman Empire operated a closed gold economy in which expenditure was met by income. This enabled the emperor to continue to distribute bags of solidi to the aristocracy and the soldiers, upon whom the security of the empire depended, and the attempted maintenance of this delicate balance was a principal role of the Count of the Sacred Largesses.²⁶ It is impossible, however, to manage a completely closed high-value economy and the Roman Emperor lost gold bearing his portrait in several different ways. Solidi would have been melted down to produce the gold jewellery, plate and tableware known from the fourth and fifth centuries, while the wealthy also were able to amass considerable fortunes in gold coins.²⁷

Some Roman solidi left the Roman gold economy entirely, having been sent to barbarians beyond the frontiers of the empire as tribute payments and subsidies. In the first half of the fifth century the main recipients of these exchanges with external groups or tribes were, as Priscus describes, the Huns. Tribute payments were measured by weight and the sums involved ranged from 350, 700 and 2,100 lb per year. It seems unlikely, however, that gold in these enormous quantities ever flowed annually across the boundaries of the Roman Empire and, on several occasions, Attila used the non-payment of tribute as a pretext for military conflict.²⁸ Nevertheless, we should not assume that, because it is doubtful that 2,100 lb of gold left the imperial treasury each year destined for Attila's royal palace, this consequently means no gold at all from Constantinople or the imperial capitals of the west

subjects to circulate through the medium of commerce, [the portraits] of those indeed whose counsels never cease to have regard for the safety of the remainder.”

Hendy M. 1989b, p. 1–2.

²⁴ Guest P. 2005, p. 24–25; MacMullen R. 1988, p. 108–127. Soldiers of the late fourth and fifth centuries each received five solidi and a pound of silver on the occasion of an imperial coronation, while the customary quinquennial donative was five solidi to each man. It is notoriously difficult to estimate with any degree of certainty the size of the late Roman army, but assuming 300,000 men, each quinquennial anniversary would have required the distribution of 1.5 million solidi (c. 20,000 pounds of gold). Hendy M. 1985, p. 177–188; Jones A. H. M. 1964, p. 435.

²⁵ Hendy M. 1985, p. 320–333 and p. 364–366; Jones A. H. M. p. 429–436. The few thousand solidi known today must represent a miniscule fraction of the millions of these coins struck and issued by the *comitatus* mint in Late Antiquity. Although more coins will be found in the future, the relative scarcity of late Roman solidi from within the empire strongly suggests an efficient taxation system.

²⁶ Hendy M. 1985, p. 257; Reece R. 1987, p. 125–126.

²⁷ Senators were able to spend large quantities of solidi on games and other events to celebrate the nomination of imperial offices, and several wealthy Romans women as well as men, donated considerable sums of gold to the church. Hendy M. 1985, p. 92–203; Jones A. H. M. 1964, p. 537–559.

²⁸ Blockley R. C. 1983, frs 23.1; 23.2 and 9.1.

crossed the Danube into Attila's possession. The size of the actual payments and the form that these took are not mentioned in the surviving fragments of Priscus' account, though he does give some clues to what happened to Roman gold once in the Hun king's possession.

Priscus describes how Onegesius (the Hun nobleman mentioned earlier), after being asked to free the wife and children of a Roman, "dismissed" the wife for 500 solidi and sent the children to the emperor as a gift.²⁹ This, and other references, indicate that gold coins could be owned and exchanged by Huns other than the king and his immediate family, thus enabling members of Hun society to redistribute gold more widely than was possible within the Roman Empire. It is likely that Roman gold would have been paid in solidi and bullion bars, much of which was probably melted down and made into forms more popular with Hun society, such as jewellery and tableware. Priscus describes the Huns using gold and silver goblets at a banquet held by Attila in honour of the Roman ambassador, while the plainness of the king's clothes and weapons is contrasted with the highly decorated aristocracy.³⁰ Such feasts for Attila's many kinsmen and dependents were an effective method of ensuring that Roman wealth was consumed as conspicuously as possible among the Hun royal court and nobility.

The Szikáncsi hoard and the circulation of solidi by weight

Echoes of the negotiations between Romans and Huns in the first part of the fifth century can be found in the archaeological record, in particular the hoards and single finds of Roman solidi from the far side of the middle and lower Danube. Although the evidence from Hungary and Romania is less abundant than the quantities quoted by Priscus would lead us to believe crossed the imperial frontiers, the surviving fifth-century solidi from within the empire as well as barbarian lands have a significant contribution to make to our knowledge of high-value coin use in Late Antiquity. Not surprisingly, the evidence generally appears to support many of Priscus' observations.

The hoard of 1,439 solidi from Szikáncsi, east of the Tisza near Hódmezővásárhely in southern Hungary, is very likely a part of one of the tribute payments sent to Attila in the 440s. The Szikáncsi find consisted almost entirely of solidi struck for Theodosius II (1,434 were struck in Constantinople), including 247 of the IMP XXXXII COS XVII PP issue produced between 441 and 444 that provides the *terminus post quem* for the hoard's burial. All the gold coins are in mint condition and there are many die-links within the various issues, supporting the observation that these solidi must have arrived directly from the imperial treasury and had not been mixed with other coins before or after their arrival and deposition in southern Hungary.³¹

The Szikáncsi solidi weigh almost exactly twenty pounds of gold, which, although a considerable sum, still represents only one per cent of the annual tribute payments demanded by Attila in the treaty signed in 447.³² This gives a very clear impression of the enormous scale of the gold paid to the Huns during the middle decades of the fifth century and, although we cannot be certain that the sums described by Priscus were always fully paid (and Attila's

²⁹ Blockley R. C. 1983, fr. 14, p. 19–26.

³⁰ Blockley R. C. 1983, fr. 13.1. Thompson believed the sedentary, highly decorated and lengthy nature of the banquet indicates direct Roman cultural influence. Thompson E. A. 1948, p. 169–171.

³¹ Biró Sey K. 1976.

³² The aggregate weight of 6,446 g of the Szikáncsi solidi equates to 19.96 pounds at 322.6 g to a Roman pound. This assumes that the figure of 322.6 g to a Roman pound is correct, though the numismatic and archaeological evidence from Pompeii and Herculaneum suggests that this is more accurate than alternative figures put forward in the past, some of which were calculated using limited evidence. For recent discussions of the weight of the Roman *libra* see: Duncan-Jones R. 1994, p. 213–215; Duncan-Jones R. 1987, p. 249–256; Duncan-Jones R. 2003.

complaints about unpaid tribute suggest they were not), the Szikáncsi hoard shows how little of the vast quantities of gold paid to the Huns survives in the archaeological record.³³ The twenty pounds of solidi buried together at Szikáncsi also are significant because the find indicates that, once outside the Roman Empire, solidi continued to be used by weight as they circulated among Hun society. That these coins could be used also as individual coins (or as $\frac{1}{72}$ of a pound of gold) is shown by the many examples of single solidi of Theodosius II's IMP XXXXII COS XVII PP and VOT XXX MVLT XXXX issues from Constantinople recorded from Hungary and Romania, and which also probably originated from the tribute paid to the Huns.³⁴

Therefore, we have the clear impression that Roman solidi circulated among barbarian societies by weight and also that they were redistributed in increasingly smaller quantities, even as single coins, over a very large area beyond the empire's frontiers. The use of solidi as gold bullion of a known weight and guaranteed purity, rather than as coins with monetary value, is demonstrated by the small hoard from Dolhești, also in Romanian Moldova, which contained about twenty gold coins of the fourth to sixth centuries joined by a gold chain, and the fourteen gold multiples found near Șimleul Silvaniei in Transylvania, some of which had been reused as pieces of jewellery and were found together with numerous other gold objects.³⁵

Significantly, the deposition of gold solidi by weight is a notable feature of many other hoards of the fourth, and particularly, fifth centuries, though the extent and significance of this pattern was recognised only recently.³⁶ Table 1 presents a sample of fourteen published solidus hoards collected to illustrate this phenomenon, while Table 2 shows the same hoards arranged by size.

The four largest of these hoards consist of multiples of more-or-less whole Roman pounds of gold solidi, while the smaller hoards appear to contain certain fractions of Roman pounds or multiples of these fractions. This pattern becomes even clearer when the solidi from each hoard are weighed together and converted to their bullion weight.³⁷ The Chemtou, Szikáncsi and Hoxne solidi weigh (almost) 23 lb, 20 lb and 8 lb respectively, while the Dortmund hoard contains exactly 6 lb of gold. The contents of the Dortmund find demonstrate that whoever buried these 443 solidi together must have received (or collected) gold by weight (*al marco*) rather than as individual coins (*al pezzo*). At first glance the Dortmund hoard appears to contain eleven solidi too many for six Roman pounds of 72 coins, but because the average weight of all the hoard's solidi is significantly lower than the theoretical weight standard, these extra eleven coins were needed to make up a full 6 lb of gold metal.³⁸

³³ A hoard found in 1916 from Hodora near Iași in Romanian Moldova is said to have contained 20,000 gold coins and stamped ingots, presumably of the fourth or fifth centuries. Unfortunately, the hoard was dispersed before the coins were recorded and we cannot be certain of its exact size or date. However, it must have contained somewhere in the region of 240 to 280 pounds of gold and a tribute payment seems the most likely explanation for the presence of such a large collection of solidi so far from Roman territory (though whether to the Huns in the 430s or 440s, or other barbarians cannot be proved). Duncan G. 1993, p. 109 and p. 119; Mihăilescu–Birliba V. 1980, no. 127

³⁴ Duncan G. 1993, p. 24–5 and p. 119–22.

³⁵ Duncan G. 1993, p. 119; Mihăilescu–Birliba V. 1980 no. 87.

³⁶ Duncan G. 1993, p. 14; Duncan–Jones R. 2003; Guest P. 2005, p. 26 and p. 39–40; Hendy M. 1985, p. 342–343.

³⁷ See fn. 32.

³⁸ This is because Roman coins, like all coinages in the ancient world, were lighter on average than their theoretical weights and, consequently, slightly overvalued. For example, the 579 solidi from the Hoxne Treasure contain three coins too many to equal 8 lb of gold, but because their average weight is slightly less than $\frac{1}{72}$ lb, when they are weighed together their combined weight is just over half a solidus more than 8 lb. The average weight of the Dortmund solidi is 4.37 g, significantly less than the solidi from Hoxne (4.46 g). Guest P. 2005, p. 39–40.

Hoard	Provenance	Closing date	Contents
Corbridge ³⁹	England	c. 384/5.	47 solidi and 1 multiple
Romuliana ⁴⁰	Serbia	c. 388	99 solidi
“Italy” hoard ⁴¹	Italy?	388–392	116 solidi and 14 siliquae
Parma ⁴²	Italy	c. 395–400	265 solidi
Beilen ⁴³	The Netherlands	c. 400	24 solidi
Caesarea ⁴⁴	Israel	395–402	99 solidi
Hoxne ⁴⁵	England	407/8	579 solidi
Dortmund ⁴⁶	Germany	407/8	443 solidi
Chécy ⁴⁷	France	c. 420	24 solidi
Chemtou ⁴⁸	Tunisia	c. 420	1648 solidi
Szikáncsi	Hungary	444/5	1439 solidi
Bina ⁴⁹	Slovakia	c. 440–445	108 solidi
Combertault ⁵⁰	France	450+	96 solidi
Djemila ⁵¹	Algeria	c. 495/6	180 solidi

Table 1. Solidus hoards from the late fourth and fifth centuries arranged by date.

The remaining solidus hoards all consist of $\frac{1}{3}$ lb or $\frac{1}{2}$ lb of gold, or multiples of these fractions. Thus, the Beilen and Chécy solidi weigh $\frac{1}{3}$ lb, the Corbridge coins $\frac{2}{3}$ lb, Combertault, Caesarea and Romuliana $1\frac{1}{3}$ lb and the Parma solidi $3\frac{2}{3}$ lb, whereas the Bina and Djemila hoards contain multiples of $\frac{1}{2}$ lb ($1\frac{1}{2}$ lb and $2\frac{1}{2}$ lb respectively). The so-called “Italy” hoard is the only example that, initially, does not seem to follow this pattern of hoarding solidi by the Roman pound (the 116 solidi together weigh 1.59 lb). Unusually, however, this hoard also contained fourteen siliquae, which together weigh 28.8 g. When these silver coins are added to the solidi the total weight of the hoard’s coins is 541.87 g, or the equivalent of 1.68 Roman pounds. This could be a coincidence, but if it is not then the “Italy” hoard appears to be a rare example of silver coins added to a group of solidi in order to

³⁹ Discovered in 1911. Grueber H. A. 1913.

⁴⁰ Jovanovic A. and Lalovic A. 1993. They suggest the hoard comprises *donativa* of $\frac{1}{8}$ Roman pound for a detachment of 10 men and their officer.

⁴¹ Bastien P. 1981. The hoard’s provenance is unknown, but is believed to be Italian.

⁴² Grierson Ph. and Mays M. 1992, p. 278–295.

⁴³ Van Der Vin J. P. A. 1988. Twenty-two coins were found in 1995 in the grounds of a dairy farm, while another coin was discovered in 1985 among garden soil moved there from the same farm in 1954. A coin found in 1845, but subsequently lost, probably belonged to this hoard. Other finds included 5 gold necklaces and a gold bracelet.

⁴⁴ Lampinen P. 1999. The coins were found in the socket of a large millstone buried beneath a mosaic in a roadside courtyard house.

⁴⁵ Guest P. 2005. The solidi were found together with 60 *miliarenses*, at least 14,565 *siliquae*, five half-*siliquae* and 24 bronze coins. The solidi were held probably in a bag or other organic container and had been placed in a wooden chest together with the other coins and 29 pieces of gold jewellery and 124 items of silver tableware.

⁴⁶ FMRD 6.5 no. 5020. The hoard also included a ‘broken’ gold imitation solidus and sixteen barbarous silver coins.

⁴⁷ Lafaurie J. 1958. The solidi were found together with a silver chip-carved belt buckle and plate, as well as a ‘porte-anneau’.

⁴⁸ ‘Coin Hoards 1994’, Numismatic Chronicle 154, p. 268–269.

⁴⁹ Kolníková E. 1968. The coins were found in a pot placed in a large pit full of stones and capped by another large stone. The latest coins included issues of Valentinian III (53), Honoria (1) and Eudocia (1).

⁵⁰ Lafaurie J. 1984.

⁵¹ Morrison C. 1987.

make a predetermined weight, and it seems that someone had used silver coins, possibly fraudulently, to make up a collection of gold solidi to 1²/₃ lb.

Hoard	Solidi	Solidus lb [†]	Weight (g)	Weight (lb)	Intended lb?	Actual-intended weight (g)	Actual-intended weight (solidi)
Chemtou	1648	22.89	–	–	23.00	–	–8*
Szikáncsi	1439	19.99	6446.00	19.98	20.00	–6.00	–1.34
Hoxne	579	8.04	2583.30	8.01	8.00	2.50	0.56
Dortmund	443	6.15	1936.99	6.00	6.00	1.39	0.31
Parma	265	3.68	–	–	3.66	–	1*
Djemila	180	2.50	–	–	2.50	–	0*
“Italy”**	116	1.61	513.07	1.59	1.66	–22.45	–5.01
Bina	108	1.50	482.00	1.49	1.50	–1.90	–0.42
Romuliana	99	1.38	–	–	1.33	–	3*
Caesarea	99	1.38	439.92	1.36	1.33	10.86	2.42
Combertault	96	1.33	–	–	1.33	–	0*
Corbridge	48	0.67	213.66	0.66	0.66	0.74	0.17
Chécy	24	0.33	105.23	0.33	0.33	–1.23	–0.27
Beilen	24	0.33	107.07	0.33	0.33	0.61	0.14

Table 2. Solidus hoards from the late fourth and fifth centuries arranged by size: [†] “pounds” of multiples or fractions of 72 solidi; * no weights recorded for these hoards, so values based on ‘pounds’ of 72 solidi; ** the additional 14 siliquae together weigh 28.8 g, giving a total weight of all coins from the “Italy” hoard of 541.87 g; this is only 6.35 g, or 1.42 solidi (at the theoretical weight of 4.48 g) more than 1.66 Roman pounds.

The circulation, use and deposition of Roman solidi in the fourth and fifth centuries

The contemporary historian Priscus describes how tribute payments to the Huns in the 430s and 440s were measured in pounds of gold, while the hoards of later fourth and fifth century solidi discussed above indicate that these gold coins were hoarded, on at least 14 occasions, also by weight. These observations demonstrate that late Roman solidi served as bullion (i.e. a commodity) rather than units of currency to be used primarily in commercial exchange (i.e. money). To what extent, however, should these few hoards describe the circulation of gold in Late Antiquity when they must represent only a tiny fraction of the solidi struck in the century or so between 380 and 500? We know that Roman emperors regularly issued vast quantities of solidi to commemorate special occasions such as imperial anniversaries and that the main beneficiaries of this largesse were the Roman aristocracy and soldiers (the elite would probably have received their coin in bags such as those depicted around the ceremonial codicil of the *Comes Sacrarum Largitionum* in the medieval copies of the *Notitia Dignitatum*). Solidi were given to soldiers as donatives and the size of the imperial military and civil services suggests that several millions of gold coins were required to meet these imperial obligations throughout the later fourth and fifth centuries.

However, the archaeological evidence appears to be almost entirely at odds with this impression of millions of solidi circulating in the late Roman world. Roger Bland’s survey of Roman gold and silver coins from AD 300 to 500 assembled just under 300 hoards from the empire and beyond (including the former USSR and the Yemen); an impressive sample, which, however, represents only one-and-a-half hoards per year.⁵² Richard Hobbs’ more

⁵² Bland R. 1997.

general study of late Roman precious metal finds showed that very few gold coins have been recovered and reported from most regions within and outside the empire.⁵³ The obvious exception is Britain where more hoards and single finds of solidi struck between 395 and 411 are known than from any other part of the Late Antique world.⁵⁴ Some 40 hoards including solidi of the late fourth and fifth centuries are known from Britain, yet together these contain fewer than 2,000 coins (or less than 26 Roman pounds).⁵⁵

From the archaeological evidence alone it would be hard to avoid concluding that late Roman solidi did not circulate in any great quantities because the imperial government did not produce many of these coins in the first place. Fortunately, Roman writers describe an entirely different world and it seems more likely that the relative scarcity of fourth and fifth century solidi is a result of these coins not being deposited in the ground rather than limited production. Priscus would not have recognised a society without the large quantities of gold and other highly valuable commodities available to the wealthy in Roman society. The absence of solidi and other precious metal objects from Italy and Gaul in the fifth century suggests either a taxation system that was extremely efficient, the recycling of surplus solidi for private use (as gold or decorated jewellery, tableware, religious items, furniture, etc.), or a combination of these explanations.

The hoards from outside the Roman Empire are most likely the surviving remnants of tribute payments made to rulers such as Attila and others by both eastern and western Roman emperors. In several cases, notably Szikáncsi and Bina, this is the only interpretation that explains the condition of the coins and the die-links between them. Significantly, Romania and, to a lesser extent, Hungary have produced finds of single solidi of the same issues of Theodosius II and Valentinian III present in hoards of the mid-fifth century.⁵⁶ A solidus was a valuable object and perhaps these single finds should be considered hoards in themselves – considerable wealth and cultural meaning in a single coin.

The archaeological material discussed in this article suggests that gold was redistributed further down Hun society than was the case in the Roman world, where the imperial court sought to monopolize access to precious metals, particularly gold. Presumably much of the gold that was sent from the empire to the Huns in tribute payments was melted down and recycled to produce objects more useful in their culture, though the number of hoards of solidi known from beyond the Danube frontier reveals that Roman gold in the form of coin continued to circulate among barbarian societies as valuable objects too. It is significant that the hoards known today are all very small in comparison to the volume of gold that historians such as Priscus suggest were transferred to the Huns, perhaps indicating that kings such as Attila and their elites were able to consume and reuse Roman gold more efficiently than lesser nobles and others lower down Hun society.

Either way, the discovery of fifth century solidus hoards in significant numbers outside the empire suggests a cultural willingness in barbarian societies to deposit Roman gold coins in the ground. This pattern contrasts with the situation within the Roman Empire where fewer hoards and single finds of gold solidi are known, indicating different cultural attitudes on either side of the imperial frontiers. Within the empire gold served fiscal as well as social functions and the use of solidi as donatives, formal gifts and tax payments would have resulted in gold coins circulating rapidly around the Roman world, actively serving different functions at various stages in their use-lives. In areas beyond imperial control,

⁵³ Hobbs R. 2006, p. 51–73.

⁵⁴ Bland R. 1997; Hobbs R. 2006; Kent J. P. C. 1994, lxxxviii–cxvi.

⁵⁵ The three largest hoards from Eye, Hoxne and Cleeve Prior alone contain almost 1,700 solidi. I am grateful to Nick Wells for this information.

⁵⁶ See fn. 34.

however, solidi did not circulate within the type of closed high-value economic system like that operated and maintained by the Count of the Sacred Largesses on the emperor's behalf. Among tribes such as the Huns solidi effectively had nowhere to go except downwards into the more numerous and geographically scattered levels of barbarian society and, without the ability to recycle and reissue gold, the solidus became an immobilised part of Hun culture whose value must have decreased each time a new tribute payment arrived in Attila's court.

Obviously these concluding thoughts and ideas are speculative, but I hope that by bringing together the complementary archaeological and historical sources in an attempt to create a more inclusive narrative, they offer an alternative understanding of the role of gold in Roman and barbarian societies in Late Antiquity. New finds and further analysis will show if this informed speculation has any lasting value, but it is clear that, like Priscus, late Roman solidi have fascinating stories to tell about the history of Europe in the turbulent years of the fifth century.

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Most contributions and abstracts included in this volume are papers which were presented at an Exploratory Workshop held September 2005 in the Radziwiłł Palace at Nieborów near Warsaw. Different patterns of influx and use of Roman Coins in barbarian territories are analysed in 37 contributions, written by 39 ancient historians, numismatists and archaeologists from 16 countries. In this way the entire territory outside the borders of the Roman Empire, which received Roman coinage, is covered, reaching from Scotland to Sri Lanka and from Scandinavia to Africa.

Die meisten Beiträge und Abstracts in dem vorliegenden Band basieren auf Vorträgen, die im September 2005 auf einer wissenschaftlichen Tagung in Schloss Radziwiłł bei Nieborow in der Nähe von Warschau gehalten wurden. Unterschiedliche Muster des Zuflusses und der Verwendung römischer Münzen in den barbarischen Gebieten werden in den 37 Beiträgen von 39 Autoren – Althistorikern, Numismatikern und Archäologen aus sechzehn Ländern – analysiert. Es wurden sämtliche Gebiete außerhalb der Grenzen des Römischen Reiches einbezogen, in denen römische Münzen umliefen, von Schottland bis Sri Lanka und von Skandinavien bis Nordafrika.



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