

The discovery of a Roman villa at Shapwick and its Severan coin hoard of 9238 silver *denarii*

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A. THE SITE AND THE DISCOVERY OF THE HOARD (R. A. Brunning and C. J. Webster)

The site (map ref. ST4242 3951) lies on a small line of hills called the Nidons, which run E-W along the N edge of the Polden ridge in mid Somerset (fig. 1). The crest of one of the Nidon 'hills' runs across the centre of the field containing the site. To the north, the land slopes down to the floodplain of the river Brue, which in the Roman period would have been a raised bog. To the south, the land dips slightly before rising again towards the top of the Polden ridge. The local geology is Jurassic Lower Lias, which is clay with some limestone; the soil (Evesham 1) is a well-drained calcareous clay.

On September 14, 1998, two metal detectorists, Martin and Kevin Elliot,¹ found a very large hoard of Roman silver *denarii* in a ploughed field on this ridge in Shapwick parish.² The first coin find was made at the N edge of the field.³ The same plough furrow was then followed south across the field, yielding small numbers of coins until a group of about 70 coins was found; after half an hour the main body of coins was discovered quite close to the group of 70. The distribution of the coins across the field shows that the hoard had suffered considerable plough damage but some 9000 coins were still *in situ* with the corrosion products on their surfaces still intact (by contrast, the coins which had been moved by the plough had lost their corroded outer layers and therefore appeared cleaner). No photographs or other records were taken by the finders before they removed the coins,⁴ but their verbal description has proved useful. In the undisturbed main body the coins appeared to be arranged in neat individual rows on their sides, suggesting that they may have been deposited in small coin rolls or individually wrapped bundles made of an organic material such as textile or leather (since decayed). The individual rolls were probably contained within a larger sack also made of organic material (the roughly circular shape of the hoard argues against the use of a wooden box).

- 1 Although the former was experienced in the use of the metal-detecting equipment, it was the first time that the latter had been engaged in this activity. The barley stubble field in which the hoard was found belongs to his family's farm and had recently been purchased after 36 years of tenancy.
- 2 In November 1999 the coins were declared as treasure at a coroner's inquest in Taunton and have been purchased with grants from Somerset County Council, National Heritage Memorial Fund, National Art Collections Fund (The Art Fund), and Resource/V&A Purchase Grant Fund by the Somerset County Museums Service, accession number TTNCM 124/2000. Since then periodic, but intensive, metal detecting has taken place, and this has resulted in the discovery of a further 23 coins from the hoard, which were subject to a second Treasure Inquest held in August 2000. These further coins are included in the list presented by R. Abdy below. The small number of coins found during the more recent detecting suggests that very few coins remain to be discovered.
- 3 In fact, the first coin from the hoard was a *denarius* of Mark Antony found in 1995 during field walking by the Shapwick Valley Project (see n. 14 below). Since that project did not use metal detectors, the true significance of the coin was not realised and the hoard remained undiscovered for a further three years.
- 4 Hoards are at their most vulnerable during the initial stages of their discovery since considerable information can be gained by a full archaeological investigation. A good example is the Hoxne treasure (cf. *JRA* 6 [1993] 493-96; a full catalogue by P. Guest and C. Johns is in preparation): in that case archaeologists were called to the scene the same day that the hoard was found and with much of it still in the ground, thus enabling them to record where, and in what order, each object was placed in its container, and to discover some rarely discerned organic materials. In the case of Shapwick, the coins were bagged up by the finders in batches of one hundred and each bag was numbered, enabling the coins to be placed in their approximate vertical context, though in the event there proved to be no discernable differentiation between the top and bottom coins of the hoard. The coins were immediately removed in two heavy (c.27 kg) bucketfuls and the finders promptly reported the discovery to the local coroner's office. [R.A.]