

# Avar and Slav invasions into the Balkan peninsula (c.575-625): the nature of the numismatic evidence

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## Introduction: the problem

If we did not know already, from the comments of Byzantine chroniclers, about the settlement of Slavonic tribes in the Balkans in the late 6th and early 7th c., could we have deduced or even suspected such momentous events from the evidence of coin finds? Did the invasions of the Kutrigurs, Avars and Slavs result in such clear-cut changes in the pattern of coin-hoarding, stray losses of coinage, and the work of the Byzantine mints, that we can identify particular moments when various provinces were overrun? Or is the numismatic evidence merely illustrative? When scholars point to discontinuities and other unexpected features in it, and link them with recorded historical events, are they creating genuinely new conclusions, or are they merely pretending that x points to y thanks to the benefit of prior knowledge?

The task of judging what constitutes historical proof of a rigorous nature is not to be avoided by heaping up evidence. All over Europe historians of the early middle ages have in the last few decades witnessed a dramatic growth in early mediaeval archaeology. In a field where, almost by definition, documentary evidence is patchy or non-existent, and where one tries perforce to take an interest in whatever else there is — archaeology, numismatics, place-name studies, local history — there is an exhilarating wealth of new material information. Some of it comes from excavations carefully structured towards the answering of questions; much of it is quite unexpected, and raises more questions than it answers. The accession of new data is so lavish that often it feels more like a tenfold increase in understanding than a doubling: the past is a foreign country, which one had read about, but now one is actually seeing it. One is learning a great deal, of course, by becoming familiar with the new material, but is one, in the end, any better than a tourist?

So far as the ever-growing body of numismatic information is concerned, the historian who wishes to judge its evidential value for himself, point by point, will be well advised to return to first principles, and to bear them in mind when he is inspecting claims of relevance. It is more profitable to do this than to spend all one's time keeping up with the latest discoveries.

## Three categories of numismatic evidence

Three straightforward examples will help us characterize the three standard arguments, and to recognize that there are logical limits to what they can prove. Those limits are essentially statistical, because the arguments are grounded in probability.

### 1. *Coin hoards concealed in or about 615-16*

An article published 30 years ago presented a map of the Aegean showing the location of a dozen hoards all concealed in or about 615-16.<sup>1</sup> The argument was that such an unusual concentration or clustering of hoards within a short space of time implied some severe threat to the region — and that an explanation was readily forthcoming, from documentary sources referring to a Slavonic occupation of Greece etc. at just that date. The force of the argument depended on the number of the hoards, and on the extent to which each of them could be closely dated. That in turn must depend partly on the size of the hoards: the *terminus post quem* provided by the latest coin may, simply by chance, be too early if a hoard consists of only a tiny handful of pieces. We need to be satisfied, also, that later coins were reasonably plentiful in the region, and thus were available to enter into a hoard, if it had been concealed for example

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<sup>1</sup> D. M. Metcalf, "The Aegean coastlands under threat: some coins and coin hoards from the reign of Heraclius," *BSA* 57 (1962) 14-23.