

Late-Roman silver plate: a reply to Alan Cameron

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In 1983 I tried to formulate some of the problems of late-Roman silver plate and its relationship to the contemporary society and economy. My starting-points were the 5 surviving major hoards (Chaourse, Mildenhall, Esquiline, Kaiseraugst, and Carthage) and the results of the major scientific examination of late-Roman silver which was put in hand by the British Museum Research Laboratory in 1977.¹ The particular questions that I raised were, first, what was the significance of such plate, either as individual pieces or as hoards, in its historical and social context, and, second, what was the significance of the most startling scientific result, the consistently and impracticably high silver content of the metal, at 96-98%.

Ten years have passed since I wrote my paper, and C. Johns has shown recently in this journal how perceptions of late-Roman silver have developed, particularly as a result of the publication of the Kaiseraugst treasure, of the reassessments of the Kaper Koraon treasure and of the silver from Gaul, and of the discovery of the Seuso treasure.² It is now obvious, for example, that the artistically inferior 3rd-c. Chaourse treasure belongs to a quite different economic and social context from that of the treasures of the next two centuries.³ My views of 1983, therefore, are outdated, and their main interest now is as an attempt to define problems, to most of which there are still no firm solutions.⁴ I am delighted to find that Alan Cameron has taken up the challenge of my hypotheses.⁵ There is much in my previous paper which I would not now attempt to defend, and there is much in his paper which I accept and which I think advances the subject. Nevertheless, there is still no definitive statement on the topic, not that made by Cameron in his paper, nor that made by myself in my review of the publication of the Kaiseraugst treasure.⁶ I hope that we are at a beginning of a debate, and so here I shall do no more than comment on some aspects of Cameron's thesis that silver plate was "not all that valuable" and that owners of surviving plate were not of high status.

Silver content of late-Roman silver plate

Cameron dismisses as irrelevant my arguments about the results of the scientific examination, which show the silver content for late-Roman plate to be consistently in the range 96-98%, with no significant outliers.⁷ The problem, however, is that the high silver content precludes a satisfactory compromise between various incompatible needs, such as that the metal should be an alloy which is of high value, that it should be capable of carrying a good-looking result, and that it should be easy for the craftsmen to work. The high value of the alloy was achieved; but the silver would have been easier to work if the copper content had been greater. Very fine silver is too plastic and malleable to be formed satisfactorily into the fine or delicate features needed for vessel work. A product made of silver which is too fine would be likely also to suffer even between the bench and handing over to the customer, quite apart from every time it was used. Practical silversmiths, therefore, would not choose to work with silver which was 96-98% pure. Roman silversmiths were not bound to this level by any lack of skill, as is shown by the moneyers' sophisticated manipulation of the silver content of the silver coinage,⁸ but nevertheless, the silversmiths persisted with the 96-98% standard for plate in spite of the disadvantages. Why? The

1 Painter 1988, "Roman silver hoards: ownership and status," in Baratte 1988, 97-112.

2 Johns 1990. Kaiseraugst: Cahn and Kaufmann-Heinimann 1984. Kaper Koraon: Mango 1986. Gaul: Baratte and Painter 1989. Seuso: Mango 1990a, 1990b, 1991; Nagy and Tóth 1990; Cahn *et al.* 1991.

3 Baratte 1988, 20-21, 35. Baratte in Baratte and Painter 1989, esp. 77-79 and 255-56. Baratte 1990, 102.

4 For previous criticism of my 1983 paper see Johns 1990, 35-36.

5 "Observations on the distribution and ownership of late Roman silver plate," *JRA* 5 (1992) 178-85.

6 *BonnJbb* 191 (1991) 777-91.

7 Hughes and Hall 1976; Hughes *et al.* 1989.

8 See, for example, Casey 1980, 8; Burnett 1987, 112-13; and Reece 1987, 7-12.