

Three late Roman gold solidi from Lincoln

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Traditionally, history textbooks present the end of Roman Britain as occurring in AD410. In reality the situation is far more complicated, and far more interesting, than that. The big question about the end of Roman Britain basically comes down to how long a Roman way of life continued after the withdrawal of Rome's official support systems.

These three gold coins, all in superb condition, are of a denomination known as a solidus. They were discovered together by a metal detector user and seem to have formed part of a small hoard, perhaps contained together in a bag. The coins range from AD378 to AD392, and represent some of the last official coinage to enter Britannia.

The chronology of the later Roman Emperors is far more complicated than their predecessors of the 1st and 2nd Centuries, as these coins attest. The coins were struck at a time when the eastern and western elements of the Roman Empire had split, and combinations of co-emperors and junior Emperors were common.

Coins 1 and 2 were produced at a time (AD378-AD383) when the Emperor Gratian was ruling the western Empire with his younger half brother Valentinian II, but had given control of the eastern Empire to Theodosius I, a general who had served in Britain. They are struck in the names of Gratian and Theodosius I.

Coin 3 is slightly later in date (AD388-AD392), and was produced after Gratian had been killed, and when Theodosius I had named his son Arcadius co-Emperor in the east. It is struck in Valentinian II's name.

Despite the changes in Emperors, the coins all bear the same reverse image – that of two emperors holding a globe between them while an angel looks over them (this being the time of the Christian Emperors the winged figure is an angel rather than 'victory'). This image of peace and harmony was no doubt not taken too literally by the people living in an age of uncertainty and strife.

The coins were purchased by the museum with the kind assistance of The Art Fund and the Friends of Lincoln Museums and Art Gallery.

Acknowledgements

The contents of this paper have drawn research from the Coroner's report for this treasure item, produced by the British Museum.

