

A Day at the Museum – Part (ii)

Moving The Shillington Hoard

Gary Oddie

On Tuesday 15th August the author and two members of the Bedford Numismatic Society (Nigel Lutt, treasurer and Simon Rowley, secretary) visited The Culture Trust's second venue at the Stockwood Discovery Centre (Luton Museum). Along with examining the Bedford Mint pennies on display and making the elongated penny noted previously⁽¹⁾ the main motive was to help the curator (Elise Naish) with the safe relocation of the Shillington hoard and other items on display.

It was a privilege to be asked, and the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity could not be missed. It is also pleasing to note such a constructive interaction between a Museum and a Numismatic Society.

Rather than going straight to the move, it is probably easiest to start at the beginning.

In late 1998, two local metal detectorists, Shane Pyper and Simon Leete, working with the permission and an agreement with the landowner, made a series of finds on land north of Pegsdon Common Farm, near Shillington, Bedfordshire. The finds were reported to Gil(bert) Burleigh (Keeper of Field Archaeology for North Hertfordshire District Council Museums) and in turn to the Bedfordshire Coroner and the British Museum. Two separate coin hoards can be found in the 1998-1999 Treasure Annual Report (pp.109-110).⁽²⁾

283 Shillington A, Bedfordshire (Figs. 283.1-13)

Deposited: About AD 79

Finders: Messrs S Pyper and S Leete

Date of discovery: 123 coins found in October 1998; 4 found in September 1999

Circumstances of discovery: While searching with metal-detectors.

Description: 127 gold *aurei*:

Tiberius (AD 14–37), 3 (fig. 283.2)

Claudius I (AD 41–54), 5 (fig. 283.3)

Nero Caesar, 3 (fig. 283.4)

Nero (AD 54–68), 64 (figs. 283.5-7)

Galba (AD 68–69), 1 (fig. 283.8)

Otho (AD 69), 2 (fig. 283.9)

Vitellius (AD 69), 1 (fig. 283.10)

Vespasian (AD 69–79), 22 (fig. 283.11)

Titus Caesar, 15 (fig. 283.12)

Domitian Caesar, 11 (fig. 283.13)

Note: The relationship between this hoard and the hoard of *denarii* found by Messrs Pyper and Leete in the same place and on the same occasions is not certain (see below, no. 284). The *denarii* may comprise a number of smaller deposits rather than one hoard.

Disposition: Luton Museum

Valuation: £200,000

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(fig. 283.1) Shillington



(fig. 293.2-13)

284 Shillington B, Bedfordshire

Deposited: About AD 128

Finders: Messrs S Pyper and S Leete

Date of discovery: 7 coins found in October 1998 and a further 11 in September 1999

Circumstances of discovery: While searching with metal-detectors.

Description: 18 silver denarii:

Republic (10):

Cn Domit (about 128BC), 1

M Porc Laeca (about 125BC), 1

C Vibius C f Pansa (about 90BC), 1

Q Anto Balb Pr (about 83BC), 1

C Nae Balb (about 79BC), 1

Mn Aquillius Mn f Mn III Vir (about 71BC), 1

T Carisius III Vir (about 46BC), 1

C Considius Paetus (about 46BC), 1

Caesar (about 49-48BC), 1

Mark Antony (32-31BC), 1

Imperial (8):

Augustus (27 BC–AD 14), 2

Nero (AD 54–68), 1

Vitellius (AD 69), 1

Vespasian (AD 69–79), 3

Hadrian (AD 117–138), 1

Note: See note on previous find.

Disposition: Luton Museum

Valuation: £4,500

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The following year, the two detectorists made a further find along with non-metallic surface finds. The 2000 Treasure Annual Report has the following entry (pp15-16)⁽³⁾:

7 Shillington, Bedfordshire: Iron Age silver brooch, bronze mirror and pottery fragments (P&EE 79) (Fig. 7)

Date: 1st century BC

Finders: Messrs S Pyper and S Leete

Date of discovery: 12 November 2000

Circumstances of discovery: While searching with metal-detectors.

Description: (1) Silver *Knotenfibulabrooch* in two pieces. (2) Decorated bronze mirror with handle. (3) Thirty pieces of pottery from a pedestal urn, flat based jars and other vessels.

Discussion: All these objects were found in close proximity and probably come from a disturbed grave. Cremation burials became a common way to bury the dead in parts of south-east England in the 1st Century BC. Most graves contain pottery vessels used for drinking or eating. The richer graves sometimes contain decorated bronze mirrors. Silver brooches are very rare finds from Iron Age Britain, and only about nine or ten others are known. They all appear to have come from burials and are very similar in shape to this brooch.

Dating to the middle of the 1st Century BC (the archaeological period known as La Tène D2), these safety-pin type brooches all have a decorative collar or boss in the middle of the bow, and are often called *Knotenfibula*. The Shillington brooch is very similar to the two pairs of silver brooches found at Great Chesterford, Essex.

The mirror is one of the finest examples of a decorated Iron Age bronze mirror found in recent years. It is constructed from three parts; the circular mirror plate, the handle and decorative ring on the bottom of the mirror plate near the handle. The back of the mirror was decorated with an abstract curving La Tène or 'Early Celtic' design. The design consists of repeated circular ovals and arches of similar sizes in-filled with a fine basket-weave of engraved or chased marks to make the design stand out. The front of the mirror would be plain and polished for seeing the reflection in. This mirror is well preserved, except for the major tear in the top made when it was found. Decorated bronze mirrors are a uniquely British object. About thirty examples are known. Many are stray finds, but those found in archaeological investigations usually come from burials. A number of decorated mirrors have been found in south-east England, including examples from Aston (Hertfordshire), Dorton (Buckinghamshire), Chilham (Kent), Great Chesterford (Essex), Colchester (Essex) and Old Warden (Bedfordshire).

Decorated bronze mirrors were made and used for at least 150 years from about 100 BC to AD 50. This is one of the earliest dating mirrors so far found.

Dimensions and metal content: (1) Length when complete: 72mm. X-ray fluorescence analysis conducted at the British Museum indicated an approximate silver content of 85 per cent. (2) Mirror diameter: 199mm; handle length: 132mm.

Disposition: Luton Museum and Art Gallery hopes to acquire this find.

J D HILL



(fig. 7) Shillington

On page 133 of the report a valuation of £35,000 is given.

A report from Heritage Gateway and The Historic Environment Record for Bedfordshire puts all three finds in the context of the local history, archaeology and landscape.⁽⁴⁾

“A complex agglomeration of irregular enclosures including a broad-ditched circular enclosure with central feature adjacent to the stream. The enclosures are thought to represent Iron Age, Roman and medieval field systems. Iron Age & Roman sherds, tile and quernstones have been found during fieldwalking. Metal detecting has found a late Iron Age mirror, two silver brooches and two groups of Roman coins, one hoard of 127 gold coins deposited c.80 AD, and a group of silver coins dating from the reign of Hadrian (117-138 AD). The gold coins have been interpreted as evidence of payment to a local client chief or king, and the mirror and brooches are thought to have come from a high-status burial.”

All three groups of items were bought by Luton Museum and ultimately placed on permanent display at Stockwood Discovery Centre.

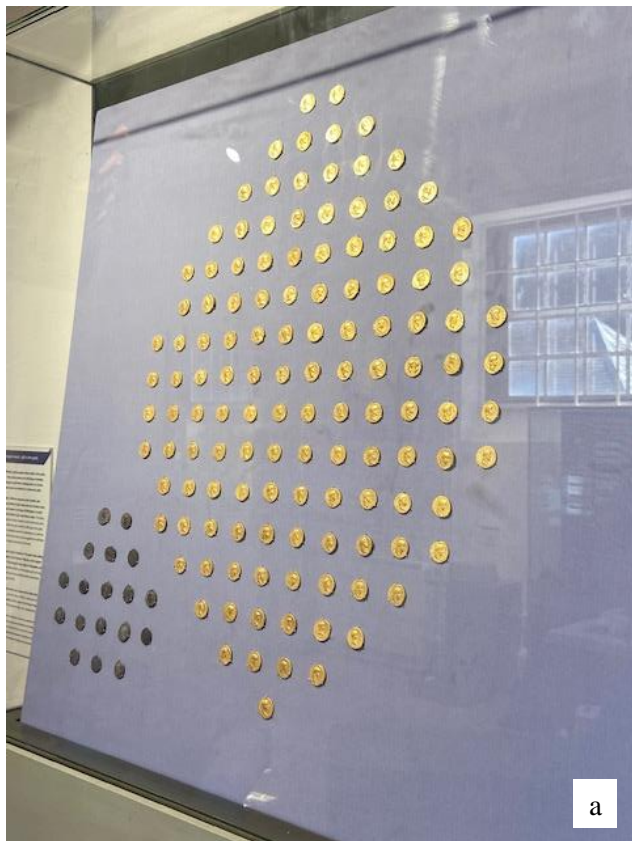
The mirror was broken when found and has subsequently been repaired and the surface sealed with quite a heavy coating of Paraloid b72. The mirror is one of a very small number of surviving Iron Age mirrors. An interim archaeological report was published in 2007⁽⁵⁾ and a full listing of the 18 such mirrors then known was published in 2014 as part of a review of the Didcot mirror.⁽⁶⁾

It has recently been decided to move the mirror and both coin hoards to a new, more central and more secure display at the Stockwood Discovery Centre. When we arrived, we were joined by Elise Naish and Jo Oliver and two members of the security staff. The alarms were deactivated and the first item to be moved was the mirror into a custom-made box. The box had an inert foam and archival tissue lining



Both of the coin hoards were housed in a custom-made display case with all of the obverses showing [a]. Three fine steel pins held each of the coins firmly in place. The steel was in firm contact with the coin. These wouldn't meet modern coin mounting standards, and one aureus was found with a small "fresh" mark on the edge, but it is certainly better than some older museums' use of cement/adhesives to mount coins onto display boards.

With the alarms deactivated, the locking bolts were removed [b].



The heavy cover is lifted, assisted by pneumatic rams [c]. A quick picture of the Bedford Numismatic Society team before the work begins [d].



With the coins firmly pinned to the board, the whole board could be safely unclipped and moved to a firm table nearby [e].



e

The first step was to remove the steel pins without touching the coins. With a pair of long-nose pliers one of the pins was bent away from the coin edge and then extracted. The coin was moved slightly away from the other two pins and they were also extracted from the board. In order to pick the loose pins up, the nitrile gloves were not practical and bare fingernails worked best. All of the coin handling was done with gloves (f).

During the original cataloguing of the hoards and creation of the display, each coin had been given a number, an annotated envelope and there was a crib-sheet giving the location and number of each coin in the display.

Though the coins had not been mounted in a numerical sequence, the crib-sheet combined with recognition of some familiar emperors' portraits provided quick spot checks that the filing system was working (g).

The gold hoard was moved first, followed by the silver, and then all the coins were taken away for safe keeping while the new displays are organized.



f



g

Having found a write up for the mirror, the author was optimistic that a fully illustrated write up and catalogue would exist for the coin hoards. Just a few references have been found.⁽⁷⁾

The largest 1st century gold coin hoard in Britain, found recently by two metal detectorists in Bedfordshire, has shed new light on the continuation of Iron Age religious practices in early Roman Britain. The hoard of 123 gold coins, which received some publicity when it was acquired by Luton Museum last month, is one of only a handful of large early Imperial Roman hoards known anywhere in Europe. The coins, or aurei, were issued by the emperors Tiberius, Claudius, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius and Vespasian, and represent a huge sum of money. Many are in mint condition. A smaller hoard of seven silver denarii, including Republican and early Imperial issues (the latest being one of Vespasian), was found nearby. Both hoards are thought to have been buried in the 80s AD.

According to Robin Holgate of Luton Museum, the hoards bear a striking resemblance to late Iron Age votive deposits of gold and silver items, such as those from Essenden in Hertfordshire, Snettisham in Norfolk and elsewhere. Metalwork hoards of this date are now typically interpreted as religious deposits - rather than 'burials for safekeeping' - and in this instance may indicate the site of an important Roman temple or cult site.

The findspot lies close to a spring and a prehistoric barrow, and scattered finds from surrounding fields include quantities of Roman pottery and tile, as well as the handle of a Roman knife, and a mortar for grinding cosmetics or incense. Rectilinear cropmarks in the field where the coins were found may suggest a temple precinct, although they remain undated.

The presence of the barrow is regarded as significant, following a number of recent discoveries of Roman (and later) religious monuments (see BA, November 1997). Other sites where Iron Age votive practice appears to have continued in the Roman period include the cult site at Essenden, the Romano-Celtic temple at Harlow in Essex, and at Bath.

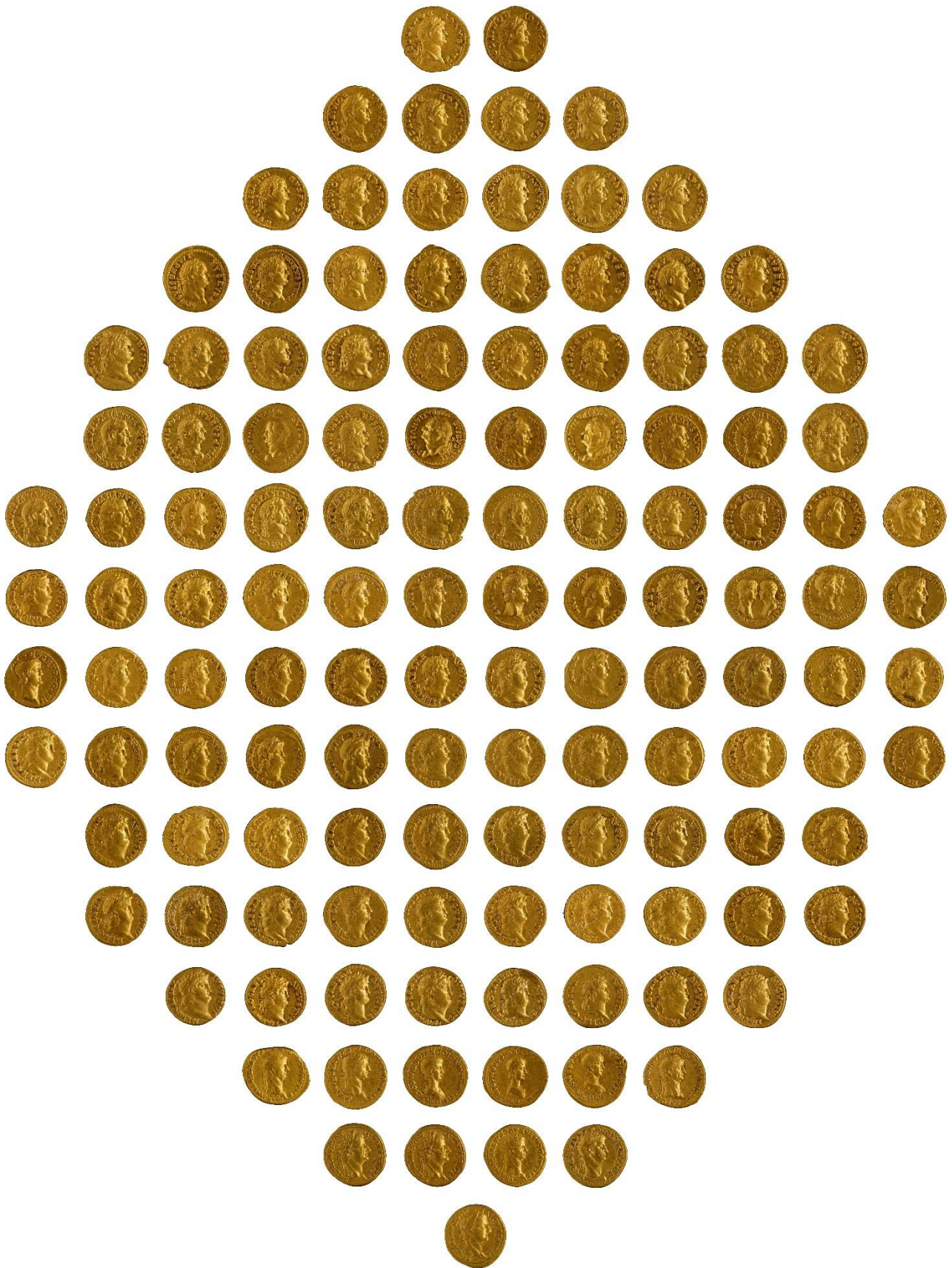
The hoards were declared treasure by a coroner's court earlier this year and valued at £200,000. They will go on display at Luton Museum early next year.

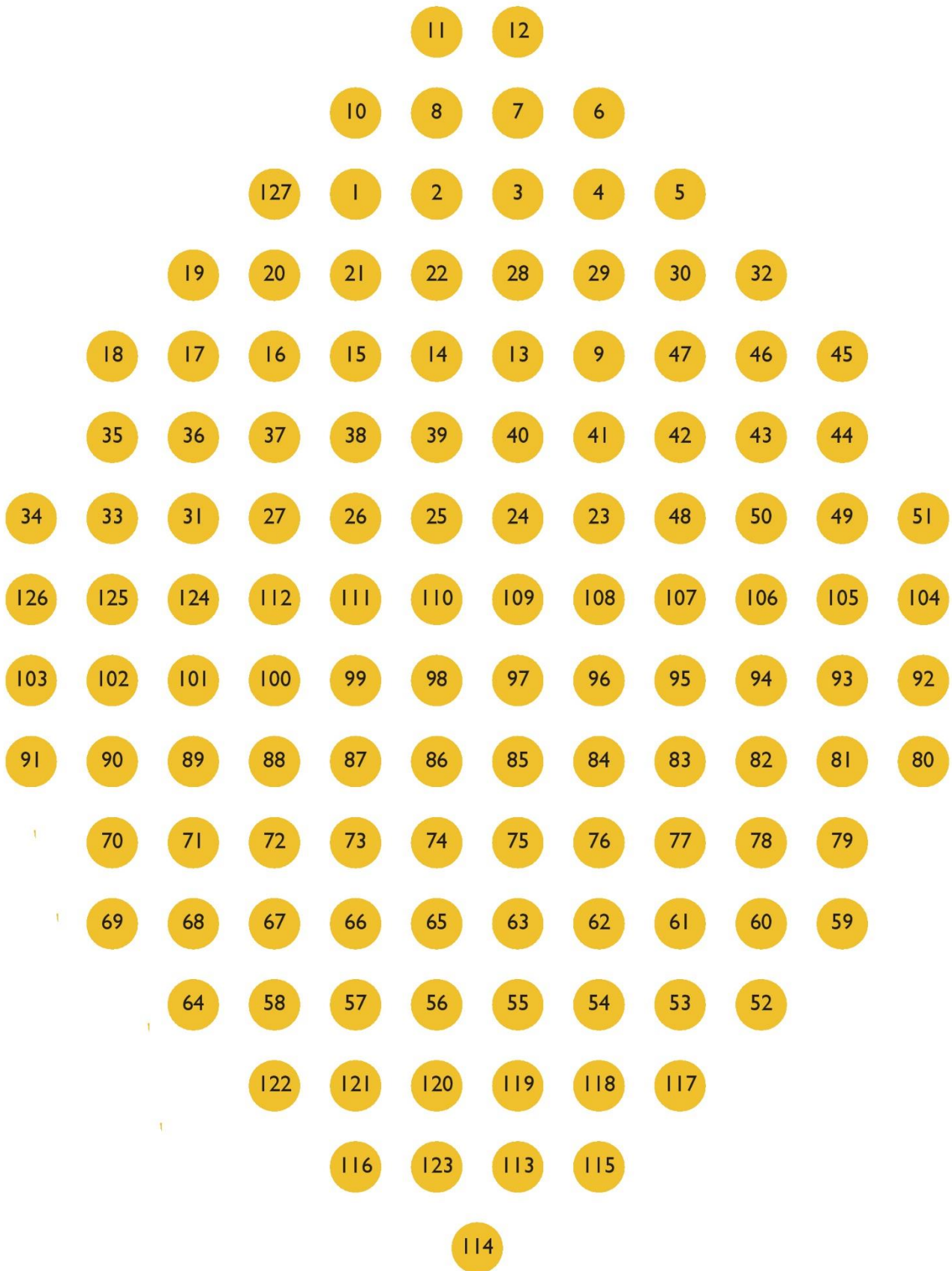
The hoard can be found on the database of the Portable Antiquities Scheme.⁽⁸⁾ And the hoard has been added to the database of the Coin Hoards of the Roman Empire project.⁽⁹⁾ These are both just basic listings of the coins with indication of the coin type according to RIC⁽¹⁰⁾, and no illustrations.

A brief 1½-page write up of the Shillington A hoard with a 5-page listing has been published which includes b/w illustrations of 14 of the aurei and can be found in the 2002 publication *Coin Hoards From Roman Britain* vol.XI.⁽¹¹⁾ The Shillington B hoard of denarii is also described and listed without illustrations. This provides a full listing of the coins in both hoards along with references to types as catalogued in RIC⁽¹⁰⁾ and BMC.⁽¹²⁾

In the absence of good online images, the following two pages illustrate the obverses of all of the aurei, along with their hoard reference numbers. Note that these numbers are not the same as the 2002 listing.⁽¹¹⁾

The coins were photographed by Chris Grabham in 2008 and provided by Elise Naish following our visit. The original coin images had a black background. The background has been digitally removed, which may result in some pixelation of the edges when viewed at high magnification.





References and Acknowledgements

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