A Small Coin Hoard from Ismant el-Kharab, ancient Kellis, in Egypt’s Dakhleh Oasis

Introduction

Four, fourth-century bronze coins, together with a small copper-alloy blade, were found in a leather pouch in a domestic structure at Ismant el-Kharab, ancient Kellis, in Egypt’s Dakhleh Oasis (Fig. A). Kellis, which is described as a village in the papyri, was abandoned in the closing years of the fourth century and was not reoccupied and so the coins derive from a secure fourth-century context. The hoard was found in an under-stairs cupboard in room 7, one element in a suite of mud-brick rooms built to the north of the inner temenos wall of the main temple dedicated to the god Tutu. The room was filled with wall and roof collapse, as was the under-stairs cupboard; the pouch may have been dropped into the cupboard or it could have fallen from the roof when the building collapsed. Numerous documents, written on papyrus, wooden boards and potsherds, were found in the debris in the complex; these include personal letters, written in Greek and Coptic, official documents and horoscopes; they all date to the fourth century. The coin issues are as follows (illustrations at Fig. B).
Obv: Sol rad. stg 1., raising r. hand, globe in outstretched 1., chlamys across 1. shoulder, looking 1.;
Rev: SOLI INV-I-CTO COMITI; in exergue, RP; mint mark, R│F
X│
1. AE; 21mm; 3.7g; 12h. RIC VII, 29 (mint of Rome). Condition: very good with little sign of wear.

Obv: Bust r., diad., dr.; [CO]NSTAN-S P F AVG
Rev: Two Victories stg, facing one another each holding a wreath and palm branch; [VICTORIAE DD AVGG]Q NN; in exergue, R│E
2. AE; 16mm; 1.6g; 6h. RIC VIII, 84 (mint of Rome). Condition: worn, especially on the reverse.

Obv: Bust, r., diad., dr.; D N CONSTAN-TIVS P F AVG
Rev: Helmeted soldier to 1., shield on 1. arm, spearing falling horseman; shield horseman is diademed; he turns to face soldier, and raises r. arm (cf. RIC 90: TEMP [REPARATIO]; in exergue, [AJNTA or ANA
3. AE; 17mm; 1.9g; 6h. Mint of Antioch, possibly barbarous: cf. RIC Condition: signs of wear on the reverse, especially the legend.

Obv: Bust r., pearl diad, dr., cuir.; VALEN-S PF AVG
Rev: Victory advancing 1., holding wreath in r. hand and palm branch in 1.; [REI]PVBLICAÆ; in exergue, ALEA
4. AE; 16mm; 2.6g; 6h. LRBC 2861/2863 (mint of Alexandria). Condition: excellent.

Discussion
This is the only identifiable hoard found at Kellis. The coins in the hoard span the period 314-5 to 368-75. Given the condition of the Valens issue, which was struck for a period of seven years, between 368-75, exhibits little sign of wear, the pouch and its contents were probably lost sometime in the 370s. The Licinius issue, struck between 314-5 is in very good condition and was presumably removed from the currency pool soon after striking. The Constans specimen, struck between 347-8, is the most worn of the coins in the hoard, and appears to have been in circulation for some twenty years. The Falling Horseman coin of Constantius II should date within the period 350-57/8 but the disparity in the condition of the obverse, which shows little sign of wear, and the reverse, which is worn, could indicate that it is a counterfeit issue. The metrology corroborates this assumption; the coin weighs only 1.9g instead of the usual 2.45g for a 17mm flan struck at the Antioch mint.4 The remaining coins in the hoard fall within the standard weights as given in RIC.
The Licinius and Constans specimens are from the mint of Rome; this was the issuing mint for the majority of coins from Kellis struck under Licinius and Constantine before 324. The reverse die of the Constantius issue is from Antioch, a mint that is well represented amongst the site finds from Kellis, and the Valens coin was struck in Alexandria. The careless striking of this specimen, as represented by the poor centring with sections of the legend missing, was peculiar to the Alexandrian mint as was noted by Milne in his publication of Hoard A in 1920.

The leather pouch, which measures 10.5cm by 3.9cm (maximum), was made of an oval piece of tanned hide, folded in half and over-sewn with leather thronging on the raw edges (Plate 3). A section of leather was cut from one of the narrow ends to create a flap to close the opening. A strip of leather, inserted into the end of the flap, served to close the pouch, which was accomplished by means of two vertical cuts on the front section, through which the leather strip was threaded. With an aperture of four centimeters, the pouch was not made to hold coins, nor is it a convenient size to hold the bronze blade that was also inside it. A point of particular interest is the owner’s purpose in putting such a small amount of money in the pouch. The depreciation of the bronze currency in Egypt, especially in the latter half of the fourth century, is well attested in the papyrological record. The denominations are far too small for any useful transaction. Although numerous attempts have been made to determine the value of the bronze currency in relation to commodity prices of this period, none has met with success. The coins and the numerous documentary papyri retrieved from Kellis shed no light on the problem.

The complex from which the coins derive comprises two discrete units: three rooms on the west, and the remainder to the east (Figure 2). The area covered in total is approximately 10m north-south by 18m east-west. The entire complex has undergone architectural modifications and it is unclear whether or not the western unit might predate that on the east.
in the complex as a whole have the potential to throw light on this question. Stray coins found within the same vicinity in the final occupational phase of room 3 in the western unit include: four late third-century tetradrachms, two issues of Constantine I struck before 324; one *Gloria Exercitus* with two standards, and one Helena.\(^\text{11}\) Third-century tetradrachms discovered alongside early issues of Constantine I are a phenomenon also found amongst the coins from two of the Kellis churches.\(^\text{12}\) It may well be that third-century issues continued in the currency pool after their withdrawal from circulation in the Nile valley. The other coins found in room 3 include one of Antoninus Pius, four issues of Constantine I, and one Fallen Horseman of Constantius II; those remaining are unidentifiable. If the pattern of coin loss in this unit follows that of other fourth-century structures at the site, the coins suggest that there was little or no activity here in the latter part of the fourth century. With the exception of the hoard, only five further coins were found in the east complex. These include one issue of Constantine of uncertain type, three of Constantius II: two Fallen Horseman and one *Spes Repvblicae*; the remaining coin is illegible but its diameter of 10mm indicates a late issue. Coin loss within the eastern complex is negligible although the pattern of loss seems to indicate that this section was not occupied before the fourth century, the coins and cannot be used to establish the period of use in its entirety. The latest coin found in the complex is the Valens issue found in the pouch. Documentary evidence from this suite of rooms, however, attests continued occupation until the end of the century. These data come in the form of horoscopes which were cast for the years 332, 337, 364, 388 and 392\(^\text{13}\) and which were found in rooms 8 and 12.\(^\text{14}\) The combination of dated documentary and numismatic evidence has proved to be salutary. If one were to rely solely upon the numismatic evidence, one might have been tempted to argue for a date of abandonment in the 370s; the documentary evidence indicates otherwise.

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4 RIC VIII, p.524.

5 Twenty-eight issues from this period have been retrieved; the issuing mint was illegible on some specimens. In excess of 700 single coins have been found at Kellis.


7 L. C. West and A. C. Johnson, Currency in Roman and Byzantine Egypt, (Amsterdam, 1967), pp. 125-27


9 The complex is designated D/8.


11 Eighteen coins were found in room 3; three were found in rooms 1 and 2: a Maximinian issue and two that cannot be identified; the flan sizes suggest that they were struck in the first half of the fourth century.


14 Ibid. An ostrakon with a section of what appears to be a horoscope, was found in room 7; see K. A. Worp, Greek Ostraka from Kellis, (Oxford, 2004), number 159.