

Cursing the emperor

By Sam Moorhead

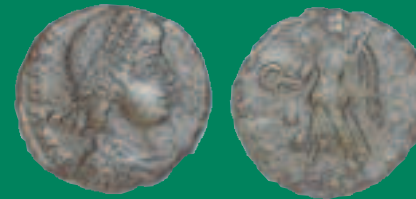
Early this year, a metal detectorist called Tom Redmayne was searching in a muddy field in the parish of Fulstow in Lincolnshire. He had already found Roman pottery (Samian ware from Gaul), some late Roman coins and several lead weights. Then he found several pieces of lead, two of which were folded over. When he carefully unfolded them, he saw that they had holes drilled in them. Furthermore, in the centre of each was an impression. He took them to Adam Daubney, the Portable Antiquities Scheme Finds Liaison Officer for Lincolnshire, who realised that they were coin impressions.

Adam brought the pieces down to the

British Museum where he and I established that the impressions were caused by bronze coins of the Emperor Valens that had been hammered into the lead. The pieces were then folded over and the edges of the sheets pierced. This was probably so they could be hung up. So how do we interpret this?

In the reigns of the joint-emperors Valentinian I (364–75 AD) and Valens (364–78 AD), the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus tells us that a certain Valentinus 'who was a native of Valeria in Pannonia [Hungary], a proud man, had been exiled to Britain for a serious offence. Like some dangerous animal he could not stay quiet; he pushed ahead with

his destructive, revolutionary plans nourishing an especial loathing for Theodosius [a general of Valentinian and Valens sent to Britain].' The same scholar reports that this troublemaker Valentinus started a rebellion which was quashed. He then describes the catastrophic events in Britain, commonly called the 'Great Barbarian Conspiracy', when Saxons, Picts and Scots (from Ireland) all ravaged the Roman province. Britannia was saved only by the swift actions of General Theodosius.



Modern historians have tended to overlook the revolt of Valentinus. But it has been suggested that this was the catalyst for subsequent invasions, as the barbarians sensed that Britain was in turmoil and therefore particularly vulnerable to attack. It might be that during the revolt of Valentinus, one of his followers decided to curse the emperors. It was traditional to write curse messages on tablets which were rolled up or nailed to a temple wall (you can see Roman curse tablets from Uley in the Roman Britain Gallery; Room 49).

In the case of the find, it seems that instead of writing the emperors' names, a coin with a picture of the emperor was used instead. Then the lead was folded over and the pieces possibly nailed to, or hung from, a wall. At a later date, the two pieces might have been ritually deposited, possibly in the ground.

This is only my personal interpretation – we will never know for certain why they were made, but perhaps they were created by a follower of the rebellious Valentinus. Whatever the truth, we have not found other objects like these in Britain.

To find out more about recent finds or report your own metal detector find, see www.finds.org.uk



ABOVE: Front and back of the bronze coin of Emperor Valens, also found in Lincolnshire
LEFT: One of the two lead sheets showing the impression of the coin of Valens and the hole drilled after the piece was folded.
RIGHT: Detectorist Tom Redmayne looking for treasure

