

## IV: Middlewich

### The Evidence of Roman Coin Loss

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The existence of a Roman site at Middlewich has long been known, associated with the processing of salt. However, recent research has pointed not only to the military importance of King Street, but has also suggested the possible location of a military site adjacent to King Street. Building developments have now led to the accumulation of a substantial collection of Roman coins, which are used in this paper to argue for, *inter alia*, pre- and early Flavian occupation and the presence of a legionary garrison.

#### Introduction

The coin record for Middlewich/Kinderton was small until the 1990s, but in recent years a number of development sites have yielded relatively substantial groups of coins. The result is that details of ninety-three coins found in the area have now been recorded; whilst this is not a particularly large sample, it is sufficient to offer some hope that trends which it displays will not be totally illusory.

#### The coin samples

The coins found prior to the 1990s consist of a few stray finds (Watkin 1886, 249; Thompson 1965, 94–6; *Cheshire Archaeol Bull* 1980–1, 65; Grosvenor Museum Records) and a group of twenty-six coins known as the ‘Pickering Collection’.

#### *Stray finds*

**Table IV.1**

No and denomination of Roman coins from Middlewich stray finds by reign

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Vitellius	1	AR	(RIC 1 ed 2,107)
Vespasian	3	AE	(RIC, 443, 489, 494)
Nerva	1	AE	
Trajan	3	AE	(RIC, 393(2), 676)
Antoninus Pius	1	AE	(As)
Septimius Severus	1	AR	(Hill 1977, 389)
Hostilianus	1	AR	( <i>Antoninianus</i> )

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*The Pickering Collection*

The coins which make up the Pickering Collection were found on farmland adjacent to King Street and were acquired by the Urban District Council in 1922; they remain with the County Museum Service. The chronological spread of and the variety of types represented in the twenty-six coins — from Augustus to Postumus — make it clear that they could not reasonably be regarded as having derived from a hoard.

**Table IV.2**

No and denomination of Roman coins from Middlewich Pickering Collection by reign

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Augustus	1	AE	(RIC 1 ed 2, 155)
Vespasian	1	AE	(RIC, 500)
Domitian	1	AE	(RIC, 347)
Nerva	1	AR	(RIC, 5)
Hadrian	3	AE	(RIC, 664, 748, 970)
Faustina I	1	AE	(RIC (Antoninus), 1146A)
Marcus Aurelius	3	AE	(RIC, 934, 1058, 1233)
Lucius Verus	1	AE	(RIC (Marcus), 1280)
Faustina II	3	AE	(RIC (Marcus), 1645, 1658(?), 1708)
Commodus	2	AE	(RIC, 364, 469)
Crispina	1	AE	(RIC (Commodus), 673)
Severus Alexander	2	AE	(RIC, 484, 637)
Julia Mamaea	1	AE	(RIC (Alexander), 710)
Maximinus	2	AE	(RIC, 58, 67)
Otacilia Severa	1	AE	(RIC (Philip), 203)
Trajan Decius	1	AE	(RIC, 112)
Postumus	1	AE	

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Of especial interest in this group is the strength of coin loss from the mid-second century and particularly of the period *c* AD 220–60, a period not normally well represented in coin-loss groups from sites in the north-west.

As far as is known, only a few coins were retrieved from the excavations conducted by John Bestwick in the 1970s; details are very imprecise, although one fourth-century issue is said to have been found (Bestwick 1975).

*Recent finds*

With regard to the more recent discoveries, there have been two chief area locations (Kinderton bypass and King Street) and a number of smaller sites. Thirty-two coins have been recorded from the area affected by the bypass and adjoining housing developments:

**Table IV.3**

No and denomination of Roman coins from Middlewich (Kinderton bypass) by reign

Republic	3	AR	(Crawford 1974, 228,1; 281,1; 348, 3)
Augustus	1	AR	
Vespasian	2	AR	
Domitian	1	AE	(RIC, 301B)
Nerva	1	AR	(RIC, 19)
Trajan13	9	AR	(incl RIC, 2, 65, 121, 131,156, 186, 241ff, Hill 1970, 522);
	4	AE	(incl RIC, 397, 492, 676)
Hadrian	2	AR	(RIC, 211, 299)
Antoninus Pius	2	1 AR 1 AE	(RIC, 177)
Marcus Aurelius	1	AE	
Geta	1	AE	
Julia Domna	1	AR	(RIC, 577)
Julia Maesa	1	AR	(RIC, 262)
Tetricus I	1	AE	(RIC,126/127)
Tetricus II	1	AE	(RIC, 270)
Constantius II	1	AE	(LRBC 1, 57)

Despite the number of *denarii* recorded here, there is no question of them having derived from a hoard, as the findspots were scattered over a considerable area.

Housing development on King Street has produced seventeen coins (Table IV.4), and a few coins have been reported from other locations (Table IV.5).

## Discussion

### *Coins and chronology*

The chronological distribution of the total coin assemblage from Middlewich is therefore as shown in Table IV.6.

This is, by any standards, a striking distribution, running counter to most features that characterise such distributions at north-west sites. First, what indications are given of initial occupation? In excess of 10% of the coins are pre-Flavian; there are six Republican *denarii*, three Augustan coins (two *denarii* and an *as*), and an *as* of Nero; in addition, there is a *denarius* of Vitellius. Of greatest significance are the *asses* of Augustus and Nero; although the pre-Neronian *denarii* are numerous, they do not necessarily point to pre-Flavian activity. Dio Cassius (68. 15, 4) states that *c* AD 107 Trajan recalled ‘old silver’; this presumably refers to coinage issued before Nero’s reform of 64, which was prompted by a need to produce

**Table IV.4**

No and denomination of Roman coins from Middlewich (King Street housing development) by reign

Republic	3	AR	(Crawford 1974, 218,1; 450,1a; 458,1)
Augustus	1	AR	(RIC 1 ed 2, 207)
Nero	1	AE	(As)
Vespasian	2	1 AR 1 AE	(RIC, 45) (RIC, 497)
Domitian	1	AE	(as RIC, 305A)
Nerva	1	AE	(RIC, 93)
Trajan1		AE	(As)
Hadrian	2	AE	(Hill 1970, 462; RIC, 793)
Sabina	1	AR	(RIC, 408)
Antoninus Pius	1	AR	(RIC, 248)
Faustina I	1	AE	(RIC (Antoninus), 1178)
Faustina II	1	AR	(RIC (Marcus), 710)
Constantine I	1	AE	(LRBC 1, 67)

**Table IV.5**

No and denomination of Roman coins from Middlewich (various recent finds) by reign

Domitian	1	AR	(RIC, 169)
Trajan3	2	AR 1 AE	(RIC, 102, 291) ( <i>Sestertius</i> )
Hadrian	2	AR	(RIC, 282, 290)
Marcus Aurelius	1	AE	( <i>Sestertius</i> ; possibly BM Cat, 898)

more coins from a stated amount of bullion — a means to raise cash quickly to ‘pay the bills’ resulting from the large-scale rebuilding of Rome after the ‘Great Fire’. Nevertheless, Reece has shown (1974, 84) that, despite the date of Trajan’s action, pre-Neronian silver coins continued to circulate in Britain into the reign of Hadrian. We may nonetheless regard the amount of such early coinage, particularly the presence of Augustan issues, as supporting the contention that there was pre-Flavian or *very* early Flavian activity at Middlewich.

A context is not difficult to find. It is accepted that Roman troops had to intervene in Brigantian territory to keep the peace between the two chief faction leaders (Cartimandua and Venutius), perhaps as early as the 50s; this was no doubt repeated — perhaps on more than one occasion — in the 60s. Further, Cartimandua lost control of the tribe in AD 69, and had to be rescued. Action to conquer Brigantian territory thus became a priority under

**Table IV.6**

No and percentage of Roman coins from Middlewich by period

<i>Period</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>%</i>
I (- AD 41)	9	9.68
II (41–54)	-	-
III (54–68)	1	1.08
IV (69–96)	13	13.98
V (96–117)	24	25.81
VI (117–138)	10	10.74
VII (138–161)	6	6.45
VIII (161–180)	10	10.74
IX (180–192)	3	3.23
X (192–222)	4	4.30
XI (222–235)	3	3.23
XII (235–259)	5	5.38
XIII (259–275)	3	3.23
XIV (275–294)	-	-
XV (294–324)	-	-
XVI (324–330)	-	-
XVII (330–346)	2	2.15
XVIII (346–364)	-	-
XIX (364–378)	-	-
XX (378–388)	-	-
XXI (388–)	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>93 coins</b>	

the governors Vettius Bolanus and Petillius Cerialis (Shotter 1994; 2000; Birley, A R 1973). It seems likely that the bases used for overland operations were principally Wroxeter and Littlechester, the latter of which provided access across the Cheshire plain and into Lancashire (Rogers 1996), and northwards towards the *oppidum* of Barwick in Elmet, which *may* have been a seat of power of Cartimandua (Carrington 1985). Contrary to older views, it is now thought likely that initial penetration was achieved along King Street via Middlewich, Wilderspool, Walton-le-Dale and Lancaster; apart from Wilderspool (the early military occupation of which remains equivocal), the other sites have produced coin evidence exhibiting some of the characteristics of early activity. It is now clear that a land route from Chester to Northwich and Manchester (Jones 1968) was not in use before later Flavian times, although Chester itself was important in the period of conquest as a base for *sea-borne* operations.

A further indicator of some importance is that all of the coins of Vespasian from Middlewich are to be dated to AD 73 or earlier. There appear to be no coins of Vespasian's later years (particularly the normally well represented issue year of 77/8), nor of Titus' reign; a similar characteristic is to be observed in the chronological distribution at Walton-le-Dale (Shotter 1993). It should also be noted that, as a whole, Flavian coins (IV) are poorly represented by comparison with Trajanic (V), which is not a characteristic normally to be found on sites occupied in the late 70s and early 80s.

It would appear from this that after the governorship of Cerialis and the ensuing construction of the legionary fortress at Chester, the King Street route and early military sites at Middlewich and Walton-le-Dale were abandoned in favour of the route from Chester to Manchester and Ribchester, with new Agricolan forts at Northwich and Manchester. The imperatives of occupation differed from those of conquest. There is, of course, no evidence currently available to indicate the nature of this putative early military site at Middlewich — campaign camp, vexillation fortress or auxiliary fort — although, as we shall see, the denominational distribution of the coins may provide some help.

That there was a slackening of (or break in) activity at Middlewich in the middle Flavian years appears to be in no doubt; that there was a resumption/redevelopment in the later years of Domitian's reign also seems likely in view of the relationship between Periods IV and V, and of the incidence of coins of Domitian and Nerva. It would not seem unreasonable to suppose that this fresh activity at Middlewich was connected in some way with reorganisations that accompanied the important changes in frontier policy *c* AD 87, which saw the evacuation of Scotland and the introduction of the Stanegate *limes* (Hobley 1989; Jones 1990). Possibly, this resumption of activity should be related to the industrial remains which were a feature of the excavations of the 1970s (Wilson *et al* eds 1974, 419; Wilson *et al* eds 1975, 242; Goodburn *et al* eds 1976, 321). It should, however, be noted at the same time that the volume of coin loss, especially of coins of high face value, remained strong through the later first and early second centuries. This presumably indicates a resumed military connection, suggesting possible parallels with sites such as Holt (Ward 1998), Heronbridge (Thompson 1965, 60–5), Wilderspool (Hinchliffe & Williams 1992) and Walton-le-Dale (*report forthcoming*). It is not implausible that all such activity should be related to 'hinterland and resource development' associated with the arrival of Legion XX at Chester (Hobley 1989).

Coin loss in the second century is at most north-western sites progressively affected by inflation, which caused the gradual loss from the system of coins of low denomination; further, as Casey has suggested (1974, 44), because this left the *denarius* and *sestertius*, coins of high face value, as the principal coins in circulation, there was probably a more vigorous search instituted than before for lost pieces; indeed, because of the more widespread incidence of stone surfaces, losses may well have been more easily detected than before. Thus, coin loss tends to drop successively from Periods V to IX.

At Middlewich, the drop from V to VI is, indeed, sharp, perhaps indicating some adjustments in activity coinciding with the further changes in frontier policy. The most striking feature, however, is the marked recovery in coin loss in Period VIII (reign of

Marcus Aurelius). This may well be connected with the decision of Marcus Aurelius *c.* AD 163 to bring to an end the use of the Antonine Wall and the direct occupation of southern Scotland (Hartley 1972; Shotter 1975–6). It would not be surprising if this brought soldiers of Legion XX back to Chester in considerable numbers, and with it the need for infrastructural reinvigoration.

That activity continued to the middle part of the third century seems clear, particularly in view of the relatively strong representation of coins of Periods XI and XII (222–59), which normally yield very few coins at north-western sites. Beyond the middle of the third century, however, a very different picture emerges — just three coins from the normally prolific Period XIII (259–275), and only two from the equally prolific XVII (330–346); it is not uncommon for these periods to occupy approximately 30% and 10% respectively of site samples. It is difficult, therefore, to come to any conclusion other than that on the sampled parts of the Middlewich area, at least, organised activity virtually ceased after *c.* AD 260–270.

### *Denominational distribution*

A study of denominational distribution is feasible for Periods I–X; the purpose of it is first to highlight and explain fluctuations in the denominations in use, and secondly to facilitate an attempt to assess changes in the level of wealth evident at the site, as well as to allow comparisons to be made with other sites.

There are a number of notable features which emerge from this breakdown of denominational distribution at Middlewich. In general, it is to be observed that Middlewich, in terms of ‘wealth’ indicators, behaves differently from almost every other Roman site in north-west England with a coin sample of reasonable size. First, the inflationary tendencies of the second century make virtually no impact until the Severan period (X); at all other sites, the measure of ‘*as*-value per coin’ shows a steady increase through the second century. This is despite the fact that all periods in the second century are relatively well represented in terms of absolute numbers. Secondly, employing the measure of ‘*as*-value per coin’, Periods IV to VI are strikingly higher than at other sites, indicating presumably a substantial high-status element in the population. The simplest explanation might be that, despite the evident break in activity in the middle Flavian years, the site was occupied in the early Flavian and late Flavian to Hadrianic periods by legionaries. A military enclosure of approximately 3.5 acres was reported in 1994 (Burnham *et al.* eds 1995, 348), although its nature remains unclear. The fact that the high ‘*as*-value per coin’ is caused substantially by the high proportion of *denarii* in the sample through the same period probably also points to the presence of personnel who were paid in coinage of high denomination — in other words, probably legionaries.

Finally, the striking nature of the wealth indicators at Middlewich is amply demonstrated by a simple comparison with other sites in north-west England of many different types (Table IV.8).

Thus, it can be seen that, whilst the coin evidence cannot answer all the questions which it poses, it makes its contribution by pointing to significant questions regarding the chronology and status of the site(s) at Middlewich which require answers.

**Table IV.7**

No of Roman coins from Middlewich by denomination and period

<i>Period</i>	<i>Denarius</i>	<i>Sestertius</i>	<i>Dupondius</i>	<i>As</i>	<i>Total no coins</i>	<i>As-value</i>
I	8	-	-	1	9	129.0
II	-	-	-	-	-	-
III	-	-	-	1	1	1.0
IV	5	2	-	6	13	94.0
V	13	4	2	3	22	231.0
VI	5	3	-	2	10	94.0
VII	2	1	1	2	6	40.0
VIII	1	7	-	2	10	46.0
IX	-	3	-	-	3	12.0
X	3	1	-	-	4	52.0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>699.0</b>

<i>Period</i>	<i>As-value per coin</i>	<i>% denarii</i>
I	14.33	88.89
II	-	-
III	1.0	-
IV	7.23	38.46
V	10.5	59.09
VI	9.4	50.0
VII	6.67	33.33
VIII	4.6	10.0
IX	4.0	-
X	13.0	75.0
<b>Overall</b>	<b>8.96</b>	<b>47.44</b>



**Table IV.8**Comparison of *as*-value per coin: Middlewich and other north-west sites

Period	Walton le-Dale	Holt	Wilderspool	Chester	Lancaster	Manchester	Papcastle	Birdoswald
I	16.0	16.0	10.0	10.64	10.8	13.11	-	16.0
II	1.0	1.0	-	1.25	4.0	2.0	1.0	-
III	6.0	1.0	6.0	4.31	5.0	9.0	-	-
IV	4.23	4.26	5.38	4.46	6.0	3.39	5.55	12.0
V	4.68	3.53	4.67	6.48	5.47	6.79	2.85	4.75
VI	3.12	5.75	6.23	5.38	8.0	5.96	7.73	7.36
VII	3.8	-	5.85	5.71	8.31	6.71	5.79	6.71
VIII	2.75	3.0	6.5	6.49	5.27	10.6	10.8	10.0
IX	4.0	4.0	7.33	6.47	7.2	-	16.0	16.0
X	13.0	-	12.0	15.39	13.3	13.67	15.08	16.0

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