

WORTH EVERY PENNY: A NUMISMATIST'S VIEW

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Roman coin (c) MOLA

My day started with the arrival of a couple of boxes of coins from MOLA's recent excavations of a riverside site, near the Tower of London. And I know that more boxes are on their way!

There are usually more Roman coins than any others from London sites but those in front of me cover a wide spectrum, ranging from Roman Republican denarii to late Roman copies. One 1st-century AD coin is particularly rare, there is a late Anglo-Saxon penny and a couple of medieval coins, as well as numerous lead tokens and a fine sixpence of Queen Elizabeth I. There are also lots of Nuremberg jetons, usually interpreted as reckoning counters (for accounting) but probably also used locally as small change.

Among the post-medieval coins we find there is lots of 18th-century small change and these always feature a few foreign coins: from France, Holland, Spain, Italy and Portugal. The latest coin from this site is, curiously, a French 5 centime piece dated 1883, perhaps lost from a visiting French ship.

Before these coins reach me they travel from the site to the finds processing department here at MOLA, where they are given a clean to get the mud off, they then have record photographs taken and are given accession numbers. The coins then head to the conservation laboratory where corrosion deposits are cleaned off, they are conserved and stabilised and, usefully, X-rayed.

The first thing I did today was make a list of the accession and context numbers, and then I weighed and measured each one before examining them in detail. I described, identified and dated both sides and these details were entered into our coin database. I made a judgement on which coins need further cleaning to help identification and which might even require chemical or metallurgical analysis. Certain coins need further research and I will discuss these pieces with other numismatists around the country or by popping over to the British Museum.

My next step is to write an assessment of the coins from this site. Firstly, I will arrange the coins by date and sometimes create a table or histogram. I will talk to the archaeologist running the dig to learn about the archaeological stratigraphy and also to other finds specialists in the department. This often determines where, how and when the coins came to be found at the site. Finally, after further research, a publication text will be created.

Such is the exciting and interesting diversity of my job!