

Largest ever find of gold coins from Anglo-Saxon England

Press images: <https://bit.ly/3Dap8Lr>

A find of **131 gold coins** along with four other gold objects **dating to 1,400 years ago** stands to be the **largest find to date of gold coins from the Anglo-Saxon** period in England.

Currently, HM Coroner for Norfolk is holding an inquest to determine whether an important find of gold coins and other objects from West Norfolk **constitutes Treasure** under the terms of the Treasure Act (1996). To qualify as Treasure, any two or more coins which contain more than 10% of precious metal and which are more than 300 years old are defined as Treasure and are property of the Crown. Typically, the Crown only claims the find if an accredited museum wishes to acquire the find, and is in a position to pay a reward equivalent to the full market value of the find.

Buried shortly after AD 600, the West Norfolk hoard contains a total of 131 gold coins, most of which are Frankish tremisses, as these coins were not yet produced in East Anglia at this date. The hoard contains nine gold solidi, a larger coin from the Byzantine empire worth three tremisses. The hoard also contains four other gold objects, including a gold bracteate (a type of stamped pendant), a small gold bar, and two other pieces of gold which were probably parts of larger items of jewellery. The presence of these items in the hoard suggests that the coins should be seen as bullion, valued by weight rather than face value.

At the point when the hoard was buried, England was not yet unified, but was divided into several smaller Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Of these, the kingdom of the East Angles, including modern Norfolk and Suffolk, was one of the most important. This region is also one of the most productive in terms of finds of archaeological material through metal detecting, so it is perhaps unsurprising that the largest find to date of gold coins from the Anglo-Saxon period was discovered in Norfolk by metal detectorists.

Most Treasure cases are relatively straightforward, but this is **an unusual case** in a number of ways. The majority of the objects were found between 2014 and 2020 by a single detectorist, who prefers to remain anonymous. The landowner has also requested anonymity, and for this reason the find is currently described only as coming from 'West Norfolk'. This finder has reported all of his finds to the appropriate authorities. However, ten of the coins were found by a second detectorist, David Cockle, who had permission from the landowner to detect in the same field. Mr Cockle, who at the time was a serving policeman, failed to report his discovery and instead attempted to sell his coins, pretending that they were single finds from a number of different sites. Mr Cockle's deception was uncovered, and in 2017 he was found guilty of theft and sentenced to 16 months in prison, as well as being dismissed from the police.

All of the objects were found in a single field, where a single gold coin was found as long ago as 1990; this was a single find before the introduction of the Treasure Act which means that this coin does not form part of the group being considered by the Coroner. Despite this quirk, it seems almost certain that this was part of the same hoard. The Treasure case includes both those finds from 2014 onwards which were properly reported

and those concealed by Mr Cockle, two of which could not be recovered as they had already been sold and had disappeared into the antiquities trade.

The **previous largest hoard of coins of this period was a purse containing 101 coins discovered at Crondall in Hampshire in 1828**. It had been disturbed before discovery and may originally have included more coins. Buried around AD 640, the hoard contained a **mixture of Anglo-Saxon, Frankish and Frisian coins, along with a single coin of the Byzantine Empire, minted in Constantinople**.

The decades on either side of AD 600 were quite literally a golden age for Anglo-Saxon England. The largest find of gold metalwork from the period was the **Staffordshire hoard**, discovered in 2009 by Terry Herbert, and dating from the mid-7th century. This contained over 5.1kg of gold and 1.4kg of silver. **Though the Staffordshire hoard is currently the largest find of precious metal from the period, it contained no coins**.

The most famous discovery from this period was the ship burial from Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, recently dramatized in the Netflix movie *The Dig*, and dating somewhere between AD 610 and 640. The Sutton Hoo burial included a purse of 37 gold coins, three blank gold discs of the same size as the coins and two small gold ingots, as well as many other gold items. The **Sutton Hoo purse contained only Frankish coins**, reflecting the fact that although imported coins were already used in East Anglia by this time, coins were not yet being minted in the area by the time of the burial. Another important grave was discovered in 2003 at Prittlewell in Essex, probably buried a few years before the Sutton Hoo ship and containing two gold coins and other gold objects.

Norwich Castle Museum hopes to acquire the hoard, with the full support of the British Museum.

Tim Pestell, Senior curator of Archaeology at Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery said: “This internationally-significant find reflects the wealth and Continental connections enjoyed by the early Kingdom of East Anglia. Study of the hoard and its findspot has the potential to unlock our understanding of early trade and exchange systems and the importance of west Norfolk to East Anglia’s ruling kings in the seventh century.”

Helen Geake, Finds Liaison Officer for Norfolk said: “The West Norfolk hoard is a really remarkable find, which will provide a fascinating counterpart to Sutton Hoo at the other end of the kingdom of East Anglia. It underlines the value of metal-detected evidence in helping reconstruct the earliest history of England, but also shows how vulnerable these objects are to irresponsible collectors and the antiquities trade.”

Gareth Williams, Curator of Early Medieval Coins at the British Museum said: “This is a hugely important find. It is close in date to the famous ship burial from Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, and although it doesn’t contain as much gold as the whole of the Sutton Hoo burial, it contains many more coins. In fact, it is the largest coin hoard of the period known to date. It must be seen alongside other recent finds from East Anglia and elsewhere, and will help to transform our understanding of the economy of early Anglo-Saxon England.”

Notes to Editors

About the British Museum’s National Programmes

The British Museum has a presence throughout the UK by reaching into homes and schools virtually, and by lending hundreds of objects to partner organisations each year. Everyone has the chance to engage with the British Museum’s collection and expertise.

With the lead support of the Dorset Foundation in memory of Harry M Weinrebe, in 2020/21 the British Museum lent 1,453 objects to 77 venues, reaching half a million visitors outside London. Even with pandemic related closures, three times more visitors saw a British Museum object outside of London than in Bloomsbury in 2020/21.

The British Museum is committed to sharing its collection and knowledge as widely as possible and to create positive educational, social and economic impact for people and places across the UK. Facilitating new perspectives on our shared global history with others through Partnership Galleries, these exhibitions reflect diverse viewpoints, lived experiences and collective ideas. The Museum also manages the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) in England, recording and sharing British archaeological discoveries to help shape our understanding of the past.

About Norfolk Museums Service

Norfolk Museums Service (NMS) is a multi-award-winning service comprising ten museums and a study centre. NMS is regarded as one of the leaders in the museum sector and in 2017 was successful in its bid for continuing major investment from Arts Council England. From April 2018, NMS has been a National Portfolio Organisation for Arts Council England, one of only 45 out of 845 heritage and arts organisations in England to be awarded the highest level of support. Norfolk Museums Service is a partnership between Norfolk County Council and Norfolk's district councils, funded through council tax, earned income and grants.

www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk

About the Treasure Act 1996

Under the Treasure Act (www.finds.org.uk/treasure) finders have a legal obligation to report all finds of potential Treasure to the local coroner in the district in which the find was made. The administration of the Treasure process is undertaken at the British Museum. This work involves the preparation of Treasure cases for coroners' inquests, providing the secretariat for the Treasure Valuation Committee, and handling disclaimed cases and the payment of rewards.

The Act allows a national or local museum to acquire Treasure finds for public benefit. If this happens a reward is paid, which is normally shared equally between the finder and landowner. Interested parties may wish to waive their right to a reward, enabling museums to acquire finds at reduced or no cost. Rewards are fixed at the full market value of the finds, determined by the Secretary of State upon the advice of an independent panel of experts, known as the Treasure Valuation Committee.

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The Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS)

Managed by the British Museum (in England) and Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales, the PAS is a partnership project, working with about 100 national and local partners to deliver the Scheme's aims. It is funded (in England) through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport grant to the British Museum with local partner contributions. All the Finds Liaison Officers working for the PAS are employed locally but work as a national team directed by the British Museum.

Thousands of archaeological objects are discovered every year, many by members of the public, particularly by people while metal-detecting. If recorded, these finds have great potential to transform archaeological knowledge, helping archaeologists understand when, where and how people lived in the past. PAS (www.finds.org.uk) offers the only proactive mechanism for recording such finds, which are made publicly available on its online database.

Many organisations have also supported the acquisition of Treasure finds, including Art Fund, the Headley Trust, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the V&A Purchase Grant Fund. Without these, as well as public donations, many important archaeological finds would not be in public collections.



For more, follow the British Museum blog at blog.britishmuseum.org

Images for press can be found here: <https://bit.ly/3Dap8Lr>

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