

Lindsay Allason-Jones und Bruce McKay, *Coventina's Well. A shrine on Hadrian's Wall. Trustees of the Clayton Museum, Gloucester 1985. XIV, 112 Seiten, 18 Abbildungen, 22 Tafeln.*

Coventina's Well is one of the more remarkable religious sites of Roman Britain, but until now it has not been afforded the detailed publication and discussion it deserves. Lying in the marshy valley immediately to the west of the defences of the Hadrian's Wall fort of Carrawburgh (Procolitia), it consisted of a well (perhaps originally merely functional and intended to act as a sump to drain the valley for the building of the 'Vallum') surrounded by an enclosure wall with a west-facing entrance. At its excavation in 1876 by John Clayton the Well was found to contain a number of altars, pottery and other artefacts, but above all a huge deposit of Roman coins. It is reckoned that in all there were some sixteen thousand coins. Of these some two to three thousand were removed one Sunday by local miners, others were given away to visitors, but some thirteen-and-a-half thousand remained to be catalogued by the indefatigable Charles Roach Smith and his helpers. The current authors have re-examined all the material, and in the process have considerably boosted the number of positive identifications of the coins.

The report opens with a discussion of the site and the circumstances of its excavation; there follows the bulk of the work, the catalogue and discussion of the artefacts from the Well; the report closes with an account of the debate provoked in the public presses by the find.

The first part of the report suffers from somewhat curious content. A description (§ 1) of early reports of the site and of Clayton's excavation is followed by a very brief description of the physical remains of the shrine (§ 2). Then follows a discussion (§ 3) of the goddess Coventina. The longest section (§ 4) is that which considers the circumstances of deposition of the Well contents, and the final section (§ 5) considers the circumstantial evidence for the date of the shrine. §§ 1, 3, 5 are all perfectly competent, yet the two crucial sections, §§ 2, 4, which deal with the Well and its contents themselves are not. The description of the remains is brief to the point of being cursory. Admittedly the nineteenth-century records are not good, but more could have been said, as indeed the authors show by the occasional aperçu elsewhere in the text. The section on the circumstances of the deposit is arranged essentially according to the various theories advanced by the Victorian antiquaries at the time. The merits of these are discussed, some more modern interpretations put forward and a number of comparanda adduced. Surely what was needed was as full a discussion as possible of the physical remains of the site, both on its own and in the light of evidence from comparable sites. Then what little can be said of the state of the deposit as excavated could be reviewed, before going on to a consideration of the Well deposits in the context of other such deposits. Within Britain, for instance, there is the 1979-80 excavation of the deposit from the sacred spring at Bath, which even though not yet fully published surely rates a mention. This contained twelve thousand coins, as well as other categories of object such as lead curse tablets, which do not occur at Coventina's Well. Also absent from the Well are ex voto wooden sculptures such as that which characterizes the deposit at the Sources de la Seine shrine. Clearly spring deposits were far from uniform in the Roman world; as the authors note on p. 7 quite a lot is now known about them and the beliefs behind them. Of equal importance is our developing appreciation of the long tradition of wet-place deposits in prehistoric Britain. All of these could have been drawn upon to add greatly to our understanding both of the Well deposit itself and of its milieu.

Clearly the main effort of the report lies in the Catalogue, and within this in the discussion of the coins. This latter is a tour-de-force both in the cataloguing of the coins, and in trying to make them comprehensible. As Clayton and others appreciated, the chronological distribution of the coins is far from uniform: there is an enormous bunching in the mid to later second century. Modern work, particularly by R. Reece, has identified the 'normal' chronological distribution of coins to be expected from continuously-occupied sites in Roman Britain. In addition McKay has constructed a comparable set of figures for northern Britain by consolidating the figures from a number of sites where the coin-lists individually are statistically worthless - his 'average site'. These techniques are used to determine the rate of 'background' coin-loss in the Well, and thus to isolate the hoard. What is over and above the expected loss must be the hoard. The hoard is of the order of eleven-and-a-half thousand coins, and dates to the 190s AD.

There are two unspoken assumptions underpinning this discussion which need to be made explicit and to be considered. The first is that we may expect a constant coin-loss into the Well exactly comparable to that observed at other sites. Two points occur. The first is that at other sites the coin-loss (or non-recovery) is assumed to be more-or-less accidental, and modern experience tells us that this is all-too-possible on settle-

ment sites: but Coventina's Well is precisely that, a well, and the physical mechanism of casual coin-loss into such a feature is difficult to envisage. Should we assume that there is such a 'background' coin-loss? The other point is that we are dealing with a religious site, and religious sites are increasingly being shown not always to mirror coin-loss on other types of site. The second assumption is that there is only one hoard. This is unprovable; it may be several hoards. There are hints that some of the coins of other periods could be interpreted as hoards. For instance, on p. 74 it is noted that there was an unusually strong representation of unreduced folles. These are not common as site-finds, but not uncommon in hoards.

There are three other problems with the 'hoard'. The first is its composition, gold, silver and bronze of all denominations in the same hoard. This would be rare indeed in a hoard of the type commonly encountered. To claim that it was 'special' because it was religious would implicitly strengthen the case for not comparing it with other coin-loss distributions, be they hoards or site-finds. The second is the problem of distinguishing between the date the hoard was put together and the date it was deposited. In strict archaeological practice the date of a deposit is that of the latest object in it, or later. We have no way of sub-dividing the coins as an archaeological deposit, so we must admit the possibility that the 'hoard' was deposited up to two hundred years after it was put together. The third is that, as is admitted on p. 75, '... there is no reason to suppose that the hoard actually belongs to the temple.' The bulk of the inscribed material from the Well is dedicated to Coventina, and as she is addressed as a water-goddess it would be contrary to claim that the Well was not Coventina's. But there is an altar of Minerva and a number of unscripted altars, and the nineteenth-century excavators noted the presence of other structures in the vicinity of the Well. If the coins were cleared out of some other shrine(s) at the time the Well was filled in, they not only do not relate to the Well, but might, as suggested above, have been put together much earlier than the date of their depositon.

The final section, on the public debate occasioned by the find, is well worth a read as an example of odium academicum. It is a sad comment on archaeology today that it is unthinkable that any modern newspaper, national or provincial, would dream of devoting so much space to an equivalent debate nowadays.

The material from Coventina's Well is now fully and well published. It is an important site. Allason-Jones and McKay deserve the gratitude of all who have to deal with the Well, religious sites, votive deposits and numismatics. But through no fault of theirs, but because of the nature of the original excavations, the results from Coventina's Well will always be provisional. Only the modern excavation and publication of comparable sites will enable us to further our understanding of this site by putting it in context.

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