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TREASURE TROVE

The discovery of "treasure" always arouses strong emotions among archaeologists. Thus the hoard of Christian silver discovered at Water Newton and described in this issue has focussed attention on the law of Treasure Trove, and some have called for radical changes. Yet the problem is immensely complex, and we must not be swept away by emotion. We must look on the situation calmly and dispassionately, and beware that we do not jump out of the frying pan into the fire.

The case in favour of our present law is a simple one: it works. In countries with draconian antiquities legislation, such as Turkey or Italy, casual discoveries tend to be melted down for bullion or sold illicitly on the black market. The Water Newton hoard, however, is now safe in the British Museum: we know its provenance, its authenticity is undisputed and miraculously the finder had not even cleaned it. Indeed in a way we can be thankful to the treasure hunter concerned. The field is ploughed annually, and at least one vessel had already been destroyed by the plough, and in another few years the plough would have caught the rest of the hoard and turned it into a few odd scraps of unrecognisable metal. The real scandal is that the field—the Roman town of Durobrivae—is still ploughed annually.

Even in its more quirky and antique aspects, our present treasure trove law has some useful by-products. The decision as to whether a find is treasure trove depends on whether it was buried with the intention of recovery. The principle is illogical, but it does mean that not all finds are interred in the vaults of the British Museum, but some remain the property of the finder and can thus find their way into the local museum. Even the ceremonial trappings of the Coroner's Court have their use, for the finds have to be taken back to the place from whence they came and explained to the local Press, so that the Court acts as a Press conference at which archaeology usually shows up well.

It is unfortunate, therefore, that the Council for British Archaeology, with its customary Utopianism, should be seeking to abolish the present law of treasure trove and replace it with sweeping provisions enabling the government to nationalise any or indeed every type of antiquity. Yet there is no slick and easy solution to the problem of casual finds, and harsh laws simply lead to evasion and concealment. In practice the present law probably works as well as any antiquities legislation anywhere in the world. We abolish it at our peril.

IN February 1975 a hoard of silver vessels was discovered at Water Newton, in a field that had once been the Roman town of Durobrivae. The hoard was by any standards an important one, but what gave it a unique character was the fact that it was Christian. Chi-rho monograms—the symbol of early Christianity—were found on many of the objects, while 3 of the vessels had inscriptions suggesting that they had been dedicated to religious use. Since the earliest known Christian silver had hitherto been of the 6th century, it was immediately clear that the hoard was of outstanding importance. When further study suggested that it could have belonged to the 3rd century or to the 4th, and therefore could perhaps have been buried in the great persecution before Christianity was even legalised, it became clear that the Water Newton treasure will throw new light on the importance and strength of early Christianity in Britain, and indeed in the Empire as a whole.

The hoard was found at Water Newton near Peterborough, within the earth-works that marked the defences of the Roman town of Durobrivae. Although the field is scheduled as an ancient monument it is ploughed annually, and the hoard was discovered by a local collector, Mr. Holmes, at grid ref. TL 124969, described as being "104 paces along the hedge and 70 paces into the centre of the field". The hoard was first seen projecting out of the side of a large rabbit hole at the bottom of a very deep furrow. Having recovered the hoard, he did not realise at first that it was silver, but thought it to be lead or pewter, and thus left it standing for some time in a shed at the bottom of his garden. Eventually he called in the local archaeologist, John Peter Wild, and at the subsequent treasure trove inquest in September 1975 it was determined to be treasure trove and lodged in the British Museum. The usual *ex gratia* payment of the full market value of the hoard of £39,400 was made to the finder.



The 'chalice': a two-handled goblet of the type that was later used as a Christian chalice. Height: 12.5 cms.
Photo by courtesy of the British Museum.

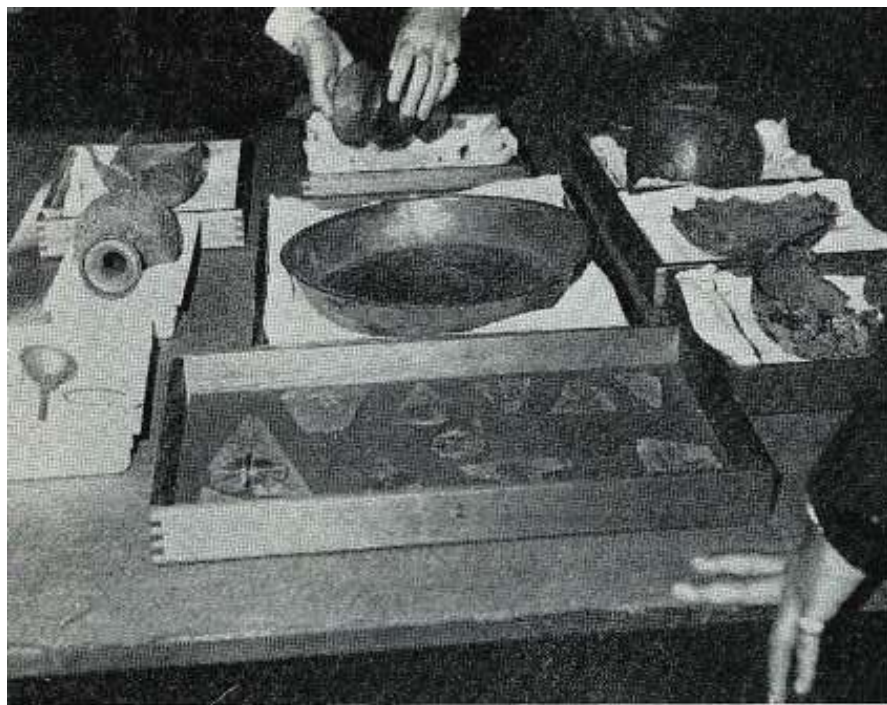
The WATER NEWTON Hoard

The hoard consists of 10 objects or groups of objects. The most startling is a two handled cup that was immediately called the "chalice". However, the term "chalice", with its implication of a cup especially made for celebrating communion, is anachronistic and possibly misleading. In fact the cup is simply an ordinary drinking vessel that happened to be the form that is later fossilised as a specifically Christian chalice. A good illustration of the attitude of the early Christians towards sacred vessels is to be found in Athanasius, who was defending one of his priests who was accused of assaulting a rival priest and committing sacrilege by destroying the altar and the chalice. Athanasius, however, defended his own priest on the grounds that in the first place he did not do it, and that in any

case it was not sacrilege because the other priest had not been properly consecrated and therefore the altar was no altar and the chalice no chalice. Clearly in the 4th century any sanctity that a chalice might possess only came through its use by a proper priest.

Then there are 3 bowls, 2 of which have inscriptions round the rim. (See illustration, p. 202). These are between 12 and 16 cm, in diameter, and could have been used for many purposes: for mixing wine, for eating or drinking from, or for a variety of general functions.

One of the most significant finds, especially from a dating point of view, is an extremely thin and very fragile bowl, decorated all over. (See illustration, p. 201). At first sight it is difficult to see what useful function such a bowl could



The Water Newton hoard, as seen at the Treasure trove inquest. At the centre is the large dish, while in the foreground are the triangular votive plaques.

All photos, except for this one, by courtesy of the British Museum.

perform: it is very fragile, probably as a result of intergranular corrosion and it will have to be conserved before it can be put on display. However, 2 suspension rings were discovered on the rim, which showed that it had been a hanging bowl: the decoration suggests that it was intended to be viewed from beneath. A preliminary guess suggested that it could have been a censer for burning incense, but a more recent suggestion is that it might have been a lamp. But its use is quite uncertain.

The largest item was a shallow dish 27 cm. (10 in.) in diameter, and with a chi-rho in the centre. It had been placed at the bottom of the hoard and the other items had been piled inside it. Originally there had also been 2 flagons, but unfortunately one of these had been hit by the plough, so that only the neck survived. However the other was complete, and is so highly decorated that it is almost "Victorian" in appearance. (Illustrated, p. 203) Perhaps these were for holding wine; if so the 9th object should presumably go with them, for this was a strainer with

a long handle. (See p. 204). The long handle is rather unusual, but there is a chi-rho monogram in the roundel at the end.

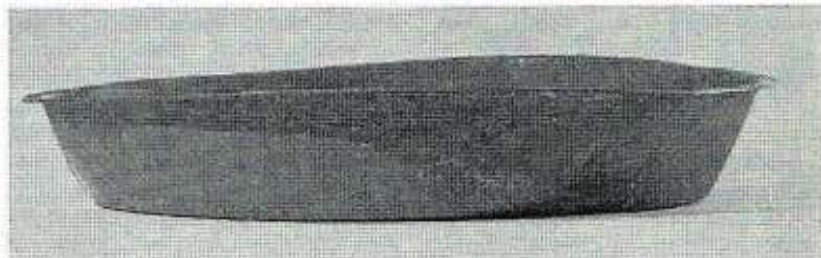
Finally, and most surprising of all, there are a number of triangular plaques. (See illustration on page 202). These appear to belong to a class of plaques well-known in pagan contexts, where they were nailed up in temples as a sign that the donor had performed his vow. The best known examples, such as those from Barkway and Stony Stratford, are somewhat more elaborate. - The Water Newton examples are in a plain triangular form, decorated with veins like leaves. There are 17 in all, between 3 and 15 cm. high: 7 of them had a chi-rho rendered in relief on a

central roundel, and several of them had nail holes where they had presumably been suspended. One had a dedicatory inscription across the top. There were also some fragments of undecorated silver plaques and a gold disc with a chi-rho and alpha and omega, the only piece of gold in the whole hoard.

Two pieces from the hoard have been analysed and gave about 96% silver which is quite a high purity, greater than that of sterling silver (92.5%) and approaching the point at which silver becomes so soft that it is of little practicable use. The total weight of the hoard was 3,977 grams, that is about 10 lbs.

The inscriptions

The Christian nature of the hoard is quite clear from the inscriptions on the various pieces. There are numerous chi-rho monograms, the symbol of the early Christians, derived from the first two letters of the name of Christ, often with alpha and omega added. These are found not only on the plaques, but also on the large dish, the handle of the strainer, and combined with other inscriptions. Three of the pieces had additional inscriptions. Two of them were on the general bowls. One, which was damaged, read: *Innocentia et Viventia () runt*, where the missing word could be restored as *dederunt* or *offerunt*, meaning Innocentia and Viventia gave, or offered (this). The other bowl was inscribed: *Sanctum altare tuum Domine subnixus honoro*, which appears to be a verse, a dactylic hexameter. This is a little difficult to translate, for *subnixus* is a rare word meaning relying on, or supported by, and it appears to have



The large dish in which all the other objects had been piled. Diameter, 27 cms.

no object. Presumably it is to be translated something like: I honour your sacred altar, O Lord, relying on or supported (by you?). On the bottom of the bowl is a further inscription, the name *Publianus*. The third inscription is on one of the triangular plaques, and reads: *Anicilla votum quod promisit complevit*—Anicilla has fulfilled the vow that she promised. Or should it really read *ancilla*, meaning servant: your servant has fulfilled the vow that she (or he?) promised.

Dating

But what is the date of the hoard? The question is a difficult one, for there are no coins from the hoard and no other means of direct dating, so we are forced back to stylistic analysis. Here one immediate point needs to be made, that there are few obvious parallels. Few of the pieces are decorated and few seem to belong to any of the well-known categories of Roman silverware. Even the highly decorated flagon, which looks distinctive, in fact proves elusive, for the decoration is very much the basic classic repertoire of floral motifs and acanthus scrolls which remained unchanged for centuries. Indeed virtually every date between the 1st and 4th centuries A.D. has been suggested by one scholar or another for the flagon.

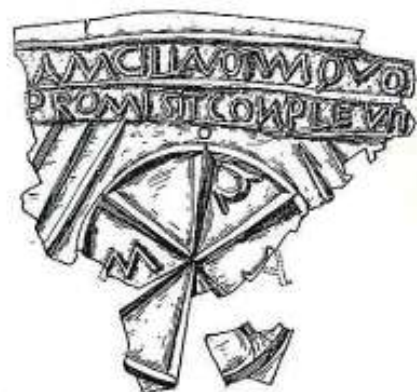
The one piece for which there are close parallels is the hanging bowl, for there are two very similar bowls in the Chaourse Hoard found near Montcornet (Aisne) in north-east France in 1883 and now in the British Museum. This is securely dated by associated coins to 270 A.D. and was no doubt buried in the barbarian eruptions around that date. This is the classic hoard of 3rd century silver and it has two hanging bowls very similar to that from Water Newton. In some aspects the bowls seem to imitate glass bowls, notably in the faceting, a technique popular among glass workers in the 3rd century.



Above: the decorated hanging bowl, diameter 10 cms. Note the prominent facets.

Right: one of the triangular plaques, with a chi-rho at the centre and an inscription at the top. Width: 9.5 cms.

Below: the inscriptions that ran round two of the bowls.



INNOCENTIA TVIVENTIA RVNT

ANCTVM ALTA RETVVMD
MINESVBNIXVSHONORO

P V B
S
N V



One of the bowls, with the inscription 'Sanctum altare tuum . . .' running round the rim. Height, 11.5 cms.

The other slight evidence comes from the votive plaques. These are found throughout the Roman period, but it would appear that their hey day was in the 3rd century. Furthermore it could perhaps be argued that since such objects have hitherto only been found in pagan contexts, they were perhaps more likely to be used by Christians at an early date, when there was still no clear dividing line between Christianity and paganism.

Negative evidence

With such little positive evidence we are forced to turn to negative evidence. Here the first point to make is the very difficulty of finding parallels, which may in itself be significant. There are a considerable number of 4th century hoards known: in this country there are those from Mildenhall and Traprain Law, while on the Continent there is the well-known hoard from Kaiseraugst, and one from the Eastern Roman Empire, now in

Munich. The troubles at the end of the 4th century provided the obvious incentive for buying treasures; thus 4th century silverware is much better known than that of the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

But compared with the 4th century hoards, the Water Newton hoard looks distinctly out of place. Firstly there is the obvious absence of decoration; apart from the hanging bowl and the flagons, the Water Newton pieces are plain. Then, too, the borders of large beads which are a feature of the Mildenhall and Traprain Law hoards are entirely absent at Water Newton. There are no spoons and no goblets at Water Newton, whereas spoons, often stamped with the chi-rho monogram, were among the commonest types of Christian silver in the 4th century, while shallow goblets with wide base plates were found in both the Mildenhall and Traprain Law hoards. Compared to these 4th century hoards, Water Newton feels different.

Dating, therefore, is extremely difficult. The hoard is a very strange one. It appears to be outside the usual categories in both space and time, as if made by a local workshop which was not in touch with the fashionable world of the Mediterranean. Any date, therefore, in the 3rd and 4th centuries is possible. If a slight preference is given to a late 3rd century date, this is as much due to the negative evidence as to the extremely slim positive evidence.

But if the hoard is to be dated to the 3rd rather than the 4th century, the historical implications are considerable. There are numerous occasions in the 4th century when hoards might have been buried: from 367 onwards Saxon raids were continuous and provided a very good reason for burying your silver in the back garden.

The other hoard

Another hoard was found only in 1974 at Water Newton which can be dated almost exactly to 350. This consisted of 30



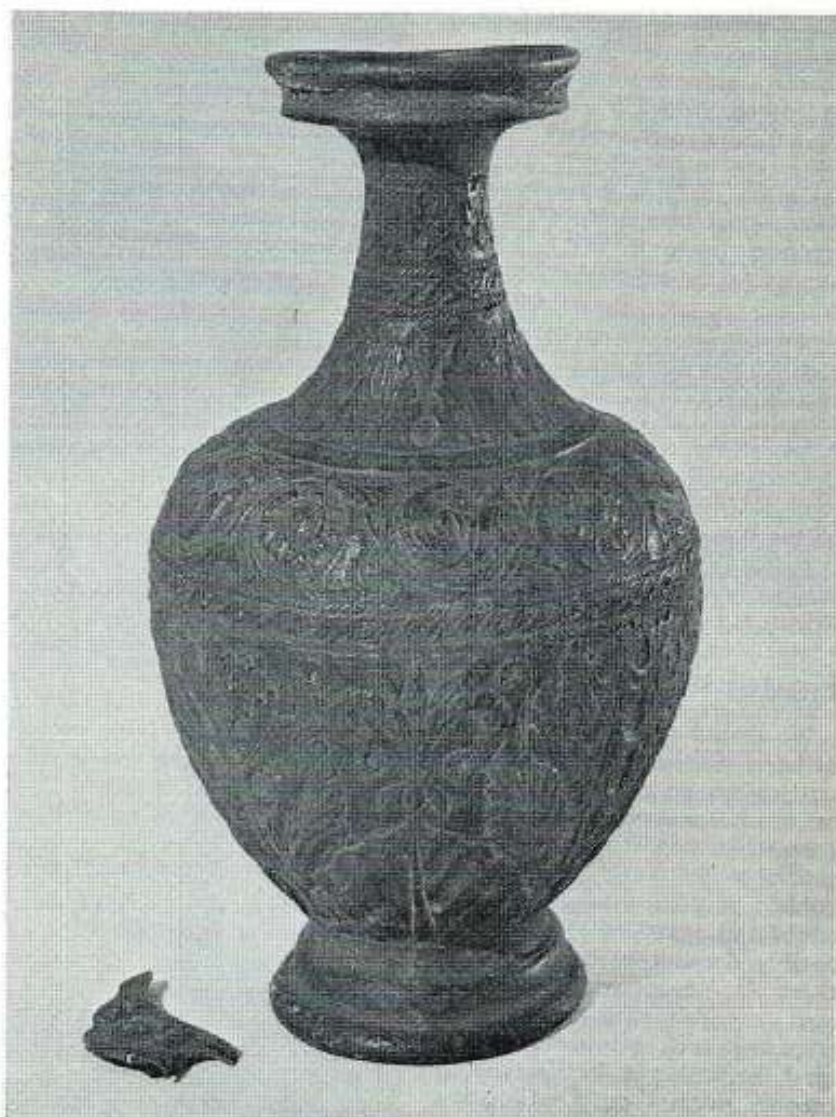
The best-preserved of the triangular plaques, with a chi-rho monogram at the centre and an alpha and omega, and veins like a leaf radiating from it. Height, 15.7 cms.

gold coins, buried in an extremely odd fashion. Originally, they had been in a leather purse, but this had then been placed in a very thin bronze bowl, resembling a Celtic hanging bowl. This, in its turn, was then placed inside a Castor ware pot with stamped decoration, to which it served as a lining. Then there were two silver vessels which had been folded flat and placed on top of the purse inside the other pots. Finally, the whole was covered by a pottery lid. The gold *solidi* enabled the hoard to be dated almost precisely to 350, but the assemblage of so many gold coins is remarkable. Common soldiers, who were relatively well-paid, received a ration allowance of 4 to 5 *solidi* a year, and so 30 *solidi* was a considerable sum of money.

But if the Christian silver was not buried at the end of the Roman Empire, when was it buried? If it was not buried by Christians fleeing from Saxons, the most attractive explanation is that it was Christians fleeing from persecution, such as the great persecution of Diocletian in AD 303-4. At a time of persecution such objects with their Christian inscriptions would be extremely dangerous possessions. One can imagine that the triangular plaques were hurriedly taken down and concealed together with the rest of the church silver, but that in the ensuing persecution the Christians perished, so that they were never able to recover the treasure. Parallels are known for such concealment of Christian objects, such as Bishop Mensurius of Carthage who when he went off to Rome divided the church silver among the four elders of the church, but left a list with an old lady who alone informed the new bishop of the silver.

East or west?

If the date of the hoard is difficult to determine, the place of manufacture is equally problematical. It is easy to assume that all pieces of valuable metal work came from the Mediterranean or from



This highly decorated flagon looks almost 'Victorian', but the motifs, palmettes and vine scrolls are so commonplace that it could date to any time from the 1st to the 4th centuries AD. Height, 20.3 cms.

the East, and two small items in the epigraphy have been attributed to the East. Firstly there is the form of the rho in the chi-rho monogram. Normally a rho is like a P, but here the end curves round and does not actually touch the main stem, a trait which a study of sarcophagi once attributed to the East. Similarly the *Innocentia et Viventia* inscription is done in double stroke lettering, which has been considered to be eastern. However, since the inscriptions would appear to be offertory, one

might have expected them to have been inscribed locally.

Furthermore, although elaborately decorated pieces such as those in the Mildenhall treasure could well come from the Mediterranean or the East, yet the very plainness of the Water Newton hoard shows that it would be well within the range of a local craftsman, while the fact that it does not fall into any known fashion could equally point towards local manufacture.

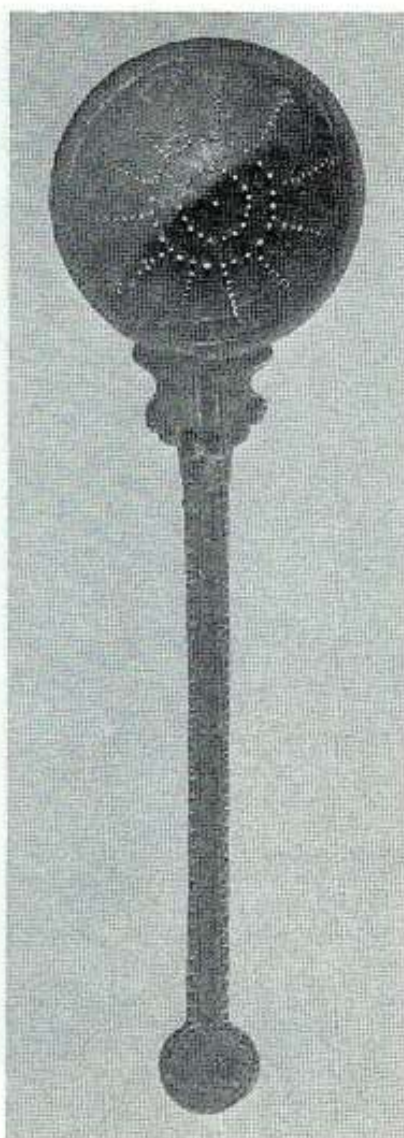
If the date of the hoard is unexpected, its nature is also unusual,

for it would appear to be a hoard belonging to a Christian community rather than to any private individual. The Christian symbols do not in themselves mark it out as belonging to the church—after all there are chi-rho monograms on some of the items in the Mildenhall treasure. However, the inscription appear to be dedicatory while the plaques are certainly objects to be displayed in a religious context. Furthermore there are no marks of private ownership: Roman butlers were in the habit of scratching the name of the owner together with the weight of the plate on the bottom, but there are no such marks on the Water Newton pieces, and it is probably fair to assume that the whole hoard belonged to the church.

Ritual meals?

We should not, however, see this as being necessarily a Communion set, for we do not know to what extent Communion had been established as the main Christian service at this date. Certainly the holding of ritual meals was a well established part of pagan cult, notably the cult of the dead, and elaborate tombs were sometimes even provided with kitchens for preparing such meals. A similar meal, known as a *'refrigerium'* is known from early Christian sources, and in the excavations at the church of San Sebastiano, just outside Rome, the words *'feci refrigerium'*—I have made a *refrigerium*—were found scratched on the walls.

Kenneth Painter perhaps hit the right note when he wrote: "Jungmann has pointed out that before the third century, the material gifts of bread and wine by the laity were hardly ever mentioned, only the thanksgiving over them, but that from the third century, it is precisely the material side that is stressed. Bread and wine are referred to, for example by Cyprian, as the *sacrificium*. Could it be that new recruits to Christianity felt encouraged to bring offerings of



This long handled strainer was probably for straining the communion wine stored in the flagons. Note the chi-rho in the roundle at the end of the handle. Length, 23.2 cms.

the pagan type, their *oblaciones*, to place within the *altare*, not the altar, but the sanctuary or sacred place? Could the objects from Water Newton be the hint of a practice, not previously suspected, transitional between paganism and Christianity?"

If therefore the Durobrivae hoard is a church hoard of the 3rd or early 4th century, many conclusions follow. Durobrivae itself, which has hitherto been considered

to be a rather large 'small town' which formed the centre of one of the largest pottery industries in Britain, should perhaps be reassessed. The defences enclose some 44 acres, but there are extensive suburbs covering 100 acres or more. In his recent book John Wachter suggested that it may have become a cantonal capital in the late Roman period, and the two recent hoards with their clear indication of wealth and prosperity will surely reinforce this conclusion.

We must also rethink many of our ideas about early Christianity. Hitherto the earliest known Christian treasures have been those from Canoscio in Italy and from Kumluca in south-west Turkey, both of which date to the 6th century. The Water Newton Hoard is thus by far the earliest known Christian silver, yet it comes from a province which has hitherto been considered to be the least Christianised of all. Hitherto the most impressive indication of Christian wealth in Britain has been the mosaic pavement from Hinton St. Mary, with its central bust of Christ, which presumably dates to the latter part of the 4th century. But the Water Newton hoard would appear to suggest that when Christianity was still a proscribed sect, it had already gained a rather more secure hold on at least some of the inhabitants of Roman Britain than has hitherto been realised.

* * *

A preliminary account of the hoard by Kenneth Painter has been published in Rivista di Archeologia Christiana for 1975, where detailed references may be found. We are indebted to Kenneth Painter and Catherine Johns for their help in preparing archaeological aspects of this article. Opinions expressed, however, are our own.

The pieces are currently being cleaned, and will go on public display for the first time on April 1st 1977, when a major exhibition of Roman Gold and Silver will open at the British Museum.