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Coins and Kings: Numismatics of the Dark Ages

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Introduction

The centuries that followed the political fragmentation of the Western Roman Empire witnessed neither silence nor simple decay; they rang with the clink of dies on flans, the whisper of silver dirhams on northern scales, and the deliberate choices of rulers who understood that money was a language of power. This book approaches the so-called “Dark Ages” through their coins, reading monetary circulation, coinage reforms, and mint organization as primary records of changing authority. By deciphering coin types, hoards, and policy, we recover how kings, bishops, and emperors asserted legitimacy, financed war and worship, and communicated identity to subjects who might never meet them face to face. Far from peripheral curiosities, coins provide one of the most continuous archaeological and documentary threads we possess for this era.

Our scope is broad yet precise. We begin with the late Roman legacy and follow the emergence of regional mints across successor kingdoms, Byzantium, the Islamic world’s interactions with Europe, and the Carolingian and post-Carolingian West. The story is not linear: gold gives way to silver; weight economies coexist with struck coinage; local practices answer to distant reforms. In these pages, readers will see how a Merovingian tremissis, an Anglo-Saxon penny, and an Abbasid dirham could intersect in the same hoard—and what that intersection reveals about markets, migration, and political negotiation.

Because coins were instruments of messaging, we treat iconography and legend not as decoration but as policy. Monograms, busts, crosses, and inscriptions compress agendas: the invocation of a saint to sanctify rule, the adoption of an emperor’s name to claim continuity, the choice of language—Latin, Greek, or Arabic—to signal audience and allegiance. Yet monetary authority also lived in the mechanics: control of mints, appointment of moneyers, regulation of weight and fineness, and the legal privileges that fenced coinage within jurisdiction. When standards shifted—through debasement, reform, or emergency—we ask who benefitted, who paid, and how markets adapted.

For working numismatists, archaeologists, and collectors, the book is deliberately practical. Clear identification keys guide you through metal, weight, module, die axis, mint marks, and stylistic features, with comparative typologies to shorten the path from find to classification. We emphasize method: how to read worn legends, separate official issues from imitations, and recognize the telltale signatures of specific workshops. Where scientific analyses exist—XRF for fineness, metallography for manufacturing—we explain what they can and cannot prove, and how to integrate results with typology and find context.

Hoards receive special attention as structured deposits that crystallize moments of economic and social stress or opportunity. We present case studies—from Cuerdale to Spillings and Hoxne—to illustrate how composition, stratigraphy, and container data anchor chronology and map exchange networks. Hoards also teach caution: a buried purse records choices, not a whole economy, and absence in the ground is not absence in circulation. By pairing hoard evidence with single finds, legal texts, and charter data, we triangulate toward a more faithful picture of use and value.

The term “Dark Ages” is used here as a conventional shorthand for a complex period roughly spanning the fifth to the eleventh centuries, acknowledging its limitations while embracing the analytical clarity it can bring when carefully defined. Darkness, where it appears, often reflects gaps in our records rather than in human ingenuity. Coins help to bridge those gaps: small artifacts that carry large histories, capable of tying a frontier market to a distant caliphate or a royal villa to a bishop’s mint. They remind us that political authority is negotiated not only in halls and on battlefields, but also in the metallic grammar of everyday exchange.

Finally, this guide aims to be at once accessible and rigorous. Collectors will find ethical frameworks for acquisition and conservation, practical advice for documentation and photography, and tools to detect modern forgeries. Scholars will find concise surveys of reforms, mints, and metrology linked to case studies that can be adapted for teaching and research. Both communities will, I hope, find in these chapters a shared language for interpreting the past: one struck in the dies of authority, circulated through networks of trust, and recovered today from soil, archives, and careful study.

CHAPTER ONE: Mapping the Monetary Landscape: Chronology and Regions, c. 400-1100

The “Dark Ages”—a term many scholars now shy away from, yet one that still conjures images of mystery and transition—were anything but monetarily stagnant. From the final throes of Roman imperial control to the emergence of powerful regional monarchies, the landscape of coinage underwent a profound transformation. Imagine a vast, interconnected tapestry where the threads of gold, silver, and even base metals tell a story of political ambition, economic necessity, and the surprising resilience of trade. Our journey begins by unrolling this tapestry, mapping out the key chronological phases and geographical zones where coins, and the power they represented, evolved.

At the outset, around 400 CE, the Western Roman Empire still cast a long shadow, albeit one increasingly fractured. Its monetary system, centered on the gold *solidus* and its fractions, along with various copper and silver denominations, provided a common currency across a vast and diverse territory. This legacy, however, was not monolithic; different regions experienced the empire’s decline and the subsequent rise of new powers in unique ways, each leaving its own numismatic imprint. The administrative heartland of Italy, the distant but wealthy province of Britannia, the strategically vital Gaul, and the grain basket of North Africa each had distinct relationships with imperial coinage, relationships that would profoundly influence their post-Roman monetary trajectories.

As the fifth century progressed, the political map of Western Europe began to redraw itself with alarming speed. Germanic federated troops and migrating peoples established new kingdoms within the empire’s former borders. The Visigoths settled in Gaul and later Hispania, the Vandals carved out a kingdom in North Africa, and the Ostrogoths eventually took control of Italy. Each of these successor kingdoms inherited, to varying degrees, the Roman monetary infrastructure, including mints and skilled moneyers. Initially, many new rulers continued to strike coins in the name of the reigning Roman emperor, a savvy move that leveraged existing trust in the currency while subtly asserting their own burgeoning authority. It was a monetary balancing act, a nod to the past while laying groundwork for the future.

The period from roughly 450 to 550 CE represents a crucial transitional phase. While the official Roman mints in the West dwindled, the successor kingdoms began to issue their own distinctive coinages. These early issues often closely mimicked imperial prototypes, sometimes to the point of being indistinguishable without careful examination. This wasn’t merely a lack of artistic flair; it was a deliberate strategy to

ensure acceptance and maintain economic stability. The gold *tremissis*, a third of a *solidus*, became a particularly important denomination in many of these kingdoms, especially in Gaul under the Merovingians and in Visigothic Hispania. It was a portable, valuable coin, ideal for long-distance trade and royal payments, yet also small enough for significant local transactions.

Further east, the Eastern Roman Empire, or Byzantium, charted a different course. While the West fragmented, Byzantium not only survived but thrived, maintaining a strong, centralized monetary system. The Byzantine gold *solidus*, renowned for its purity and consistent weight, became the premier international currency, circulating far beyond the empire's borders and influencing coinage across Europe and even into the nascent Islamic world. Its stability provided a crucial anchor in a sea of changing currencies, making it a benchmark against which other coinages were often measured. We'll delve deeper into the specific reforms of Byzantine emperors like Anastasius I and Justinian I in later chapters, but for now, it's important to recognize Byzantium as a continuous, powerful monetary force throughout our period.

The seventh century witnessed another significant shift with the explosive expansion of Islam. The new Islamic caliphates rapidly conquered vast territories, including the wealthy provinces of Syria, Egypt, and North Africa from Byzantium, and the Sasanian Empire of Persia entirely. Initially, Islamic coinage often imitated Byzantine and Sasanian prototypes, but by the end of the seventh century, a truly distinct Islamic coinage emerged: the aniconic gold *dinar* and silver *dirham*. These coins, bearing Arabic inscriptions and religious formulae instead of figural representations, quickly became a dominant force in international trade, particularly across the Mediterranean and into Northern Europe. The influx of silver *dirhams* into Viking Age Scandinavia, for instance, provides compelling evidence of these far-reaching economic connections.

Meanwhile, in Western Europe, the monetary landscape continued to diversify. The Merovingian kingdom in Gaul, particularly during the sixth and seventh centuries, saw an astonishing proliferation of local mints. Bishops, aristocrats, and even smaller potentates began striking their own *tremisses*, often with highly localized designs and inscriptions. This "mint boom" reflects a decentralization of political power, with coinage serving as a tangible expression of local authority. Identifying these often crude, yet historically invaluable, coins is a particular challenge and joy for numismatists, as they offer unique insights into regional economies and political structures often poorly documented by written sources.

Across the English Channel, Anglo-Saxon England developed its own unique monetary trajectory. After the end of formal Roman rule, coinage largely ceased for a period, with a return to bullion-based economies. However, from the late sixth century onwards, gold *thrymsas* (often imitations of continental *tremisses*) began to appear, followed by the distinctive silver *sceattas* in the seventh and eighth centuries. These small, thick silver coins, with their often enigmatic iconography, circulated widely

across Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and had significant cross-Channel connections, reflecting vibrant trade networks. The *sceattas* represent a fascinating phase of monetary experimentation before the eventual standardization under the penny system.

The late eighth and ninth centuries ushered in another transformative era with the rise of the Carolingian Empire under Charlemagne. Recognizing the disparate and often debased nature of Merovingian coinage, Charlemagne implemented a sweeping monetary reform that established a new, standardized silver coinage: the *denier* (or *denarius*). This reform, which abolished gold coinage for everyday circulation in much of Western Europe, had profound and long-lasting effects. The Carolingian *denier*, a small silver coin, became the dominant currency across a vast empire and served as the prototype for countless later European pennies. It signaled a shift in economic gravity, a move away from the gold standards of the Roman and Byzantine worlds towards a silver-based economy in the West.

Following the fragmentation of the Carolingian Empire in the ninth and tenth centuries, regional mints once again gained prominence. While the Carolingian *denier* provided a common module, individual rulers, bishops, and secular lords increasingly asserted their right to strike coins, often adapting the imperial prototypes with their own names and symbols. This period saw the emergence of distinct regional coinages within the broader Carolingian tradition, reflecting the decentralized nature of political power. The sheer variety of these issues, from the German Ottonian empire to the nascent kingdoms of France and Italy, provides a rich field of study for understanding the complex interplay between central authority and local prerogative.

The eleventh century, the tail end of our chronological scope, saw further consolidation and innovation. In England, the Anglo-Saxon penny system became highly organized, with strict royal control over minting and regular recoinages. Across the continent, while regional variations persisted, the *denier* remained the staple, with increasing output and expanding circulation. This period also witnessed the increasing monetarization of economies, with coins playing a more central role in everyday transactions, taxation, and the payment of services. The monetary landscape, which began with the fading echoes of Roman gold, had evolved into a vibrant, diverse, and increasingly silver-dominated system, laying the groundwork for the high medieval period.

Geographically, our monetary journey stretches from the Atlantic shores to the edges of the Byzantine and Islamic worlds. We will examine the distinct numismatic identities of Britannia, Gaul (Frankia), Italy, Hispania, and North Africa as they transitioned from Roman provinces to independent kingdoms. The vital role of the Mediterranean as a conduit for trade and monetary exchange will be a recurring theme, connecting the economies of Byzantium, the Islamic Caliphates, and the emerging Christian powers. Further north, the Baltic and North Sea regions reveal a fascinating world of

hacksilver, bullion exchange, and the influx of foreign coinages, particularly Islamic *dirhams* brought by Viking traders. Each region, while interconnected, offers unique insights into the varied forms of monetary circulation and the expression of authority through coinage during these centuries of profound change.

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