Placed Coins in Late Antiquity, or how Archaeology can Uncover Small-Scale Religious Transactions

Ine Jacobs

Abstract

This chapter focusses on the religious usage of everyday objects in Late Antiquity. More in particular, it traces coins used in "placed deposits", i.e. deposited as part of an irreversible act that attempts to enter a transactional relation with supernatural powers. The author first explores the role of coins as offerings in general, stressing that the monetary value of the coin is generally far smaller than its potential in religious action. An overview of "placed coins" in sacred, public and domestic settings is then presented. As the author argues that "placed coins" were likely ubiquitous in Late Antiquity, it is also examined why the phenomenon has largely gone unrecognised by scholarship. Process-related issues are examined as well as the reluctance of modern researchers to recognise religion in the material record. The author concludes by outlining how the framework of material religion can assist in overcoming perceived differences between "proper" and "improper" religious actions.

Introduction

Whereas other papers in this volume deal with exceptional artefacts of which the religious importance and usage is apparent from their form and/or iconography, this paper focuses on the religious usage of things[1] with mundane functions that were available to all layers of late antique society. The identification of a religious act is made possible entirely through their archaeological context, or the careful observation and recording during excavations of the location of these things within features and in relation to associated things. In addition, an

open mind during interpretation is required. To underline and demonstrate the importance of archaeological find context in the research of Material Religion, but also the pervasiveness of small-scale religious actions, I will turn to one of the most common things found in excavations: coins. In particular I will focus on coins left intentionally in a variety of locations, associated with structures of various size, function and construction, in an irreversible act. Several terms are used to refer to such coins and other things found in association or in similar positions. I here refer to them as “placed deposits”, or “placed coins”, a term that underlines the intentionality of the act without taking a narrow view on their location or incorporating a judgement on the reason behind the deposition.[2] I will, however, argue that these placed deposits should be considered religious acts.

Even though there have been dispersed mentions of such activity over the last four decades,[3] there is no coherent research on placed deposits in Late Antiquity nor has there been much progress on their recognition.[4] The situation is the same for the byzantine centuries and not much better for Classical Antiquity, although the phenomenon has been receiving more attention in the Medieval North-West and Scandinavia.[5] The stark contrast between the omnipresence of intentionally deposited coins and the scarcity of publications on the religious usage of coins is indicative of a lingering reluctance in our field of research to infer religion from the material record alone. Or, to place a more positive spin on the situation: placed deposits are another aspect of late antique religion that can be illuminated by archaeology.

This chapter is written by an archaeologist and engages with shortcomings in the archaeological record to avoid their recurrence in the future. Yet, its main purpose is to point out the ubiquitous nature of modest evidence for Material Religion, which can be found even in the least noteworthy of locations and was practised by all layers of society. In the following pages I will explain how and why these placed deposits fit within the framework of

Material Religion and provide a brief overview of the wide variety of contexts in which relevant material can be found. I will attempt to explain why this evidence has gone unnoticed for so long, and why also today the practices resulting in these coin finds are not recognized for what they were. It is important to outline the archaeological process and the issues connected to it, as in this case it is the main reason for our ignorance about what is likely a pervasive manner of engaging with transcendent powers. I am not concerned with determining the exact intention of these acts or labelling them further as this would inevitably be an oversimplification of diverse intentions that may have depended on setting, time and place, and even individual mindset.[6]

Placed Coins and the Material Economies of Religion

First of all, it is useful to be explicit about what defines placed deposits, why these instances should be considered as part of late antique religion, and how they might have been perceived to function.

During excavations, it happens that a coin or several coins, as well as other artefacts and ecofacts,[7] or combinations of all the previous, are found in close contact with buildings or other human features where they were placed with purpose. In situations like those discussed below, for instance where coins are found exactly underneath the centre of the storage vessel, it is clear that they did not end up there as refuse or accidentally, having fallen from someone's pocket. They were placed in their location as an irreversible act, presumably as part of more complicated religious actions that left no trace in the material record. As such, placed deposits form part of the broader category of "religious deposits" (more commonly termed "ritual deposits"), all of which have been "deposited deliberately, not as refuse or in connection to rituals pertaining to death, but in an act directed at communication with or

concerning supernatural (i.e. transcendent) powers".[8] Religious deposits can be regarded as a form of exchange between human and superhuman and/or supernatural agents who have the power to either harm or help human beings. Broadly speaking, human actors provide offerings to acquire favour or assistance, to compensate powers for a range of benefactions already bestowed upon them, or to assuage powers for harm done to them. A positive response from the powers addressed is not a given, but failing to make the offering or tribute would be dangerous.[9] This idea of economic exchange also finds its way into Christianity, in which the impact of offering on the welfare of the soul becomes well-established.[10]

Placed deposits and votive deposits therefore both involve offerings. Votive practices, however, were dependent on a pre-existing special religious status of a location; votive coins for instance are found at sacred sites, in relation to a sacred effigy or altar, in wells and other watery contexts of which the sacred nature was already well-known to the giver. By contrast, in most of the cases of placed deposits discussed here, there is no indication that the exact spot of deposition was special. Yet the very fact that depositions exist makes it clear that for their creators, the location, feature or structure the deposit was associated with was essential and, as will be argued further on, sometimes of life-importance.

Placed deposits have been found around the world, from ancient times up until the present. In Classical Antiquity, it was still common to present offerings of objects with religious imagery, valuable items, precious or exotic material, but also foodstuffs including water, wine, milk, oil, meat, grain, bread and so on.[11] These offerings were increasingly supplemented by or replaced with coins (cf. infra). Their monetary value and usage in everyday transactions would indeed have made coins particularly fitting for religious practices as well, as these in essence are also intended to be, or hoped to be, transactional.[12] Yet, the religious value of the coin is often far greater than its monetary value. In most of the placed deposits discussed here, as well as in placed deposits of other centuries and regions,

copper-alloy coins of low or even very low value were used.[13] The same is true for other religious deposits including votive deposits and can be noticed in funerary contexts.[14] There therefore does not seem to be a simple correlation between the economic worth of the coin and the roles it could play in symbolic or religious practices. Moreover, it is clear that coins were but one payment option. In that sense, choosing to study coins in isolation in this chapter or in research in general is not optimal.

Studies on the non-monetary usage of coins have been increasing in recent years.[15] Contributions dealing with remains of late antique and byzantine centuries remain scanty and focus on a few selected locations that already *a priori* could be characterized as special and likely to have heightened religious meaning, the foremost example being graves.[16] In addition, some attention has been paid to coins found in springs and wells.[17] The lack of engagement with this kind of archaeological evidence is representative of a more general reproach that can be made to late antique archaeologists, that they have a remarkably passive attitude towards potential evidence outside of mortuary contexts and sacred sites and at best seem content to deliver these uncontextualized *archaeologica* as proof of what is already described in the abundant texts of the period, even though the relationship between text and archaeological record is not as straightforward as it may appear.[18] To my knowledge, there is only one passage that explicitly refers to religious deposits: in the late seventh century, Jacob of Edessa lists the incorporation of Eucharistic bread into house walls among other (in his eyes) aberrant religious practices;[19] "aberrant" in this case meaning a practice that proper Christians should not be engaging with. There are no texts from Late Antiquity that discuss the placement of coins in relation to buildings, doors, fireplaces, roofs, or pieces of furniture for religious purposes by pagans, Jews, or Christians, although such practices are mentioned in periods predating Late Antiquity.[20] We will therefore have to infer religious practice from the material record.

Examples from Civic, Sacred and Vernacular Late Antique Contexts

We are far from having an encompassing overview of late antique find locations of placed coins or other placed deposits. Published information is scarce and scattered, and high-quality information is very difficult to come by. Nonetheless, even with anecdotal evidence, it is possible to give an impression of the variety of contexts in which placed coins are encountered in excavations.

Unsurprisingly, most attention has been given to placed coins in public structures with a religious function.[21] In fact, the only context in which placed coins in Late Antiquity have been researched in any comprehensive manner is that of the synagogue. Coin deposits here (placed coins as well as other deposits) could number several hundred, or even thousands (!) of mostly copper-alloy coins. They are found primarily in synagogues in Upper and Lower Galilee and the western Golan Heights, but have also been attested in Sardis (*Lydia*) and in Ostia in the western Roman Empire.[22] One of the most remarkable examples appears to be the synagogue at Umm el-Qanatir in the Golan, where nearly 7,500 coins were found underneath the flagstones (75% of which were lifted in a controlled manner) and under the benches.[23] It has been suggested that such coins were tithing coins that eventually were "deposited during the construction of the building to be able to dispose of the sacred coins in a respectful way".[24] Yet, the resemblance of the placed coins here with other contexts discussed below suggests there was some kind of relationship. Plus, even if they had originally been assembled as tithing coins, the physical expression of the practice remains the same: they were eventually put under floors in a conscious act without the intention of retrieving them. A practice with similar material results has been attested in a few churches as well. During a rebuilding and floor replacement of the chancel area in the church of Khirbet Fa'ush

(Maccabim, *Palaestina II*) in the last quarter of the fifth century, 153 coins were deposited before laying the mosaic floor.[25] They were all copper-alloy *nummi*,[26] many of them worn. The largest concentration was found underneath the bema chancel (83 *nummi*), with additional deposits under the walls and most recent floors of the pastophoria.[27] The most discussed example of a late antique church context is probably that of the coins deposited in a church at Torre de Palma (*Lusitania*), published in a brief article more than 25 years ago.[28] Here, ten coins were found approximately in front of the altar. The authors describe how the coins had been carefully sealed in the plaster floor of the basilica during construction, within (not under) the actual flooring material itself, while it was still viscous.[29] Eight of the coins were clustered in a loose group immediately in front of the location where the altar must have stood. The ninth coin was deposited separately, about 1m to the north of the altar's northern, front leg. All coins were copper-alloy and of low value. Similar examples may have occurred elsewhere. Several coins (undefined) were for instance found underneath the second-phase mosaics in the New Episcopal Basilica at Stobi (*Macedonia Salutaris*), the most recent minted under Leo I, in AD 457–474.[30] In addition, coins were integrated into the wall of churches and their baptisteries as well. A hoard of 300 copper-alloy coins, the latest minted during the reign of Valentinian III (r. 425–455), was found integrated into the formwork foundations of the Lateran baptistery.[31] Deposits similar in appearance and location were apparently persistent, with examples of church and baptistery-related deposits continuing also in successor kingdoms. For instance, the so-called Zorita de los Canes Treasure was an exceptionally valuable placed hoard composed of 90 gold *tremisses*, buried under the pavement of a baptistery at Reccopolis in the second half of the sixth century.[32]

Placed coins are, however, also found outside of religious buildings, associated with public spaces and civic monuments. Thus, anastylosis of the Tetrapylon at Aphrodisias (*Caria*) revealed two small late antique copper-alloy coins, minted during the reign of

Arcadius (393–408), between the second base from the south and the stylobate.[33] Originally constructed in the second century as the entrance gate to the sanctuary of Aphrodite, these coins clarified that the entire monument had been dismantled and put back up again at some point around or after AD 400, possibly because it had been damaged as the result of an earthquake. In 2016, during conservation of the hypocaust in the Hadrianic Baths at Aphrodisias, a golden solidus of Heraclius was found on top of one of the *pilae*, in between the pillar and a floor tile.[34]

As mentioned above, the largest numbers of coins are thought to have been found underneath the pavements of synagogues, including the one at Sardis, where about 400 coins of fourth-century date were discovered underneath the mosaics.[35] At Sardis, coins were also spread out when laying mosaics in public and private settings. When the mosaic in the south portico of MMS/N Road was created in ca. 425 (a date provided by the most recent coin), 58 mostly low-value copper-alloy coins were encased in the bedding.[36] Some 150 to 175 years later, the mosaic was replaced. This time, a staggering 678 copper-alloy coins were integrated.[37] In addition, in a late antique private domestic complex in sector PN, 53 coins were placed under the tesserae probably in the second quarter of the fifth century.[38] Sardis therefore already provides a tantalizing glimpse of the spread of the phenomenon of coin deposition. The placement of coins also underneath floors of private houses certainly occurred in multiple regions of the Late Roman Empire as well. Several cases have for instance been noted (and interpreted as placed deposits) in fourth-century Aquileia (Italy), both in urban residences and in a rural villa.[39]

Coins were furthermore placed into the walls of vernacular architecture. Thus, in Scythopolis (*Palaestina II*) hundreds of *nummi* were apparently found mixed into the mortar of walls.[40] The pervasiveness of coins throughout a living space can be glimpsed from a multi-roomed residential structure to the south of the Upper Agora at Sagalassos (*Pisidia*)

(Fig. 8.1).[41] In Room 9/11 three single placed coins were found. Firstly, the entrance to the unit was repaired sometime before the year 600. For this purpose, previous floor levels were partially dug away to install a foundation of small stones, brick fragments, mortar and some tuff stones. Underneath both the lowest rubble block and a brick fragment just next to it a very small copper-alloy coin (unidentified, probably of fifth-century date) had been laid down. Secondly, around the same time, the rooms were given new floors. As part of this operation, a pithos was installed inside room 9, as part of which a small copper-alloy based coin was positioned exactly underneath the centre of its base (Fig. 8.2). The three placed coins were probably deposited by the same individuals. If placed coins are mostly associated with a new building phase or installation of a building feature, in this building placed coins were also associated with the purpose of use and occupation. Inside a pithos installed underground in the floor of Room 10, a *nummus* was left after the vessel had been emptied for the last time. Before the inhabitants abandoned the room, they also carefully arranged the remnants of an amphora inside the storage vessel; its neck opening is so small that anything but a careful deposition was physically impossible (Fig. 8.3). This also suggests that the amphora was broken at the time of abandonment when or even because its owners were not taking it with them. Likewise, a clipped coin was left inside another pithos in Room 16, together with two (at time of deposition) intact ceramic vessels and a glass bead. The special status of the vessel is also highlighted by the fact that this storage vessel had been surrounded with placed deposits including miniature vases and household objects when it was installed.[42] In both Room 16 and Room 10, a coin therefore was part of a larger "termination deposit" during which diverse objects were intentionally left behind.[43] The exact purpose of these "termination deposits" again must remain unknown, but as they may well reflect a gift-giving element and therefore communication with non-human powers, they may also be regarded as the remains of religious practices.

<<FIGURE 8.1 HERE>>

<<FIGURE 8.2 HERE>>

<<FIGURE 8.3 HERE>>

The examples at Sagalassos already hint that placed coins could be pervasive, but they still remained limited to one building (or they were only noticed in the excavation of one building). The extent to which coins could be integrated into all kinds of structures throughout an entire settlement has to my knowledge only been demonstrated at the early Roman colony of Magdalensberg in ancient Noricum (modern Carinthia).[44] Excavations here yielded a dataset of 1,434 Greek, Iron Age and Roman coins, 1,010 of which come from stratigraphic contexts dated between the first century BC and the Claudian period. Out of these, 578 were apparently deposited intentionally and irreversibly. That is more than one third of the complete dataset and more than half of the coins with a certified context. Many of these deposited coins were single finds and again of modest monetary value.[45] As this data set from Magdalensberg is so comprehensive and well-studied, it is worthwhile summarizing the diversity of contexts in which coins were intentionally deposited.[46] 42 coins were encountered underneath floors, including two silver coins underneath a threshold; three coins were deposited in postholes; a total of 166 coins were retrieved from nine hearths. Seven coins were retrieved from waterlogged contexts, including wells, a cistern shaft and a sewer pipe. In total 97 coins were found associated with standing walls. Of these, five had one coin deliberately mixed in with the building materials. In addition, in two neighbouring beam-sockets belonging to a two-storeyed taberna, hoards of 31 and 22 coins were found. As both hoards would have been made unrecoverable from the moment the beams were installed, it is very unlikely that the reason for their deposition was economic. Further characteristics –

including the inclusion of Iron Age coins at a time when Roman coins had been broadly adopted for economic transactions, and the presence of graffiti on two Roman denarii – further indicate that the composition of the hoards was not ordinary. Finally, 38 silver coins were placed in an artificial cavity near a wall niche which afterwards was covered with a carved stone. In this last case as well, a religious motivation should be considered, as wall niches were the focus of household religious activity, which included offerings to chthonic gods.[47]

The number of coins from Magdalensberg that has been identified as intentionally deposited is therefore exceptionally high and the related contexts remarkably diverse. Although it may be argued that this settlement is not comparable to others mentioned in this chapter, both because Magdalensberg was located on the borders of the Empire and the coin depositions occurred over a 90-year period several centuries before the start of Late Antiquity,[48] at the very least it should make us wonder how much we are overlooking or not recognizing elsewhere.

Process-Related and Conceptual Reasons for Neglect

In the publications on Magdalensberg the exceptional coin record is connected to the site's location on a steeply sloping hillside and therefore its high level of preservation, as well as to the quality of the excavations and the excellent archaeological documentation pinpointing exact findspots. I can be brief on the first aspect: in comparison to other Roman-era structures in surrounding sites and even regions that is certainly true, but the level of preservation seen at Magdalensberg is, if not entirely matched, then certainly approached in many Mediterranean and Near Eastern settlements, none of which can compare to the coin record of the Carinthian site. I am afraid that the quantity and quality of information available is

dependent on the attention paid to coin finds, great and small, during excavations and the ways in which coin information is dealt with afterwards, during phases of documentation, research and publication. In addition, even when locations are noted with the greatest exactitude, the step of connecting these coins with religious actions in the past is seldom taken. Process-related and conceptual aspects are interconnected and reciprocal, but for the sake of clarity I will touch upon them one by one in the following paragraphs.

There are several process-related factors that impact on the availability and quantity of the evidence.[49] First of all, it is very likely that many placed coins were/are simply missed in excavations. This is probably true for all periods and places, but the problem is compounded by the very large numbers of low-quality and low-value small coins used in the late antique centuries. As has already become clear from the overview above, most coins in placed deposits of late antique date are low denomination copper-alloy coins: sometimes larger *folles* and semi-*folles*, but, as for instance is demonstrated by the finds from the complex of Sagalassos, *nummi* were also used as placed deposits (Figs 8.2, 8.4). Due to their small size and a colour that often is very similar to the surrounding soil, such coins no doubt are overlooked much more often than they are retrieved; it takes an archaeologist already aware of the issues discussed here to know where to take a very close look for the presence of relevant material culture. The building in which the coin finds discussed above were found was only part of a larger excavated area in the city centre of Sagalassos, but in none of the adjoining excavations have such coin finds been reported. What differs is not necessarily the practice, but in this case the archaeologist on site, who happened to have an interest in placed deposits.

<<FIGURE 8.4 HERE>>

If one or more coins were placed underneath floors constructed using perishable materials (e.g. straw mats or wooden boards) in vernacular structures, it is next to impossible to distinguish between placed deposit and accidental loss; such coins will simply be registered as lying on top of the surface of the layer underneath. Conversely, stone-built architecture is of course not conducive to the finding of placed deposits either. When items are included underneath or inside walls during construction, excavation will only by accident recover them. Likewise, when stone pavements are encountered, it is still not customary to lift the floor slabs to see what is underneath. We are better informed about mosaic floors, not because there was a special association between placed deposits and mosaics, but because mosaics often require lifting or partial lifting during conservation after having been unearthed.[50] In general, relevant finds show up during anastylosis or conservation work as often as they do during excavation. But such activities often occur many months or years after the excavations, and conservators and workmen are trained differently and have another focus. When they come across relevant finds, that information does not always make it back to the archaeologists. It can be assumed that many finds, including low-denomination coins, which are of no importance in the eyes of conservators, are not registered. The golden solidus found on a hypocaust pillar in the Aphrodisian Baths would in all likelihood not have been reported had it been a copper-based coin. And even if an archaeologist gets involved, the exact find spot and context of the deposit are often already lost.

In order to research placed deposits, i.e. determine whether a coin was deposited intentionally rather than thrown out as rubbish or lost accidentally, engagement with the precise find context of the coin or coins *within* their context, including exact location, associated artefacts and features or structures, is essential.[51] Yet despite a fast-growing number of calls to treat coins as archaeological artefacts, many archaeologists still often only see coins as dating tools and pass them on to the numismatist, whereas many numismatists

consider coins to be self-sufficient objects and give little attention to find context.[52] Needless to say, for a numismatist, the low-denomination coins that are often not in a very good state but also arrive in large quantities, are not very interesting.[53] Until recent years, many illegible and/or disintegrated coins did not make it into publications or were mentioned only in bulk.[54] In ideal circumstances, a coin specialist is present on site and can engage with the find if not immediately than at least while the excavators are still present, so that the coin can be evaluated as part of its original context. When this happens, an actual intellectual exchange between numismatist and archaeologist can ensue, which goes far beyond conveying the minting date of the coin to date the context in which it was found.[55] Ironically, it seems that coins in contexts like those mentioned above need to be treated with extreme care as they do not make precise dating tools at all. At Magdalensberg, placed coins had been minted long before being deposited (cf. supra). Likewise, the coins found under the Tetrapylon of Aphrodisias have been used to argue for an earthquake shortly before or during the reign of Arcadius, but the seismic event responsible for damaging the monument has now been redated to the later fifth century, thus the coins again only provide a very broad *terminus post quem*.[56]

Information that was not captured in the past can only be re-created to a certain extent and mainly when several coins or a quantity of coins have been registered in the same stratigraphic unit. In such cases, intentionality of deposition may at times also be traced post-factum. In all cases mentioned at Sardis, it was the noteworthy number of coins in the mosaic beddings that alerted the numismatist that something “out of the ordinary” was going on.[57] Recurrence of deposition certainly helps interpretation. One can imagine that the excavators at Scythopolis did not think much of one or a few coins encountered in the mortar of excavated structures, but with hundreds of them present, a pattern can be established.

In the case of single coin finds, properly evaluating the purpose of the deposition becomes next to impossible without detailed publication of context. For instance, how do we interpret finds like the one golden solidus associated with a wall in the Pactolus North suburb at Sardis? The solidus, issued between 519 and 527 under the emperor Justin, is only reported to have been found "in the massive rubble wall which forms the eastern limit of [Unit] J…", a presumed industrial unit.[58] As the Sardis publication explicitly added that the excavator concluded the solidus had been "placed there during construction", this solidus is now used as an example of placed deposit.[59] In the context of this article, this should be regarded as a good thing, but it would be desirable to know what the grounds for such a conclusion were. There are many more cases in which single coins are reported as found inside the masonry of buildings; should they all be interpreted as placed deposits?

And how do we distinguish between coin hoards deposited for economic reasons, where the depositor had the intention to recover the coins but was prevented from doing so, from placed deposits?[60] If a hoard was created to safeguard the coins, the economic worth of the total of coins and especially their accessibility, or rather retrievability, are essential aspects. In many cases, however, neither is easy to evaluate, especially not retrospectively. Take for instance "Hoard D", found in the same complex in the Pactolus North suburb at Sardis. This hoard consisted of 120 small bronze coins buried in an earthen floor along the west wall of one of the complex's rooms, potentially at a moment when there was some rebuilding going on. The coins were all found close together, which indicates they had been buried inside a container, probably a cloth bag which has since perished. The container may be an indication that the hoard was intended to be retrieved, but this is far from conclusive. Information on the find circumstances of this hoard is scanty, and we for instance do not know how far below the contemporary floor level it was buried, whether there was anything to mark its location etc. It therefore may or may not have been retrievable. Of the 120 coins,

only 17 could be identified, ranging in date from Valentinian II (issued 375–392) to Justin I (518–527), whereas many of the others already disintegrated during cleaning.[61] The total monetary worth of the coins is not very high, but for its owner may nevertheless have been important enough for safeguarding by burial. A further hoard consisting of 71 bronze coins mostly minted in the late fifth century was found underneath the tile floor of a late antique building on the slopes of Sardis's acropolis. In this case, the coins had been gathered in a ceramic drinking flask.[62] The vessel may have been a convenient way of keeping the coins together but may equally have been part of the deposit. The total worth of the hoard was again very low, but may have been essential for its owner. Again, it would have been good to have more information on where exactly under the tile floor the flask was found: immediately underneath or further down and, most importantly, underneath one tile that could be lifted with relative ease or not? In both cases, though, if the coins were put away for safekeeping, why were they not retrieved?

In some cases, the exact location of the placed deposit combined with an awareness of the significance of locations can help to understand if and why engagement with superhuman powers was considered beneficial. Thresholds are a prime example. The importance of thresholds, or, more aptly, the door openings to which they belonged, as liminal and thus powerful and potentially dangerous places is present in many cultures.[63] Placed coins and other deposits under thresholds were only one aspect of religious practices associated with doors. For instance, graphic signs and symbols, including crosses and menoroth, but also short prayers, were carved as architectural decoration or added later on door posts and door lintels. The depositions associated with the pithoi at Sagalassos only make sense when realising how expensive such storage vessels were and, even more importantly, how vital they were for the survival of the household as containers of basic food supplies. This would explain why placed deposits associated with the installation of the vessel were considered to

aid in ensuring that food was plenty and would not spoil, whereas termination deposits could be left in acknowledgement and gratitude for good services.

When a spread of coins is present, there may still be noticeable patterns present as well, even if we cannot immediately explain them. For instance, the coins placed under the residential mosaics at Aquileia were primarily associated with the corners of rooms, which it has been suggested may be connected to either structurally important locations or to the stages of the mosaic laying process.[64] In the church at Torre de Palma, there was a clear concentration near the church's altar area. If there were clusters noted among coins spread under synagogue floors, they were located near the doors, *bemah*, benches and Torah shrines.[65] In other cases, the spread may have been more general and intended to envelop the entire building. Coin hoards deposited in one location, like for instance those encountered in baptistery walls, may have been considered to have a spatially greater impact as well.

Placed Coins, Placed Deposits and Religion in Late Antiquity

Process-related issues could be improved with better and more detailed recording practices and a more context-orientated post-excavation analysis. But even if increased attention will allow us to notice and note coins that were deposited intentionally, it is another step to arrive at an evaluation of the deposition being a religious act. Interpretations given to the deposits discussed earlier on in this article make it clear that researchers are reluctant to interpret deposits as the result of a religious act or are unaware of the possibility. The presence of the golden solidus under the hypocaust floor at Aphrodisias was never questioned. The coins under the Tetrapylon were explained as a stabilization and fixture of the monument after its reconstruction.[66] At Sardis, the spread of coins under mosaics was noted down as unusual, but in concluding that "there was some effort to throw coins in the bedding matrix of mosaics",[67]

the interpretation remains cautiously uncommitted.[68] The author of the article dedicated to the coins underneath the floor of the basilica at Torre de Palma compared them to modern lucky charms and even time capsules.[69] Especially in Christian settings, authors are noticeably uncomfortable with the practice: while they are willing to assign placed coins a religious function in Roman centuries, they are reduced to a pagan survival or superstition as time progresses.[70]

As already mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the problem arises because we still prioritize religious practices referred to in literary sources over practices attested in the archaeological record, no matter how recurrent or widespread. Without related texts, practices are more likely to remain unrecognized or to be qualified as "superstitious", not entirely proper, and carried out by people who did not know better. Limiting the practice to the uneducated masses and construction workers is a typical example.[71] Both the locations of the coins and their low value certainly made this kind of communication available to all, but it is worth highlighting once more that the monetary value of the coin did not necessarily equal its potency in transactions with supernatural beings. Moreover, some of the locations mentioned (e.g., the walls of baptisteries), and the value of some placed coins (e.g., the solidus in the Baths at Aphrodisias), hint that wealthier individuals or groups and at times even church leaders were also aware of the practice and condoned it.

The neglect of placed deposits is probably also related to the consistent underestimation or even denial of the numerous and ubiquitous demonic powers, beliefs in which were shared across cultural and religious boundaries in Late Antiquity (and beyond). Although most attention has gone to how late antique populations protected themselves against evil demons, it is likely that they considered the world to be populated by a whole spectrum of forces, many of them implacably hostile, some potentially useful and controllable, especially if one knew how to approach them in the proper manner.[72]

Considering the range of monuments discussed, from very modest structures to public monuments, and including synagogues as well as churches and baptisteries, it should be clear that placed coins were not tied to any religion in particular. The people depositing them must have self-identified not just as "pagan", but also as Jewish or Christian. It is highly likely that coins and other objects were placed in carefully chosen places in an attempt to communicate with such beings, not as powerful as divine powers, angels or saints, but nonetheless with the ability to cause harm or bring prosperity to the household or the community.

The greatest benefit of the Material Religion framework is that it makes no distinction between religious frameworks or supernatural powers in the world and is not hindered by value judgements on proper and improper ways of contacting them. Placed deposits were obviously considered efficient and useful by their practitioners, and we should therefore treat them with due respect.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have attempted to create awareness of unassuming but ubiquitous religious practices by focussing on archaeological evidence for placed coins. Although only a small fraction of the coins and other objects that were intentionally deposited have been recognized by modern researchers, enough is preserved to suggest that they formed part of the fabric of daily life. They were a means to fortify the home, public monuments and religious structures. Placed deposits are spread over vast geographic areas and were created by members of various religions. They long predate Late Antiquity and continue without any abatement throughout the period, and probably in later centuries as well. Even though placed deposits are (almost) absent from the rich literary sources of the period, they cannot be considered as aberrant or unimportant, but should be added to the tried and tested plethora of strategies

employed to enter a relationship or transaction with supernatural powers and thus increase the chances of living a good and prosperous life.

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[1] On the term “things”, see Morgan 2021: 3–5.
[2] The most common term for these deposits is “foundation deposits”, but, as we will see, in addition to foundations, coins were also found in other parts of structures and/or their furnishings. Other terms used include “special”, “structured”, “odd”, or the more general “ritual”.
[3] One of the earliest to attempt a survey of coins as “foundation deposits” in houses and villas of the Roman period into the fourth century was Donderer 1984.
[4] The only vaguely related object-category are the so-called “Aramaic incantation bowls”, buried mainly between the sixth and the eighth centuries in Mesopotamia. About 2,000 of these are known, but many more existed. They are, however, only a very small and very particular part of a much larger phenomenon.
[5] Rassalle 2021: 156–60 provides an overview per region for the ancient Mediterranean, where the focus is still very much on sacred structures. Useful overviews can furthermore be found in Fingerlin 2005; Hunt 2006; Wilburn 2019. See also Gilchrist 2012: 227–37; 2020: 121–33 for medieval Britain. The most complete discussion of placed deposits is Hukantaival 2016. Though focused on Scandinavia and later periods, it is a highly useful reference work for methodological issues.
[6] A concise summary of interpretations of placed deposits, valid also for Late Antiquity, can be found in Rogers 2019: 127–31.
[7] Reed 2019 is, to my knowledge, a rare example looking into plant remains in placed deposits.
[8] Osborne 2010: 1. Osborne uses the term “ritual deposits”. Much has been written about the terms “ritual” and “religion”. Osborne’s definition, however, also answers to the broader term of Material Religion as set out also by Meyer in this volume.
[9] Morgan 2021: 94 with further references on the economic aspects of Material Religion.
[10] See for instance several articles in Davies and Foracre 2010. Franses 2018: Chapter 4 examines gift exchange in byzantine donor portraits or, as Franses prefers to refer to them, “contact portraits”.
[11] Hub 2012: 29.
[12] For the importance of the monetary aspect, see also Leatherbury 2019: 253.
[13] DeRose Evans 2018: 67 note 111 for an extensive bibliography on copper-alloy coins in classical foundation deposits and used as votive gifts.
[14] Walsh 2019: 32–3 presents an overview of votive deposits near cult reliefs in mithraea in the northern and northwestern provinces of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, and pp. 62–3 for examples of small-denomination coins left in the third and fourth centuries at spring sites and temples, some centred on the main cult statue or reliefs in Italy, Gaul and Britain. Leatherbury 2019 for the usage of low denomination coins as votives at the sacred sites of Mamre, Vari, Corinth and Hammat Gader. Coin deposits in synagogues: Rassalle 2021: 169. Noeske 1991: 278–90; 2000: 93–8 discusses the alabaster krater filled with 8,600 *nummi* found underneath the altar of the pilgrimage centre at Abu Mina.
[15] Maguire 1997 remains a seminal paper on the byzantine non-monetary usage of coins. See also now also Burström and Ingvardson 2018; Krmnicek and Chameroy 2019.
[16] Bollók 2013 is a useful summary of late antique grave goods, including coins, with presumed apotropaic functions. See also Burström 2018: 231–2 with examples of coins deposited in/around grave and baptismal fonts. Most studies are site specific. For instance, see DeRose Evans 2018: 67–74 for Sardis, with references to other sites; Stroobants, Cleymans and Van de Vijver 2019 for Sagalassos; Wenn, Ahrens and Brandt 2017 for Hierapolis.
[17] See for instance Barkay 2000; Leatherbury 2019. For coin depositions in Roman and late antique centuries, see also Facchinetti 2004.
[18] Bowes 2008. Claudia Perassi’s 2018 study on the deposition of bronze coins in baptismal fonts is a good case in point. She convincingly argues that the text of the pseudo-Iliberritan Canon 48, which considers the danger of bishops appearing to receive payment for the administration of baptism, is related but only considers a potential consequence of the act and does not shed light on the intentions of the people depositing the coins.
[19] Hindo 1943: 300–1. Literary sources mentioning coins embedded in structures deal with instances whereby valuables were hidden and retrieved or were hidden with the intention of retrieving them, see Thüry 2000.
[20] See the literature cited under note 5.
[21] Most studies on previous centuries as well have focused on large buildings with public functions, whereas there are only a few studies that deal with private contexts. In addition to those mentioned later on in this paper, see Schmid 2010 for Augusta Raurica and Rogers 2019 for placed coin hoards in Britain.
[22] The most recent comprehensive overviews are Rasalle 2021: 134–210; Ahipaz and Leibner 2023.
[23] Dray, Gonen and Ben-David 2017: 216.
[24] Rasalle 2021: 162–76. Note that Rasalle (2021: 161–2, 186) considers the coins underneath synagogue floors as different from structured deposits which are defined in a rather narrow manner based on examples from older ancient Mediterranean cultures, and therefore as “unique to ancient Judaism”. I would argue that that is not the case and that the coins from underneath the floors of late antique synagogues need to be evaluated against contemporary depositions in churches but also private houses.
[25] Har-Even and Shapira 2012: 334, 338; Ahipaz and Leibner 2023: 152–3.

[26] *Nummi* or *minimi* (many scholars use the term interchangeably) were small copper-based coins weighing up to 1 gram and of very low value. They were minted in huge quantities. For instance, to buy 1 kg of bread in the sixth century, about 300 *nummi* would have been required (Morrisson and Cheynet 2002: 829). They were so small that they were easily lost or dropped and of so low value that not much effort would have been invested in retrieving them. Hence, they are also present in large numbers in late antique archaeological layers.
[27] Bijovsky 2012a.
[28] Huffstot 1998.
[29] Huffstot 1998: 222.
[30] Pavlovski and Blaževska 2018: 59.
[31] Pelliccioni 1973: 111, Figs 167–8. The author suggests here the coins represent a money bag lost by a construction worker. The find location has been re-evaluated as belonging to the original foundations by the team of the ERC-funded *Rome Transformed* project (Thea Ravasi, pers. comm.).
[32] Castro-Priego, Diarte-Blasco and Olmo-Enciso 2023. The recently published edited volume *Coins in Churches. Archaeology, Money and Religious Devotion in Medieval Northern Europe* (Gullbekk et al. 2021), deals with remarkably rich coin finds in churches of Scandinavia and Switzerland between 1100 and 1700.
[33] Paul 1996: 208. Both had diameters of less than 20 mm.
[34] Smith 2018: 270
[35] Magness 2005.
[36] Greenewalt, Ratté and Rautman 1994: 6–7; DeRose Evans 2018: 78 Table 3.11a.
[37] Greenewalt, Ratté and Rautman 1994: 3–5; DeRose Evans 2018: 83–87, Table 3.12c.
[38] DeRose Evans 2018: 81–2, Table 3.11f.
[39] Facchinetti (2012: 339–43) discusses five private buildings in the centre of Aquileia with coins placed underneath floors, at least three of which belonged the fourth century. Interestingly, placed coins were often recognized under two or three different floors within the same house, with an apparent preference for placing them in the corners of the rooms. Placed coin deposits were further identified at a rural estate and in several public buildings from the Julio-Claudian period to (at least) the fourth century.
[40] Bijovsky 2012b: 90–1 with more examples.
[41] See Jacobs 2021 for a more extensive discussion of the complex and the finds.
[42] For a description, see Jacobs 2022: 90. The practices surrounding the installation of this dolium were related to the deposition of the one *nummus* underneath another storage vessel in Room 9/11, though much more elaborate.
[43] Facchinetti 2019: 230 for further examples.
[44] Krmnicek 2014, 2018.
[45] Krmnicek 2018: 525.
[46] Krmnicek 2018: 520–4 for a more extensive discussion of the evidence. Comparable contexts are briefly mentioned in Rogers 2019: 124–7, though none as secure and pervasive as at Magdalensburg.
[47] Krmnicek 2018: 524.
[48] Krmnicek 2018: 520.
[49] A useful overview of the issues related to coin excavation and post-excavation processing is provided in Rasalle 2021: 63–78.
[50] See Rensbro and Moesgaard 2021 for a discussion on the relationship between floor type and coin finds in medieval churches.
[51] Find context is the overarching theme of the volume on coins and their usage edited by Krmnicek and Chameroy in 2019.
[52] For more elaborate versions of this highly pertinent critique, see Kemmers and Myrberg 2011; Krmnicek 2023; Krmnicek and Kalisch 2023: 14–15.
[53] DeRose Evans 2018: 52.
[54] DeRose Evans 2018: 52.
[55] In addition to Magdalensberg, another example of excellent excavation, recording and collaboration between numismatists and archaeologists is that of coins found fallen from a wall of a Roman-era die workshop at Virunum (Austria), see Krmnicek 2014.
[56] Wilson 2024: 116. In general, fourth-century coins also continued to circulate as legal currency in the fifth century, whereas hoards deposited in the sixth century still include fourth- and fifth-century coins, see e.g., Bijovsky 2012b: 76–99; DeRose Evans 2013.
[57] DeRose Evans 2018: 80. Rasalle 2021: 87–95 carefully put together a classification system for coins found foremost in synagogue buildings, distinguishing between scattered and clustered coins, retrievable and irretrievable coins, and seven potential interpretations of coins finds. However, this classification too assumes the presence of multiple coins.
[58] Hanfmann 1964: 24.
[59] Bijovsky 2012b: 91.
[60] On this topic, see also Rogers 2019.
[61] Hanfmann 1964: 64; Burrell 2008: 166.

[62] Greenewalt et. al. 1994: 24, Fig. 26, 35 n. 15; Burrell 2008: 166.
[63] Anniboletti 2010 for coins under thresholds in Pompeii. Literary sources from the Roman period mention that objects underneath thresholds had the power to both bring good luck or prosperity to the building and its residents, and to ward off bad luck and evil magic. According to Pliny the Elder for instance burying the head of a "dragon" (*draco*), probably some variety of snake, underneath the threshold brought prosperity to the residents (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 29, 20, 76), while the genitals of a black dog averted evil magic (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 30, 24, 82). To name just one contemporaneous example, in late antique settlements in the North Sea zone there was also a special relationship between special deposits and entrances (Hamerow 2006: 9–12, 23).
[64] Facchinetti 2012: 342.
[65] Rasalle 2021: 195; Ahipaz and Leibner 2023: 151.
[66] Paul 1996: 208.
[67] DeRose Evans 2018: 80. Previous excavators had also already interpreted the coins as being intentionally deposited, but provide no explanation as to why this would have been the case. See for instance Hanfmann and Waldbaum 1970: 47 and Seager 1972: 433.
[68] Nonetheless, the usage of coins in "ritual deposits" is acknowledged in a few other archaeological contexts, where the coins formed part of larger placed deposits of the first and second centuries (DeRose Evans 2018: 62–4).
[69] Huffstot 1998: 225; repeated in Leatherbury 2019: 255.
[70] E.g., Facchinetti 2019: 227: "La possibilità che anche cristiani possano aver fatto ricorso a questa offerta, suggerita dalla cronologia dei casi più recenti e dal suo ricorrere anche in edifici di culto cristiano, evidenzia come, se anche in origine doveva rappresentare un atto religioso, nel corso del tempo poteva aver perso
il suo significato fino a divenire una consuetudine superstiziosa, senza alcun riferimento al credo professato dai suoi autori."
[71] For both the mosaics in the houses at Aquileia (Facchinetti 2019: 227) and the basilica at Torre de Palma (Huffstot 1998: 222–3) the builders were thought to have put down the coins. Raselle 2021: 161 doubts that priests or synagogue leaders were involved in the practice.
[72] Lunn-Rockliffe 2018.