THREE EARLY DISCOVERIES OF 'LEATHER MONEY'

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Granlund, in his survey of the evidence for the use of leather as money and as coinage, dismisses a number of alleged medieval instances as mythical. Although no 'leather money' is to be found in collections in this country, there are records which speak of its discovery. Three such find-records are discussed here.

The Launceston hoard, discovered about 1540, is one of the earliest antiquarian descriptions of a find of medieval coinage, if the leather objects of which it was made up were in fact money. It was published at the beginning of the seventeenth century by Carew, who wrote, 'About sixty years past there were found certain leather coins in the castle wall, whose fair stamp and strong substance had till then resisted the assault of time, as they would now of covetousness.' Polwhele, the nineteenth-century historian of Cornwall, mentioned Carew's note, and added the interpretation which Granlund has generally attacked; the main interest of his account is its early date. He said, 'They [i.e. the leather coins] were French. Philip de Comines informs us, that for a long time after King John of France was taken prisoner, the current coin of that kingdom, was nothing but bits of leather, with a silver nail in the middle of them. Probably, these were some of the sort.'

Sixty years is a long interval between the event and the record, and Carew does not say where his information came from. A clue to the circumstances of the discovery is offered by another, almost contemporary, source. Leland's itinerary took him to Launceston, probably in 1542. 'The large and auncient Castelle of Launstun', he remarked, 'stondith on the Knappe of the Hiile by South a litle from the Paroche Chirch. much of this Castel yet stondith.' He also noted that the parish church had lately been 're-edified'. One may guess that the ruins of the castle were used as a quarry in repairing the church nearby, and that the 'leather coins' were discovered as stones were being pulled from the wall.

The value of the find-record is dependent on Carew's reliability, so that it is worth mentioning another example of his interest in the discovery of coin-hoards. He gives a pleasing vignette of a search for hidden treasure near Fowey:

Not many years sithence, a gentleman dwelling not far off was persuaded by some information or imagination that treasure lay hidden under this stone. Wherefore, in a fair moonshine night, thither with certain good fellows he hieeth to dig it up; a working they fall, their labour shorteneth, their hope increaseth, a pot of gold is the least of their expectation. But see the chance; in the midst of their toiling, the sky gathereth clouds, the moonlight is overcast with darkness, down falls a mighty shower, up riseth a blustering tempest, the thunder cracketh, the lightning

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flasheth; in conclusion, our money-seekers washed instead of laden, or laden with water instead of yellow earth, and more afraid than hurt, are forced to abandon their enterprise. . . .¹

The poetical Carew may have imagined the storm as an intervention from above in the ‘money-seekers’ illegal activity.

‘Fair stamp’ is the most intriguing phrase in the Launceston find-record. It seems to imply that the leather was embossed or marked by means of cutting, and that the work was neatly done. As the pieces of leather were taken to be coins, they may have been quite small, and possibly circular. The evidence is so vague, however, that it serves to tantalize and nothing else. Apparently no antiquities are known,² at least from this country, with which the objects from Launceston could be compared, except the leather ‘coins’ found in Anglesey, in 1871.³ These circular pieces of leather, without any impressions, but with bits of silver neatly inserted and riveted in their centres, have been regarded as money rather readily. In the light of Granlund’s article, it may be suggested that scholars assumed the relevance of Comines’s description of French provisional money, and did not give enough consideration to the possibility that the objects may have had some other use.

Tanned leather was formerly required to be marked, and it happens that there are references from Launceston to ‘a jury of six persons . . . sworn to try whether 11 bullocks hides were tanned in accordance with the statute’, and to ‘lether brought before you to be sealed’.⁴ Very little is known⁵ about a practice which is often referred to in medieval and later documents, but it is reasonable to suppose that any such marking took the form of incised marks (as is still done). If some kind of metal stamp was used, none appears to have survived or has been identified as such. Such markings might have been cut out and kept, as a bailiff’s tally-check, or something of the sort, and could be the explanation of the Launceston find.

One’s view of the date of deposit will be governed by an estimate of the time for which leather would retain its ‘strong substance’, and, of course, by the history of the castle. The keep of Launceston belongs to the thirteenth century, but the shell-keep, where the ‘coins’ would seem to have been found, was obviously earlier.⁶ It may have been erected within the first century after the Norman Conquest,⁷ and if at an early date, then perhaps during the anarchy of the reign of Stephen. A number of adulterine castles are thought to have been thrown up in Cornwall in the years following 1135, only to be demolished by the orders of Henry II in 1154.⁸ Launceston castle, the strategic key of the peninsula, probably shared in the military activity of these decades, but there is no record of its having been invested, nor would it have held a

¹ Carew, op. cit.
² We are indebted to Mr. J. W. Waterer, of the Museum of Leathercraft, for his helpful comments on the Launceston find.
³ See J. D. A. Thompson’s Inventory, no. 78, for references.
⁵ Again, we must thank Mr. Waterer for his help.
⁷ The castle, which was introduced into this country by the Normans, was usually a stronghold of earthwork and timber, but a considerable amount of stone fortification is now thought to have been carried out in the century following the Conquest. Brown, op. cit.
large garrison. If one could show that leather siege-money was issued during the anarchy,¹ a most interesting page would have been added to English numismatic and monetary history (among so many vague speculations, it is certain, because of the early date of discovery, that the Launceston find cannot have anything to do with the civil war, and almost as certain for the same reason that the objects were authentic) but the true explanation seems more likely to be an unsuspected one from a much later period.

Another early discovery of ‘leather money’ has been noticed from the Isle of Man, and offers an opportunity for comparison with the Launceston find. Henry Dodwell, in a letter written in 1707 to Thomas Hearne, reports that one Mr. Gilbert, a petty canon of St. Asaph . . . told me that, in clearing the castle, [i.e. Castle Rushen] they found a room full of old leather coyn, such as he supposed to have been the current coyn of the Island formerly. But they had no regard for it, but threw it away. If the Bp. can retrieve any of it, and it have any letters stamped on it, it may be of use to you.²

Apart from the fact that both finds come from castles, which may be no more than a coincidence, the Castletown find adds the new point that a large quantity of leather was discovered. The account is not at first hand, nor is it very circumstantial, so that ‘a room full’ may be an exaggeration, but even so the possibility that it was coinage is more difficult to dismiss than if there had been only three or four objects. One may conjecture that the sweepings of a harness-maker’s work-shop, for example, would have included scraps of leather of an irregular shape, so that even if there were an accumulation of circular pieces, formed by punching holes in straps, the general character of the discovery would almost certainly have suggested its true significance to the finders. Train states that leather money was in circulation in the Isle of Man in 1577, and Clay in his book on the currency of the island discusses the evidence at some length, but without referring to the Castletown find of which he was presumably ignorant.³

A third find of ‘leather money’ was discovered about 1830 at Bwlch-garneddog, Llandderfel, near Bala. It is recorded in a manuscript-book written by the Reverend John Jennings, curate in the parish of Llandderfel. The entry reads

At Bwlchgarneddog (Llandderfel) where tradition says there was an old Welsh cemetery, a man while ploughing found (about the year 1830) an earthen vessel containing money made of leather, which he presented to the Revd. Mr. Jones, at that time Rector there. It may be it is still in the possession of his nephew at Bar- mouth or some of his relations.⁴

If this record of a buried pot-hoard is reliable, it is difficult to dismiss the interpretation of the leather objects as coinage.

¹ There is an early tradition to that effect. See W. Camden, Remaines concerning Britain 1629, p. 165.
² F. Ouvry (ed.), Letters addressed to Thomas Hearne, 1874, pp. 14 f.
³ C. Clay, Currency of the Isle of Man, 1869, pp. 23 ff., where earlier references may be found. The Ordnance Survey Grid Reference to the find-spot in Castletown is SC 265675, and to Launceston castle, SX 331846.
⁴ At p. 72. Written in 1857. Bwlch-garneddog is a mile north of the village of Llandderfel; its Grid Reference is SH 983391.
In this case, as in the others, one would feel far more confident in drawing conclusions if it were possible to see some of the objects that were found. There is always the hope that the recovery of one or two more find-records may throw light on those that are already known, so that their correct explanation becomes clearer, while a well-authenticated new discovery would, of course, put the problem on a new footing. If these tentative remarks come to the eyes of antiquaries more expert in questions relating to leather than numismatists are, we hope that they may suggest some further ideas.