

THE AURUM BARBARORUM COLLECTION

'On foreign soil, among disordered troops, he drowned in the waters of a swamp, so that his corpse could not be found. His son, in fact, was killed in the war.' (Epit. de Caes. 29.3-4).,

The legionaries fought to the bitter end. Caught in a swamp and surrounded by enemies, arrows of the Goths pelted down on them from every direction. The end finally came as the Emperor Trajan Decius and his son Herennius Etruscus were also struck down - the Roman troops died in thousands under the raging attacks of the barbarian invaders.

The - from a Roman point of view - disastrous Battle of Abritus in the summer of 251 AD marked in many ways a turning point in the relationship between the Empire and its barbaric neighbors north of the lower Danube. For the first time since the Dacian Wars of Domitian and Trajan, the tribes under the leadership of chieftain Cniva formed a threatening concentration of power and crossed the Danube in large numbers. In summer 251, Decius put everything on one card and attacked the main army of the Gothic invaders on their way back north with a concentrated military force. Cniva lured the allegedly 80,000-strong Roman army into a swamp near the Roman fort of Abritus, inflicting a devastating defeat on them. It was the first time that a Roman emperor had fallen to barbarian hands and it was the prelude to the existential crisis of the 3rd century, which was to lead the empire to the verge of collapse before Aurelian's resounding successes in the 270s.

The Battle of Abritus, however, also brought about great changes in the Barbaricum. Modern archaeology has shown that in the 250s, large quantities of Roman precious metal flowed into the Germanic regions north and northeast of the Danube, including in particular many aurei of Trajan Decius - presumably the imperial treasure had fallen into the hands of the Goths and their allies at Abritus: tens if not hundreds of thousands of aurei found their way to the north in this manner.

After a brief period of stabilization of the northern border in the late 250s, new barbarian invasions were brought about by the capture of Valerian I by the Persians in 260 and the numerous usurpations against his son Gallienus. Particularly disastrous was the great Gothic invasion of 261/2, whereby Gothic fleets left enormous devastation across large parts of Asia Minor and Greece. On

their way back to the Black Sea at the Dardanelles, the invaders also plundered the venerable cities of Ilion and Alexandria Troas, whereby the local mint in Alexandria must have fallen into their hands: this is the only way to explain the fact that gold coins have been found north of the Danube with the types of the provincial mint of Alexandria Troas (an early example of this highly exciting series with a longer note can be found in this catalogue under lot number 430).

As the supply of Roman gold to the Barbaricum diminished when the empire was stabilized under Claudius II and Aurelian, Gothic goldsmiths began to develop local imitations: this marks the Dawn of Germanic Coinage. The present Aurum Barbarorum Collection comprises in its breadth a unique collection of these early Germanic imitations of Roman gold coins. In more than twenty years of meticulous work, the collector has compiled no less than fifty examples of this highly interesting series. He has paid particular attention to gathering a broad collection of different types, with the result that the collection contains pieces both strongly and less strongly abstracted, and imitations of early emperors such as Marcus Aurelius stand next to very late pieces of the Tetrarchy.

Auction 4

p. 435

Leu Numismatik

For the classic collector of Greek and Roman gold coins, the frequent perforations and suspension loops as well as the strongly varying weights may seem somewhat strange. Modern archaeology has shown that aurei north of the Danube in the late 3rd and 4th centuries were mostly worn by chieftains and leaders of warrior groups in the form of pendants as badges of honor. There is every indication, therefore, that the earliest independent Germanic coinage did not come about through the monetarization of the broader society at the time but was initiated by the demand for the popular Roman or Romanized status and honor symbols by local elites. Standardization of the weights was superfluous as the coins were usually perforated in order to be worn around the neck - a practice that was later replaced by the application of suspension loops.

The pictorial motives on the earliest Germanic coinage were largely modeled on Roman coins, whereby abstraction increased with time and spatial distance. Germanic artists, however, repeatedly took up new Roman motives in the progressing 3rd century and early 4th century - the often warlike types of Probus and the emperors of the first Tetrarchy in particular were popular among the Germanic warrior societies and hence frequently imitated. Imitations of the coins of earlier emperors such as Marcus Aurelius and the Severans, on the other hand,

indicate that Roman tribute payments were probably made at least in part in old, worn currency: for the barbarians only the gold value counted.

It is remarkable that despite the sometimes strong abstraction of coin types, hardly any independent Germanic motives developed. Even particularly 'Germanized' motives such as the alleged horse Sleipnir, the eight-legged mount of Odin (Lot 816), turn out to be abstract copies of Roman models on closer inspection. The only exception is the depiction of a bear giving a basket to a seated person (Lot 823 and enlargement p. 433): this unique motive, the importance of which unfortunately eludes our knowledge, does not go back to any known Roman model and must therefore have originated in the local tradition of a Germanic tribe.

In the description of the Aurum Barbarorum Collection, the cataloger has endeavored to reproduce the multiple imitative legends as accurately as possible. Minor deviations are sometimes unavoidable with the often very abstract symbols. Wherever possible, the coins have been arranged by the sequence of their Roman prototypes: this does not imply a strict chronological order. The dates given in the catalogue are deliberately vague and are based on the date of the Battle of Avarus on one hand and on the copied Roman models on the other. The possibility cannot be ruled out that some of the imitations were also made in the middle of the 4th century, before the late Roman Solidi reached greater prominence in the Barbaricum, and many were undoubtedly still worn for a longer period beyond that time. The denominations such as 'heavy aureus', 'aureus' and 'quinarius' are based on contemporary Roman models and are anachronistic for the Germanic societies of the 3rd and 4th centuries, which had not yet or scarcely been monetarized. The terms 'Gothic' and 'Germanic' are used as synonyms here: they do not imply assignments to specific tribes, let alone to Ostro- and Visigoths, Vandals or other historically known groups that formed in the late 4th and 5th centuries through gradual ethnogenesis. Contemporary and late Roman sources speak of the Barbarians from north of the Black Sea either as 'the Goths', or they use the classicistic term 'Skythians', which goes back to Classical authors such as Herodotus and Thucydides.

The Aurum Barbarorum Collection concludes with a few clearly later imitations of Roman and Byzantine solidi and tremisses from the 5th to 7th centuries. They originate from a time when the Germanic tribes both inside and outside the Empire had long become accustomed to the use of money in the form of coins, and their strongly standardized weights allowed them to circulate side by side with the official Late Roman and Byzantine solidi.