Essay

Snettisham Revisited

I. H. Longworth F.S.A.*

It is now over forty years since the first items appeared of what was soon to become known as 'the Snettisham Treasure'. In 1984 three deposits of Early Iron Age gold torques were discovered by chance while ploughing in a field on the Ken Hill Estate, Snettisham, Norfolk. Subsequent investigations by archaeologists from the Norwich Castle Museum established the exact location of the hoards (Hoards A-C) and recovered other artefacts which had once formed part of these deposits.[1] That this was not the end of the story became clear when two years later the plough uncovered two further hoards (Hoards D and E). More finds of isolated torques were to follow in 1964, 1968 and 1973[2] but the presumption remained that though some stray finds deriving from the deposits already known might still lurk within the ploughsoil no further hoards were likely to survive. What was to change that presumption was a find made in 1990 by Mr C A Hodder. Mr Hodder had been given permission by the landowners to use a metal detector on the field and in the previous year he had been rewarded by the discovery of a gold stater and further fragments of gold torque. In August 1990 however he was to locate a massive hoard of broken metalwork (Hoard F) weighing in all some 9.2 kgs. This had been buried apparently within a bronze vessel set within a pit. The find was submitted to the British Museum and on examination was found to contain fragments from at least fifty torques, seventy or more ingot rings or bracelets, three straight ingots and nine coins. One of the features of this deposit was that several of the pieces, including some of the fragments, had been strung together into bundles, and one of the hollow tubular torque fragments was found to contain five coins.

If such a hoard had survived intact, it seemed possible that others too might yet lie undiscovered. It was also important to establish why such a remarkable series of deposits had been placed in the ground at this particular locality. Clearly systematic investigation was now called for and in the autumn of 1990 survey and excavation was undertaken for the British Museum under the direction of Dr Ian Stead.[3]

During the course of this work five further hoards were discovered. Whereas Hoard F, the hoard discovered by Mr Hodder,

* Keeper of Prehistoric and Romano-British Antiquities, British Museum, London.

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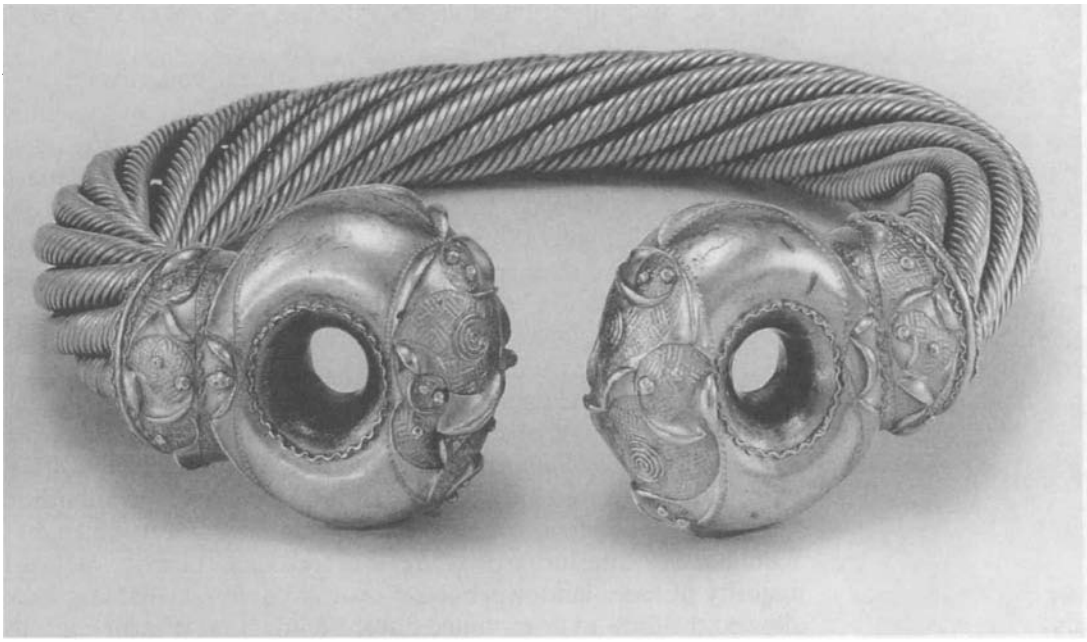
was of metalwork largely reduced to scrap, the new hoards (G, H, J, K and L) were composed of complete objects. In four of the hoards – G, H, J and K – the torques had been placed in very small pits no more than 20 cms. deep and in diameter sufficient only to take the ornaments. But it was possible to demonstrate that in G and H the torques had been buried not as a single act but in two successive instalments. It was also noted that in these two hoards the most precious torque was at the top of the lower deposit, the upper and lower instalments being separated by a layer of earth. The fifth hoard had been placed in a somewhat larger pit but presented a similar history. In the upper part of the pit lay seven silver and bronze torques; in the lower deposit, four gold, seven of gold/silver alloy, and one of silver.

These recent discoveries mirror and shed new light upon the earlier discoveries, all of which were found by chance. Hoards B and C were composed largely of fragmentary torques, coins and bracelets and resemble the new Hoard F. The remaining hoards and finds of individual torques could well have come from deposits similar to the new Hoards G, H, J, K and L, though due to the manner of their discovery this cannot now be proven. With a combined weight of over 30 kgs., the old and new finds from Ken Hill have established for the site a unique place in prehistory, for here is by far the greatest concentration of buried wealth so far discovered from any British Early Iron Age context, and the only occasion on which objects made principally of silver had been recovered on any scale for this period.

The Duchy of Lancaster holds the franchise for treasure trove discovered in the parish of Snettisham. At an inquest called by Mr W R Knowles, H M Coroner for the Lynn district of Norfolk and held at King's Lynn on 7 March 1991 the jury found the gold and silver items recovered to be Treasure Trove and they were duly seized for the Crown in right of the Duchy. Mr Hodder, as finder of Hoard F, received an *ex gratia* reward, equivalent to the full market value of the treasure trove component of the find, as assessed by H M Treasury's Treasure Trove Reviewing Committee. In the case of the remaining finds declared treasure trove but discovered during the British Museum's investigations no reward was paid, the participants having previously disclaimed their interest. With the gracious consent of H M The Queen, the Duchy of Lancaster transferred all these items to the British Museum. The finds not considered to be part of the Treasure Trove were subsequently acquired by the Museum from the Trustees of the Ken Hill Estate.

The basic facts of the new discoveries as set out seem simple enough but they serve to highlight many of the problems met in the current administration of treasure trove in England and Wales[4] and these can be reviewed briefly under three headings:

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The Great Torque from Snettisham, found in 1950.

1 What is Gold and What is Silver?

That treasure trove is confined to objects made of gold and silver has most recently been re-affirmed by Mr Justice Dillon in his judgement of the case *Attorney-General for the Duchy of Lancaster v G E Overton (Farms) Ltd [1980]*.[5] The same judgement established, in the context of coinage, that no presumption could be made that what was accepted as silver in the period of manufacture must be accepted as such in the present day. In the case of the Overton coins the silver content was 18% or less and this he felt was not 'silver' in today's usage. This judgement was upheld in the Court of Appeal, Lord Denning, then Master of the Rolls, stating his view that for an object to be considered silver the amount of that metal present 'should be fifty per cent or more'.[6] However, these judgements have left the question at the discretion of the members of the jury empanelled at each treasure trove inquest to decide what for them constitutes an acceptable definition.

If we turn to gold, the problem of definition occurs again. Look in a jeweller's shop window and you will see an array of objects labelled 'gold' but on closer inspection these will usually include items that have been gold plated, or made either of nine or twenty-two carat gold. None will be of pure gold, but a ring of twenty-two carat will contain 91.6% of that metal, while one of nine carat will have only 37.5%. Yet all would be accepted today under the blanket term 'gold'.

What then of Snettisham? Here the torques, bracelets and ingots analysed by the British Museum's Department of Scientific Research

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ranged across a spectrum of values from less than 1% to 97% gold, and from 2% to 98% silver. The jury on this occasion took the perfectly defensible view that any object which (collectively) contained 50% of gold and/or silver placed the object as potential treasure trove. Items with less were deemed to be excluded. The effect of this decision was to divide the scrap metal hoard (Hoard F) for example roughly 2:1 treasure trove to non-treasure trove items. It seems highly doubtful, however, that the Iron Age metal smith would have seen such a distinction as meaningful. To them, all these metals would have represented malleable wealth.

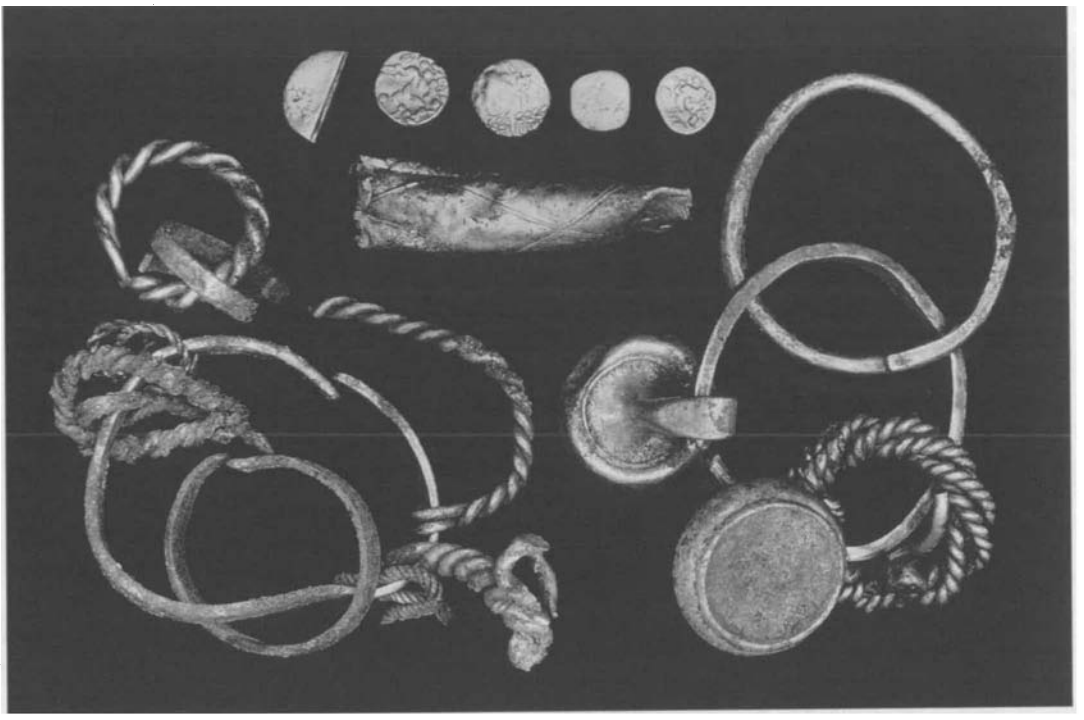
For the archaeologist the type of arbitrary division imposed by the treasure trove system is not simply unhelpful but can present a very real threat. The value of any find is greatly enhanced if *all* the evidence can be assembled and preserved together for study and future re-analysis. The non-treasure trove items, however, will almost always belong to the landowner and there is no compulsion to present or even sell such items to the institution which has acquired the treasure trove. We are fortunate that in the vast majority of cases landowners have proved public spirited and have allowed the finds to be re-united but the outcome at present depends entirely on good-will.

A helpful reform would be to seek a definition of 'gold' and 'silver' which could be simply and rigorously applied. To have maximum benefit this might seek to include all objects to which gold or silver had been deliberately added but would need to exclude small values which could occur naturally. A content of 5% or more of either gold or silver might serve as a general definition, though coinage might need its own lower limit of 0.5%.

2 Objects Found in Direct Association

At Snettisham, then, and in many other cases, objects made of non-precious metal can form part of a single deposit, in which only the gold and silver items are declared treasure trove. This can often simply be a container, a pot for example, in which the hoard had been placed, or a minor component of the hoard, as at Thetford where a unique shale box formed part of the find.[7] Such associations are often of great significance in relating the precious metalwork to the more mundane articles of everyday life. But the separation of a single find into treasure trove and non-treasure trove components can lead to total absurdity. In the case of a recent treasure trove again from Snettisham but from a different site, a hoard of Roman silver jewellery was discovered inside a pot.[8] The hoard clearly belonged to a jeweller for it consisted of silver rings, coins, bracelets necklaces, scrap metal and a collection of 110 loose carved carnelian gems destined to be set at some future date in the rings. From careful study of the metalwork and gems it became clear that they represent not a stock derived from here and there but the product

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Selection of objects from Hoard F, showing strung groups (including ingot rings/bracelets) and a fragment of tubular torque with the five coins found in it.

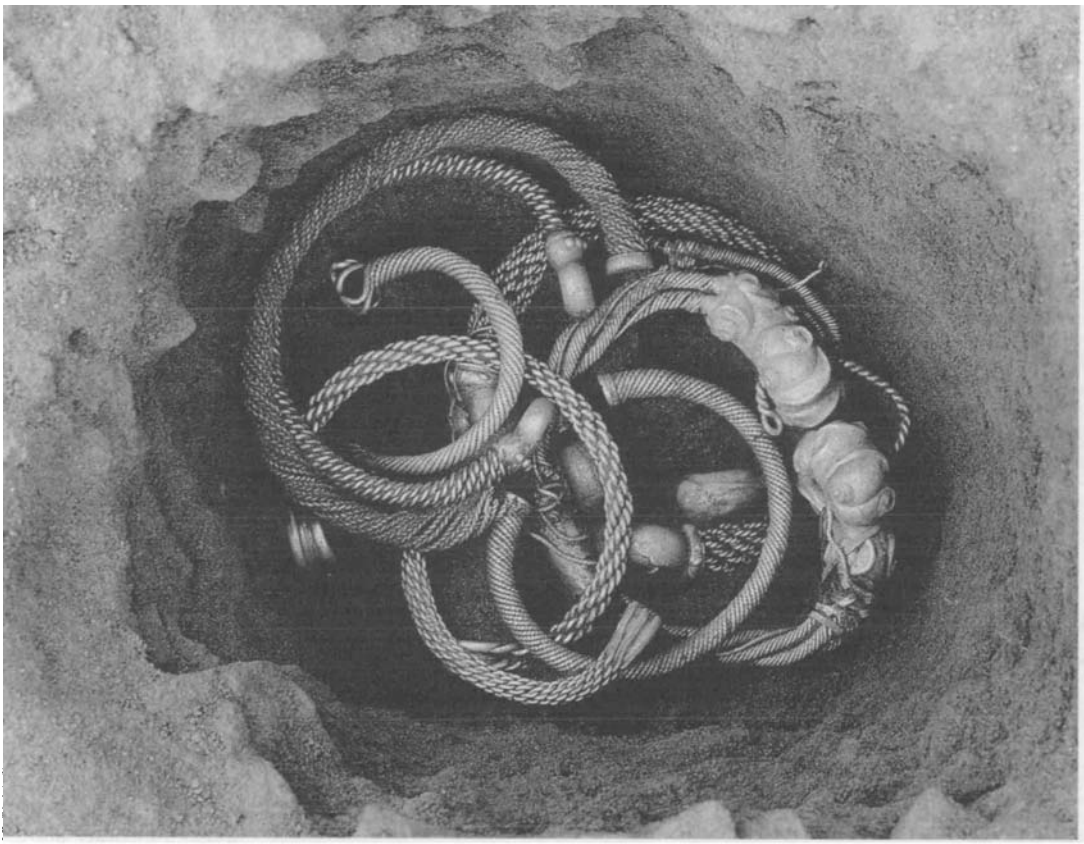
of a single workshop providing a unique insight into the ways of a Roman jeweller at work in the mid-second century AD. Under present procedures the pot cannot be declared treasure trove, nor can the loose gems.

If we are to continue to use the laws of treasure trove as a way of enabling the nation to preserve major discoveries like the Snettisham Jeweller's Hoard and the Snettisham Treasure in their entirety, then some extension to the present definition of treasure trove is needed to embrace items found so closely associated with objects of precious metal that they can be construed to form an integral part of a single indivisible deposit.

3 Hidden with Intention to Recover?

Perhaps the most difficult and certainly the most contentious area to have emerged in recent years involves the principle of *animus revertendi*. It has become the norm to accept a definition of 'hidden' as implying not simply concealment but also the intention to recover. Thus grave deposits, following the judgement in the case of Sutton Hoo,[9] are considered to be outside the definition of treasure trove on the assumption that once buried in a grave there could have been no intention to retrieve objects so assigned unless by theft. The desire to secrete away personal valuables in troubled times is a concept familiar enough in our own day and one that seems to

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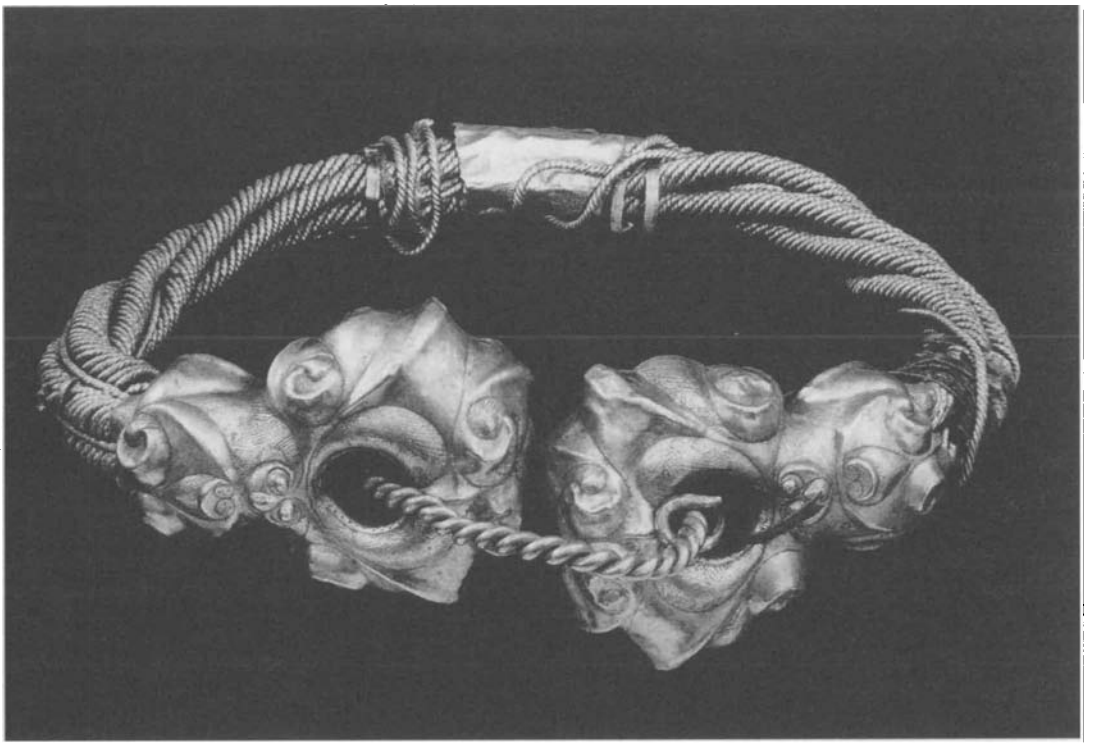


Hoard L, the lower deposit.

have occurred throughout recorded history. The diarist Pepys notes just such an occurrence when in 1667 the Dutch fleet appeared in the Thames estuary.[10] The account is worth reading not only to capture the sense of panic that such events inspire but also for the considerable difficulties which later arose in re-locating the hiding-place when the time came for retrieval.

But are all deposits of valuables apparently hidden away always to be construed in this way? While the archaeologist can demonstrate (so long as the site has not been too badly disturbed) that a given deposit has been carefully placed in the ground and concealed, the reason or reasons for so doing may be less simple to establish. Certainly for example in the Roman period objects could be buried at temple sites for purely votive purposes, as offerings to appease the gods or in payment for a call upon a specific deity for help. However, even within the context of a temple, other deposits could also be placed in the ground not as votive offerings but for safe-keeping since the sanctity of the site imparted safety. These were the ancient equivalent of safe-deposits, where the god guaranteed survival. For purposes of treasure trove these interpretations be come matters of substance for if the deposit was made with votive

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Ring terminal torque, Hoard L.

All photographs in the Essay by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

intent then there will be a presumption that no subsequent retrieval was ever intended.

For periods before written records, inferences have to be drawn either from the recorded practices of the historic periods or by analogy with recently recorded ethnographic data. In recent years prehistorians have tended to draw heavily, though sometimes uncritically, upon the latter. The problem for those seeking to interpret deposits of this kind lies in the fact that while ritual behaviour can be confidently expected to have played a major role in the life of all members of society in all the prehistoric periods, the motivation for and purposes of that behaviour will always remain debatable. Certainly the case for votive deposits must be borne in mind but only close juxtaposition, say, of offering and effigy is likely to place such a specific interpretation beyond doubt.

In the case of Snettisham, despite further fieldwork in 1991 no evidence for sanctuary or temple has so far been revealed. What is certainly present is careful, ordered and therefore probably ritual deposition of the complete torques. Regrettably we have no direct evidence as to the status of these objects other than the fact that torques are depicted as being worn round the neck of both men

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and Gods. That torques of gold are likely to have been linked with high status and/or power is further suggested, if we are to believe the statement that Queen Boudicca wore such an ornament round her neck in the first century AD.[11] No torque of precious metal has been recovered from a grave in Britain so we must assume that this was considered inappropriate, but it is surely not surprising that prestigious objects of this kind should have been treated with respect. If a time came when the torques of a family or tribe had to be hidden away for safety no doubt very precise rituals would have needed to be performed.

Not all the deposits at Snettisham are of complete ornaments. Amongst the more recent discoveries Hoard F, and of those found in 1948, Hoards B and C, are hoards composed mainly of ornaments reduced to fragments, but also of ingots and coins. That these represented metal ready for melting down is suggested first by the stringing together of fragments into small groups and by the presence both of ingots and fragments fused together by heat. In a further deposit recently discovered (Hoard M), the find consists entirely of melted down silver objects weighing a total of 6.6 kgs. Here undoubtedly is wealth but now in the form of bullion. Once reduced to fragments or scrap metal, careful ordered deposition as noted in the other hoards seems no longer to have been required. Yet these deposits are not segregated but lie in close juxtaposition to the hoards composed only of complete torques. It is difficult to argue that the two types of deposit convey a different purpose. On the evidence so far recovered by Dr Stead that purpose is more likely to have been the safe guarding of wealth for later re-use than of votive offering, but the difficulty of establishing the intention behind an action taken 2000 years ago again underlines the need for reform. Here surely simplicity must be our guide. If no other claim to legal title can be established then let Treasure Trove embrace all gold and silver (as re-defined above) in whatever context it may occur. For if the laws of Treasure Trove are to help preserve antiquities for the nation it is irrelevant whether the objects found are from graves, votive offerings or hoards buried for safekeeping. All are needed to build up our total picture of the past and the administration of the Treasure Trove system would itself be greatly simplified.

Notes

1 Clarke, R.R., 'The Early Iron Age treasure from Snettisham, Norfolk' (1954) 20 *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 27–86.

2 Burns, J.E., 'Additional torcs from Snettisham, Norfolk' (1971) 37(1) *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 228–9. The 1973 find remains unpublished.

3 A brief account of this fieldwork and of the finds made is given in Stead, I.M., 'The Snettisham Treasure: Excavations in 1990' (1991) 65 *Antiquity* 447–65.

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4 A number of articles have drawn attention to these problems over the years *inter alia:* Palmer, N.E., 'Treasure Trove and the Protection of Antiquities' (1981) 44 *The Modern Law Review*, 178–187; Sparrow, C., 'Treasure Trove: a lawyer's view' (1982) 56 *Antiquity*, 199–201; Cookson, N., 'All that glitters' (1991) 141 *New Law Journal*, 1255–7.
5 [1980] 3 All ER 503.
6 [1982] 1 All ER 524 CA.
7 Johns, C. & Potter, T., *The Thetford Treasure* (1983), 83.
8 This find is being prepared for publication by Miss Johns.
9 See Hill, Sir G. (1950) 30 *Antiquaries Journal*, 67–8 and Bruce-Mitford, R.L.S., 'Treasure Trove – a note on law and practice' in *Recent Archaeological Excavations in Britain* (1956) (ed. R.L.S. Bruce-Mitford) 300–1.
10 *Pepys Diary* (1974) (ed.) Latham, R. and Matthews, W. 8, 263–4, 280 and 472–5.
11 *Dio Cassius* 62.2.4.

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