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# A GOOD LUCK MEDALLION FROM KALGOORLIE

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In recent years gold miners have often found it profitable to re-treat by modern methods the material left over from past excavations. This is sometimes done on a large scale; on the other hand, the individual prospector can often have considerable success by using a metal detector around the dumps where claims have been previously worked, and a number of nuggets, missed by the original workers of the claims, have been discovered in this way.

The use of metal detectors sometimes leads to the discovery of other things of interest, among them being coins, and an unusual object of this kind was brought to the Department of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Western Australia last year by Mr Brian Irwin of Kalgoorlie, who had found it several years previously at Grant's Patch, seventy kilometres from Kalgoorlie, when investigating material dumped by earlier gold miners. Some 19th century British coins were also discovered in the same area, and this suggests that the original mining had taken place in the 1890s or early in this century.

The 'coin' is a heavy cast brass piece 38mm in diameter and weighs 50.6 gm. The obverse shows a youthful head, of indeterminate sex, wearing a crown and an ear-ring, and the reverse type represents a long-snouted animal with some ill-defined blobs between its legs, and the suggestion of a couple of figures in the background.

The obverse is clearly inspired by Roman imperial coins. The radiate crown, which we usually associate with double denominations, makes it look like a double sestertius, but the head does not resemble the emperor's head on the rare specimens of this denomination struck in the third century A.D. in the reign of Trajan Decius, nor does it look like any

other Roman emperor; in fact, the general effect is rather more like that of the 'turreted' city goddess so often seen on Greek civic issues. The lettering on the obverse at first sight resembles the name and titles of a Roman emperor, but is blundered and meaningless.

The reverse type is best interpreted as a representation of a sow with four piglets at her teats (the traditional Roman subject of the she-wolf with the infant twins Romulus and Remus is much less likely), and it is this which helps to explain what this object is, since it is certainly not a genuine ancient Greek or Roman coin. A sow is a creature not unknown to Roman mythology and art. When Aeneas came from Troy to establish a new city in the west, he was divinely directed that it should be established where he found a white (*alba*) sow with her young, and when he did indeed find a white sow, with the remarkable number of thirty piglets, it was at this place thirty years later that his son Ascanius founded the city, called Alba, from which Rome was later settled, according to Roman tradition.

But this is not a Roman coin, and the probable explanation of it is to be sought elsewhere. There exists in Greece the tradition that a sow with piglets is a sign of hidden treasure — based perhaps on a pig's habit of rooting, and appropriate to a part of the world where the practice, until modern times, of burying one's wealth was well established. Because of this tradition, one occasionally finds crudely made medallions of various kinds, made as lucky charms, which bear the representation of a sow and piglets upon them.

This subject was researched many years ago by the Keeper of the National Numismatic Collection of Greece, J. N. Svoronos, who published a long article on

these and other 'magic' pieces in the *Journal International d' Archéologie Numismatique* (Vol. 8, 1905, 257-92 and pls 6-7). The Kalgoorlie find does not exactly resemble any of the pieces illustrated by Svoronos, but there can be little doubt that it is of this general class. It is therefore a lucky charm rather than a coin or medal, and must have been made in the hope that it would bring wealth to its possessor.

The Greek tradition mentioned earlier can be documented as far back as the seventeenth century, and some of the 'medallions' or charms studied by Svoronos may be as old as this, although this is not very likely; it is more probable that most of them were made in the nineteenth century. A genuine ancient

coin may have served as a model for at least a part of the design of this specimen. It may have been made in Greece.

It is at this point that speculation takes over. The appropriateness of such a lucky charm for someone going to work at the diggings is obvious. But where the person who lost it acquired it, and where he came from, is something that we shall never know. It is possible that he was a Greek, although the number of Greeks in Western Australia at the time when it may be assumed that the 'medallion' was lost was very small, but nothing more can be said; we can only hope that it brought him at least a little treasure before he parted company with it.

