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During an archeological dig of what was once a Roman fort in northern England, the Rev. Paul Bulgerin found an ancient Roman coin depicting Emperor Trajan, who reigned from 98 to 117 A.D.

"I got to hold it for a few minutes, then I turned it over to the head archeologist," said Bulgerin, pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Grafton. "That was my moment of glory."

An avid collector of Roman coins since 1999, Bulgerin sold a portion of his collection to fund participation by him and his daughter Samantha in digs at Vindolanda, an active archeological site and home of the Roman Army Museum that is most famous for the Vindolanda writing tablets. The thousands of scraps of wood are among the earliest examples of the written Latin language and are considered Britain's top treasure.

Bulgerin spent two weeks in 2010 digging at the site, while Samantha, who was 23 at the time, washed dirt off pottery found at the site.

Everything found during digs there stays at the privately owned site that was started by three archeologists in the 1930s. The third generation of their families now operate the site.

"We were digging in an old barracks building. The coin was probably dropped elsewhere and became part of the dirt deposited there," Bulgerin said.

Or the coin could have been buried by a soldier before he went into battle, he said.

While Bulgerin and Samantha worked at the site, his wife Karen and their younger daughter Hannah, who was 19, explored the area. The family stayed in a nearby cottage built in the 1800s of stones from the fort and ate at a pub also built of stones from the fort in 1750.

While her father is interested in Roman coins, Samantha prefers rings, fasteners called fibulas that held Roman togas together, locks, spear points, sling shots, bells and other items from the era.

"I like bells because I think it's cool to hear a sound someone heard thousands of years ago," Samantha said. "I'm more interested in people and what they had and used."

Some shots used in slings had insults engraved on them, she said.

Her oldest ring is from 1500 BC and was found in northern Afghanistan. It depicts a man and woman and the universe.

Samantha has an archer's ring that's worn on the knuckle to help aim the arrow.

She and her father search for items on eBay and go to coin collector shows. They're fascinated by the stories, which may not be completely true, surrounding the objects.

However, the items themselves are surprisingly common and not the type of antiquities that museums want, Bulgerin said.

Most of the items they collect are below the value required to be reported in the countries where they were found, although some people would like nothing to be allowed to leave the country of origin, including coins, Bulgerin said.

"Coins were minted by the millions," he said.

Roman coins, he said, were used as propaganda and to win allies. They were often minted to celebrate a military victory.

"I love the history, the art and the stories," Bulgerin said of his hobby. "Someone had this coin 1,600 years ago. What did they buy with it and who were they? I like coins that have Christian symbols.

"I always loved Roman history. When I found you could buy these coins for not much money, I started collecting them."

He has a bronze coin minted by Julian II, a great-nephew of Constantine the Great, that has intricate details on his hair and armor.

The most Bulgerin paid for a coin was $300 for a gold piece he values at $600. One of his most valuable coins he bought for $35. It's worth more than $1,000 because of its pristine condition.

Bulgerin likes to buy uncleaned coins and discover what lies underneath the grime. He uses water and a soft bamboo stick to clean coins or other objects without taking off the patina.

Some uncleaned coins he sold on eBay for a friend were minted before the birth of Christ. He recommended the new owner not clean the coins in that instance because they are more valuable with the ancient dirt.

However, many uncleaned Roman coins can be purchased for $1 at coin shows.

Bulgerin keeps his own hoard of Roman coins to give to children in his parish or to

schoolchildren when he and Samantha give presentations on the Roman era and display their artifacts.

"If you enjoy something, you like to get others interested, and most kids haven't held anything that old," Bulgerin said.

Samantha, who has been going to coin shows with her father since she was 10, usually pays $20 or less for rings.

"The dealers know me and if they find something they know I'll like, they keep it for me," she said.

Samantha, who is getting her genealogy license, wants to be an anthropologist and focus on research.

Collecting Roman coins fits Bulgerin's role as a pastor immersed in the life of Christ, who walked on Earth when some of the coins were minted.

Image Information: The Rev. Paul Bulgerin held an ancient Roman coin he found in 2010 at Vindolanda archeological site in northern England.