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COIN FINDS FROM CHURCHES IN THE CANTON OF BERN. A SURVEY

1. Overview of church excavations

In the Canton of Bern, numerous churches have been excavated since the 1950s. The reason for that can usually be found in newly built-in floor heating systems, making archaeological excavations necessary. In the whole canton, about 120

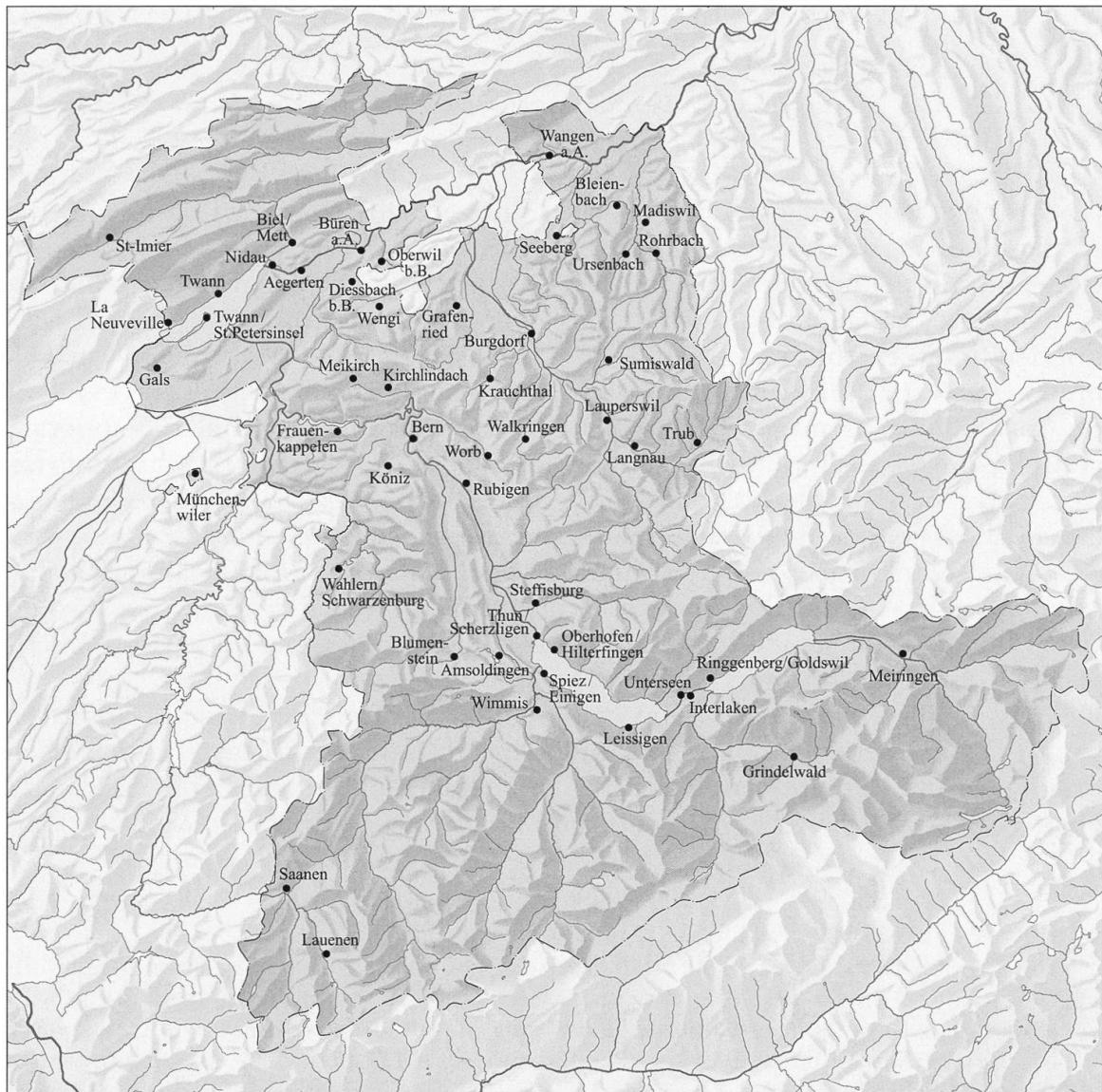


Fig. 1 Map of church excavations in the Canton of Bern with coin finds (1954–2018).

churches have been professionally excavated, in roughly a third of which coins have been found (*Fig. 1*). Altogether, a total of more than 1000 coins has been found up until today.

There are two main publications addressing coin finds from Bernese churches. The first one, published in 1993, is a general listing of coin finds from churches all over Switzerland in the first volume of the Swiss Inventory of Coin Finds, including the Canton of Bern.¹ Ten years after, the treatise on the coin finds from the church of Steffisburg has been published.² The monograph includes a comprehensive analysis of coin finds in Bernese churches and is thus the most important referential and foundational work on the topic. Although no further major works have been published so far, we must not forget to mention additional analyses of churches excavated between the 1970s and the 1990s, published including the coin finds.³

2. Archaeological Context

Wooden floors

In churches with a big amount of coin finds usually wooden floors from the medieval or early modern period were documented. If the floor consisted of stone, plaster or tiles the coins could easily be found after they dropped and the archeologists can't hardly find a coin. Examples in the Canton of Bern with wooden floors are the churches of Steffisburg, Lauenen and Walkringen. The well preserved stratigraphy within the church of Steffisburg is an interesting example of what such wooden church floors could have looked like.⁴ The contemporary church is a Baroque building of 1681 using parts of a former Romanesque church. In the end of the 15th century, said Romanesque predecessor building exhibited a late medieval wooden floor within its three aisles (*Fig. 2–3*).

During years of use, different material accumulated within the joints of the wooden floor. Among this material, not only mud and dirt from shoes would settle, but also coins, as well as rosary beads, hair needles, and other small finds (*Fig. 4*).

Those objects must have been dropped, whereafter they have disappeared within the cracks in between the planks. In Steffisburg, this material has been particularly well preserved, which again explains the many coin finds. It's obvious that most coins have been found in places where the joint material has

¹ DUBUIS – FREY-KUPPER 1993, pp. 157–210.

² SCHMUTZ – KOENIG 2003. A list of all the excavations in the Canton of Bern with coin finds can be found on pp. 143–144. Not mentioned there are the following excavations with coin finds: Ringgenberg-Goldswil, Kirchenruine Goldswil (2015–2017); Meiringen, Kirche St. Michael (1916, 2005–2006); Saanen, Kirche (2005). The documentation of these excavations is in the Archives of the Archaeological Service of Bern.

³ EGGENBERGER – BOSCHETTI-MARADI – SCHMUTZ 2004; FREY-KUPPER 2009a; FREY-KUPPER 2009b; FREY-KUPPER 2012; FREY-KUPPER 2016; HERRMANN – LEIBUNDGUT 2018.

⁴ The following remarks are based on SCHMUTZ – KOENIG 2003.

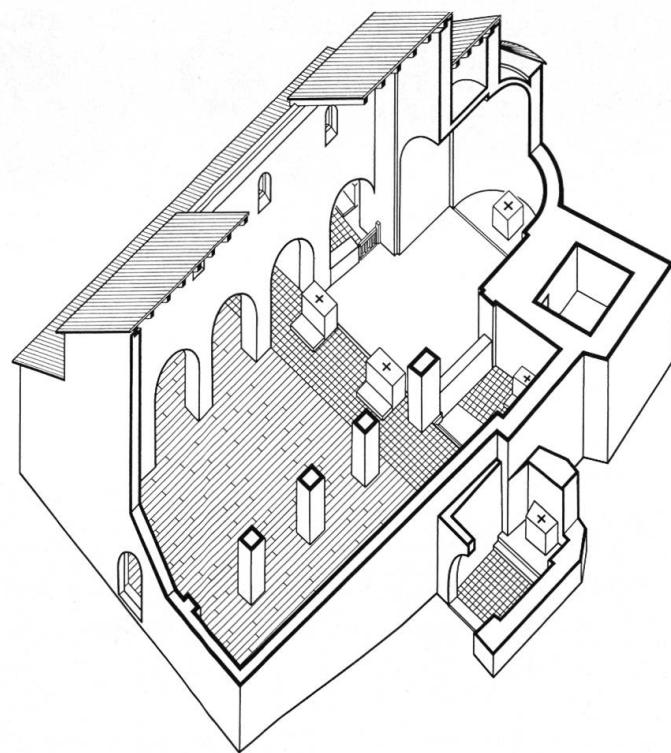


Fig. 2 Wooden floor in the late medieval church of Steffisburg (reconstruction).

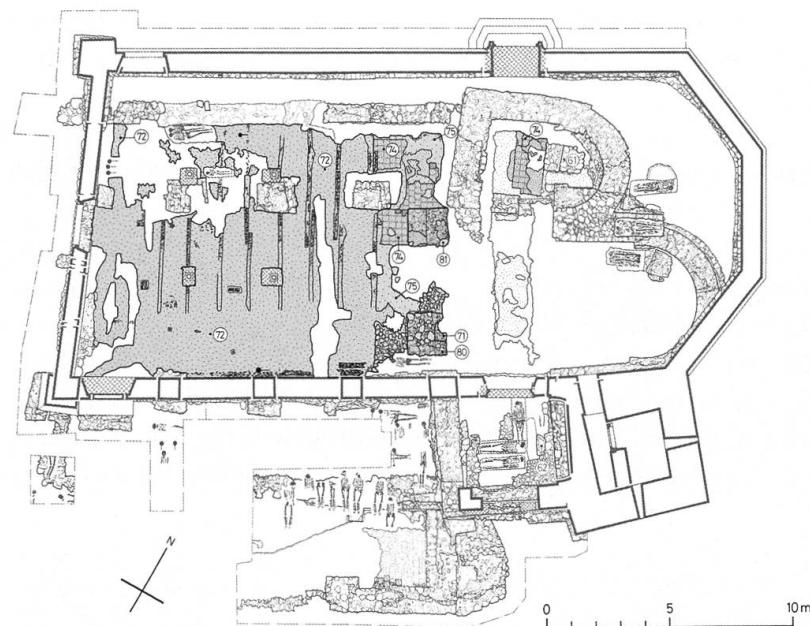


Fig. 3 Well preserved layer with accumulated material underneath the wooden flor. The initial position of the beams which supported the floor is clearly recognizable.



Fig. 4 In Steffisburg, a plethora of small everyday objects was found next to a great number of coins.

been preserved. Furthermore, examples from Sweden⁵ as well as the example of the City Church of Winterthur⁶ show that sometimes, there is a correlation between bigger amounts of coin finds and places of sacrifice within the churches. Unfortunately, coins are not usually found in the exact spots they have been lost. This doesn't come as a surprise considering the many floor renovations as well as other constructions causing the coins to move and to find themselves in different layers. Keeping this in mind, it goes without saying that the distribution of the coin finds in Bernese churches hardly ever offers additional useful information.

Graves

A second important category of coin finds from churches includes coins found in graves. However, the context of those finds unfortunately is frequently unclear since it's often hard to tell whether they have been given the dead intentionally, or whether they are simply part of the filling of the grave. If they are older than the graves, it can be assumed that they have been deposited secondarily. Clear examples still do exist, though. One of those examples is a grave by the church of Kleinhöchstetten which has been excavated by Paul Hofer and his team in 1954/55. The coins in that grave have doubtlessly been given the dead intentionally.⁷

The relevant grave (Grave 103) is situated outside the church, northeast of the apse.

⁵ KLACKENBERG 1995.

⁶ VON ROTEN 1993, pp. 95–96.

⁷ F. E. KOENIG, «Quidquid agis, prudenter agas, et respice finem!» Paper presented at the conference «Münzen aus Gräbern» organized by the SAF, 3.3.1995 in Neuchâtel (unpublished manuscript in the archive of the Archäologischer Dienst des Kantons Bern. The documentation of the excavation is also there, the coins are stored in the collection of the Bernisches Historisches Museum).

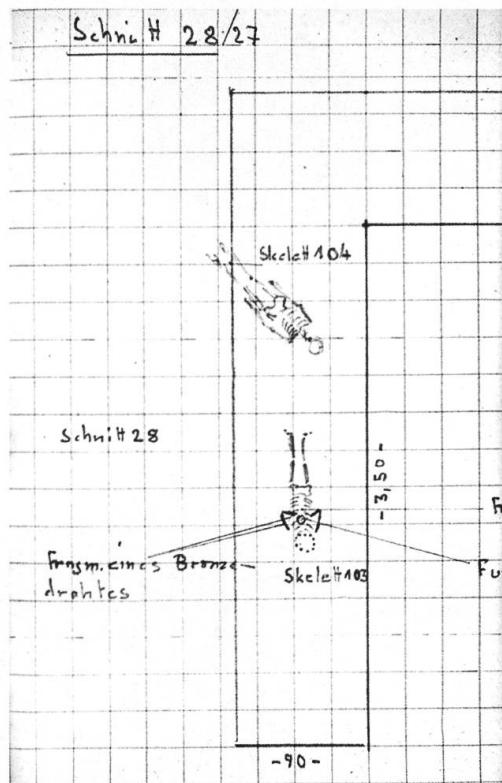


Fig 5 Excavations next to the church of Kleinhöchstetten:
Ground plan with the Skeleton No. 103.

The skeleton has probably belonged to a 12- to 14-year-old girl. Unfortunately, there is no evidence exposing the cause of death.

Her arms were placed on her chest, where a leather pouch containing a handful of coins had been deposited (*Fig. 5*). Those coins, 5 or 6 bracteates from Bern, Solothurn and Saint Gall, date the grave into the last quarter of the 15th century. The pouch was held together by a bronze wire. Initially, the coins might have been embedded in a fabric lining.

Hoards

A third kind of church finds includes hoards, although they are relatively rare. From the Canton of Bern, there are only a couple of known examples. The first one is a hoard found in the church in Wimmis, which has been excavated in 1962.⁸ There, in a hole next to the north wall, 21 bracteates have been found in a depth of about 30 cm. It is very probable that the coins haven't been deposited in a vessel or a bag, but directly into that hole. Over all, the 21 bracteates included in the Wimmis hoard belong to the oldest Bernese Pennies whatsoever (*Fig. 6*). Those Pennies have been mentioned in written sources as early as 1228.

⁸ JUCKER 1962.



Fig. 6 The earliest penny from Bern, found in the church of Wimmis (2:1).

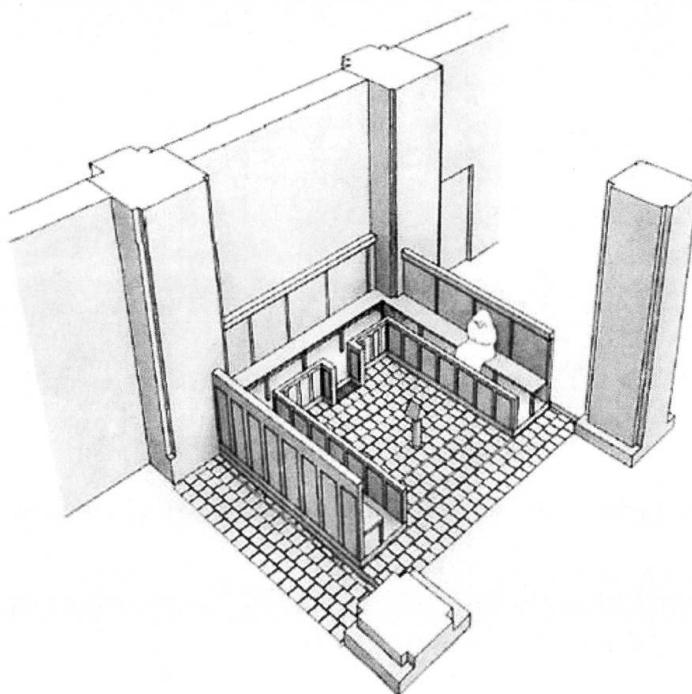


Fig. 7 Hoard of five gold coins placed in front of the seat of the prior in the priory of Twann/Petersinsel.

Another hoard comes from a former Cluniac priory located on St. Peter's Island, a peninsula in Lake Biel. During the excavations from 1984 to 1986, a hoard consisting of five gold coins has been discovered.⁹ The gold coins have been found in the transept of the church, or, more precisely, below a slab located directly in front of the prior's seat (Fig. 7).

The hoard includes five different coins that come from entirely different places. They have been struck in Genoa, the County of Provence, the Papal State of Avignon, the Archdiocese of Cologne, and the County of Holland. The most recent one of the five coins dates to the end of the 1380s, making the ensemble one of the oldest gold florin finds of Switzerland.

⁹ KOENIG – SCHÄRLI 1997.

The question that remains is whether the hoard can be interpreted as a building sacrifice. On the one hand, we've got the special composition as well as the deposition to the priory's feet, indicating that it might well be a building sacrifice. On the other hand, neither the archaeological nor the historical evidence substantiate that theory, considering the catastrophic economic situation of the later 14th century.

3. Survey of the coin finds

A good example to present a survey of the coin finds from churches in the Canton of Bern are once again the coins from the church in Steffisburg. Figure 8 shows where they were produced.

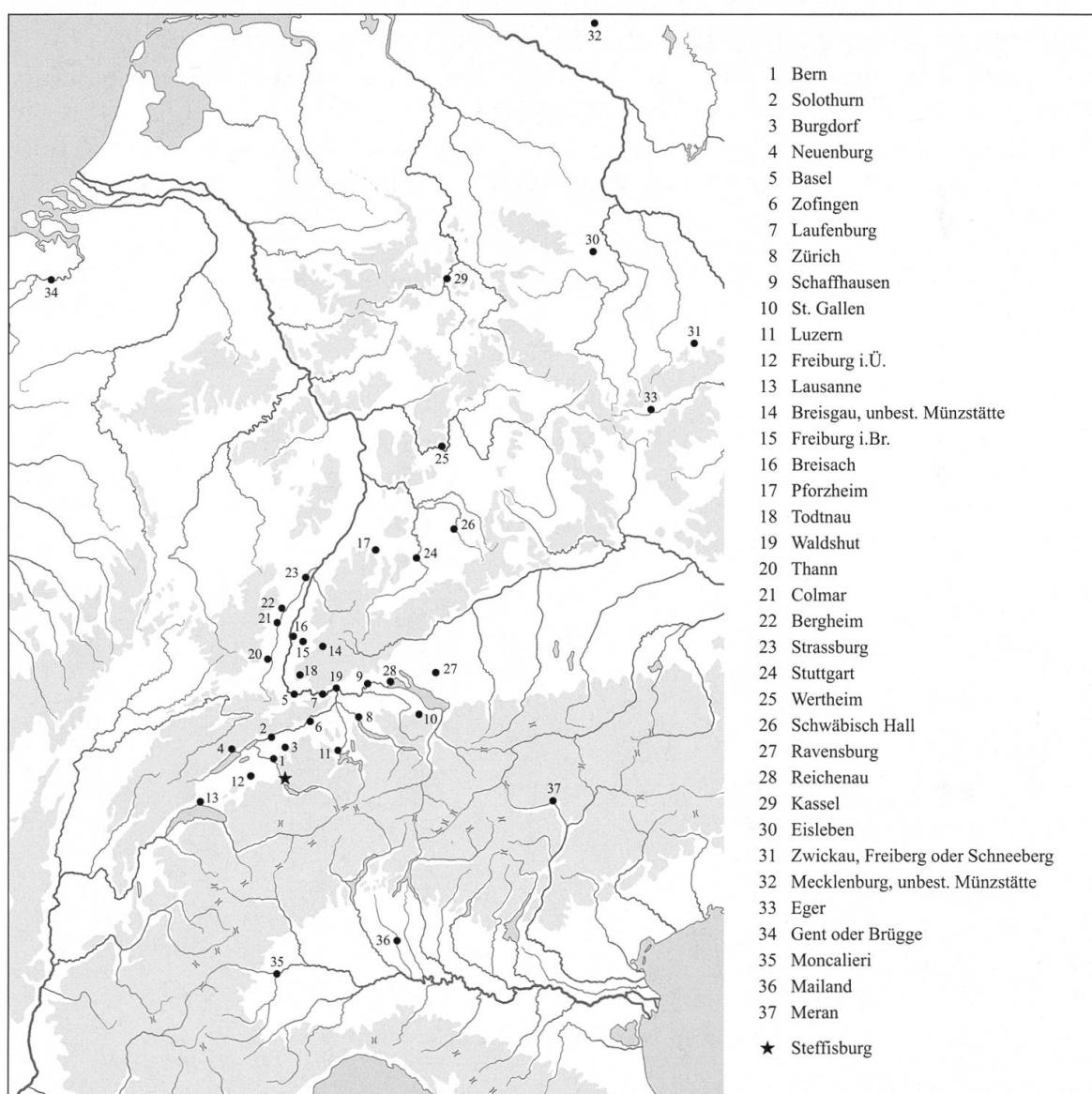


Fig. 8 Origin of the coins found in the church of Steffisburg.

About 70% of all coins found in Steffisburg were struck in the Swiss Central Plateau between Bern and the Lake of Constance. In fact, almost every late medieval mint located in this region is represented. The bulk of the remaining coins were made in Southern Germany, the upper Rhine as well as the Alsace region, whereas only a few examples had been produced in Middle and Northern Germany.

It is quite surprising that coins from the western part of today's Switzerland as well as from Savoy, France and Italy are generally rare among Bernese coin finds. To the west of Bern, there used to be a significant border between two regions of coin circulations that was crossed only seldomly by coins. This border is more or less identical with the present-day border between the two languages German and French.¹⁰

Chronological survey

The diagram in figure 9 shows the chronological distribution of the coins from Steffisburg as compared to other churches in the Canton of Bern. One can easily recognize that there are only very few coins present in the period before 1300. The peaks are in the first halves of the 14th and 15th century respectively. After the Reformation, only very few coins were lost. The peak in this period is due to only one church in the Bernese Oberland and is not significant.

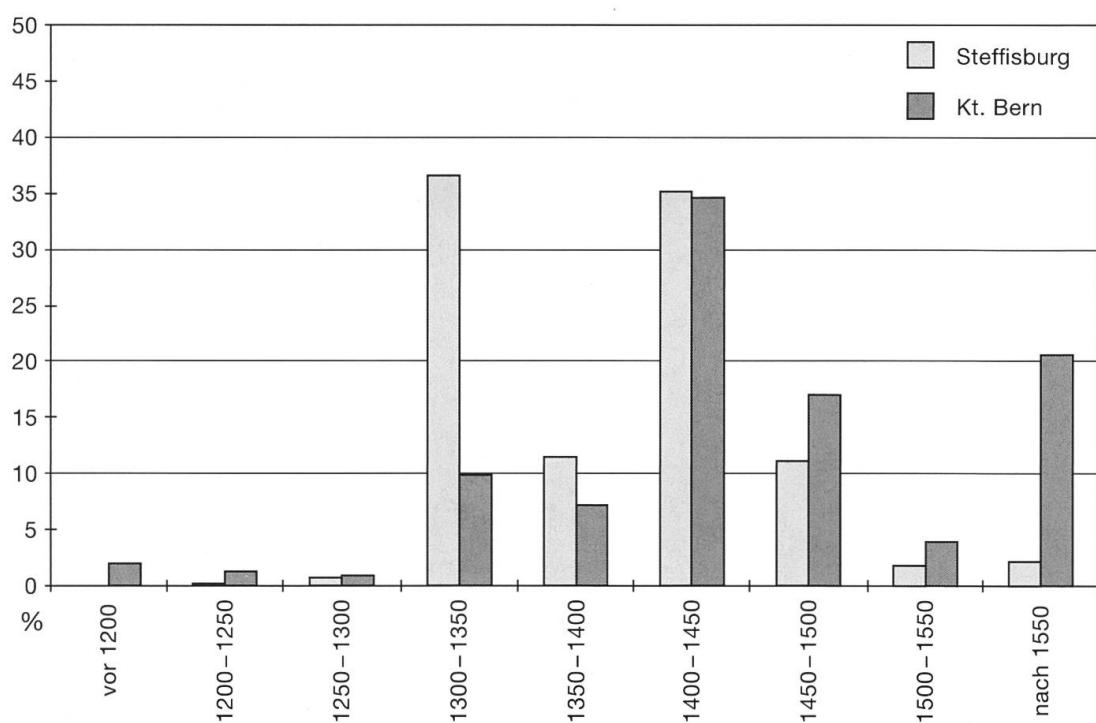


Fig. 9 Chronological distribution of the coins in Steffisburg and in other Bernese churches.

¹⁰ SCHMUTZ 2003.



Fig. 10 Penny of the French King Louis d'Outremer (936–954) from Langres (F), found in St-Imier (2:1).

The oldest medieval coins from Bernese churches belong to the late Carolingian period (*Fig. 10*). In two churches of the northern part of the Canton, two denarii of Louis d'Outremer, king of Western Francia, produced in Langres in today's France were found (St-Imier, Oberbüren). There is a concentration of these coins in the Three Lakes Region. Obviously, these foreign coins were more important for the coin circulation of that time than the contemporary issues of the much closer mints of Basel, Zurich and Orbe.¹¹



Fig. 11 Penny of the Bishopric of Basel (11. Jh.), found in Walkringen (2:1).

In the 11th and 12th century, some few pennies from Basel are present. The coin shown in figure 11 was found in the church of Walkringen.¹² Pennies from the same period from Zurich are present in finds from Bernese castles, but not in churches (for example Ins, Oberwangen).¹³

¹¹ FREY-KUPPER – KOENIG 1999, pp. 104–106.

¹² KOENIG 1992.

¹³ SCHMUTZ – KOENIG 2003, p. 75.



Fig. 12 Three halfpennies (Hälblinge) from Laufenburg, Solothurn, and an undetermined mint, all of them found in Steffisburg (2:1).

In the first half of the 14th century, the half penny, in German Hälbling, is the predominant denomination. The first two coins in figure 12 were struck in Laufenburg und Solothurn and are present in almost every church in the canton. Both coins show a lion, and the Solothurn coin is obviously an imitation of the Laufenburg coin. The third piece with the letters RO, also an imitation of the first one, has not yet been clearly identified. Bernese coins are still rare in this period.



Fig. 13 Penny and halfpenny from Zofingen, found in Steffisburg (2:1).

Figure 13 shows a common penny from Zofingen and the corresponding halfpenny, which had been unknown before the excavations of Steffisburg. This fact shows the importance of coin finds for our knowledge of coin types of this time.

In the first half of the 15th century, coin finds from churches increase again, especially Swiss coins from Bern, Zurich, Schaffhouse, Saint Gall, Solothurn, Lucerne, Zofingen, but also coins from southern Germany.



Fig. 14 Big Penny (Angster) from the City of Bern, (about 1425), found in Steffisburg (2:1).

In this period, Bernese coins play a significant role in coin circulation for the first time (*Fig. 14*). By now, you can also find them in distant regions like the Alpenrheintal or southern Germany.



Fig. 15 Penny (denier) from City of Freiburg i. Ü. (1446), found in Steffisburg (2:1).

The only double sided coin with some importance is a denier from Fribourg from 1446, produced in high quantities (*Fig. 15*).

In this period, we notice the presence of some rather exotic coins from Germany, including Northern Germany (Hesse, Mansfeld, Saxony, Mecklenburg, Cheb/Eger in Bohemia). These foreign coins are typical for the coin circulation of the second half of the 15th century. According to Benedikt Zäch, these coins partly replaced the local coins because the production of coins in Switzerland had almost entirely collapsed in the middle of the 15th century due to a shortage of silver.¹⁴



Fig. 16 Sesino from the Duchy of Milan, Gian Galeazzo Visconti (1395–1402), found in Steffisburg (2:1).

Small denominations from Italy are rare among Bernese church finds (*Fig. 16*). The more valuable coins from Milan, however, can often be found in treasures north of the Alps, but not in churches.

¹⁴ ZÄCH 1999, p. 428.



Fig. 17 Vierer of the city of Bern (1. half of the 17th century), found in Lauenen (1:1).

After the Reformation, coin finds decrease tremendously. The reason for that is not quite clear. In one of the churches in the Bernese Oberland, in Lauenen, most of the coins were lost in the modern period.¹⁵ The church belongs to the group of churches with a planked floor. When Franz Koenig published the coin finds, he observed that the biggest amount of coins had been lost in the choir and on the left hand side of the church. He thus concluded this was probably due to the women sitting on the left hand side and offering more than the men on the right hand side. The concentration in the choir can probably be explained with the so-called «Chorgericht», the local tribunal, which took place here after the Reformation.

The most common explication for the decreasing number is that the coins were not collected during the service anymore but only at the end of it at the exit, when people left the church. Among the small denominations, Bernese coins play an important role by now (Fig. 17).

4. Special interventions



Fig. 18 Penny from Bern from which one part was chipped, found in Steffisburg (2:1).

In the church of Steffisburg, some coins with secondary interventions were found.¹⁶ Often, a part of a coin was chipped (Fig. 18). It is difficult to tell if the intervention was motivated by a fraudulent gain of silver or religious reasons.

¹⁵ KOENIG 1990.

¹⁶ SCHMUTZ – KOENIG 2003, pp. 58–62.

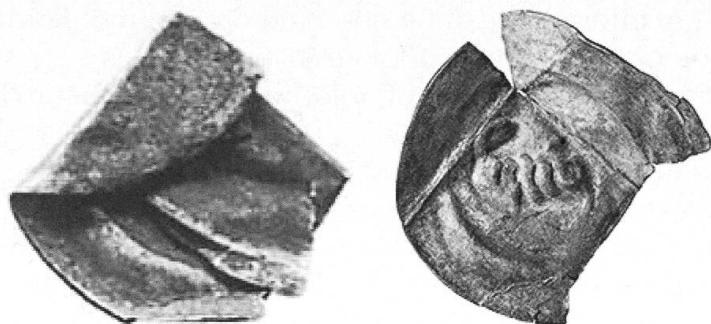


Fig. 19 Folded coin, and the same coin shown unfolded (Angster from Saint Gall), found in Steffisburg (2:1).

Much less common are folded coins. This act can be interpreted as a demonetization of the coin in the moment of the process of offering it in the church (*Fig. 19*).¹⁷



Fig. 20 Flattened coin from Solothurn, found in Steffisburg (2:1).

About 90 coins show yet another kind of intervention: They were flattened by hand or foot. The reason for this compression is arguably similar to the reason for folding the coins (*Fig. 20*).



Fig. 21 Coin with traces of a cut from Solothurn, found in Steffisburg (2:1).

¹⁷ VAN VILSTEREN 2017.

One last example of alteration can be observed on a coin of Solothurn on which there are traces of a cut made by a pointed instrument (*Fig. 21*). We can imagine that the effigy of Saint Ours, patron of Solothurn, was deliberately altered at the time of the Reformation.

As we tried to show, the coin finds from churches in the Canton of Bern are an essential source for further numismatic studies. Until today, the coins of merely 23 excavated churches are published in catalogue form. The coins of the remaining 21 excavated churches, however, are only roughly determined yet. As soon as all relevant determinations will be on hand, we can further examine the regional coin circulation.

Abstract

In the Canton of Bern, numerous churches have been excavated due to construction and renovation works. In about 60 out of 120 excavated churches in the canton, a total of about 1000 coins has been found up until today. Generally, wooden floors are a common feature of late medieval Bernese churches. This is very interesting for us today since a lot of coins as well as other small finds have fallen into the cracks in between the wooden planks during years of use, leaving us an abundance of finds to work with. A particularly well preserved and researched example is the church of Steffisburg. Generally speaking, coin finds from churches have not only provided us with a lot of information about chronological aspects, coin circulation and coin types – from the church of Steffisburg for example, several previously unknown coin types have been discovered! – but also given us hints about different habits through time.

Zusammenfassung

Im Kanton Bern fanden anlässlich von Bauarbeiten und Renovationen in zahlreiche Kirchen archäologische Untersuchungen statt. In rund 60 der 120 untersuchten Kirchen kamen bis heute insgesamt *ca* 1000 Münzen zum Vorschein. Häufig wiesen spätmittelalterliche Kirchen Bretterböden auf. Durch deren Spalten fielen während der Benutzungszeit zahlreiche Münzen und andere Kleinobjekte, welche uns heute für Forschungszwecke zur Verfügung stehen. Eine Kirche mit einer hohen Anzahl Funden, die zudem gut untersucht sind, ist die Pfarrkirche von Steffisburg. Diese Prägungen liefern nicht nur wertvolle Informationen zur chronologischen Verteilung der spätmittelalterlichen Fundmünzen, sondern es kamen auch bisher unbekannte Typen und zahlreiche Münzen mit sekundären Eingriffen zum Vorschein.

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Fig. 6: Bern, Bernisches Historisches Museum

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