COINS AS EVIDENCE FOR THE HISTORY OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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There are few works with any pretensions to scholarship, dealing with any period of the Roman Empire from the principate of Augustus onwards, in which the worker does not appeal to the evidence of coins in one connection or another. This is decidedly less true for the period of the Roman Republic, when the currency system had not yet reached the developed state of organization which it attained under the empire. In this respect, as in so many others, the principate of Augustus forms a prominent landmark. But although, under the empire, there is hardly any time or topic to which the evidence of coins is not in some way relevant, the degree of relevance varies considerably according to the period or subject being studied. It assumes, for example, what is perhaps an exaggerated importance in modern accounts of the later centuries of the Roman Empire, partly because the coins of those centuries have survived in very large numbers and there is a dearth of reliable written evidence, and partly because it is the economic phenomena of those centuries which have a special interest for historians. In respect of subject matter, it is, of course, the economic history of the empire, in its various aspects, to which the evidence of coins is most directly relevant, but it can also have relevance for the study of government policy and for certain aspects of cultural life. Coins have a special interest, of course, for historians of art, particularly in the study of one art-form in which the Romans excelled, namely, portraiture.

Therefore, I shall be dealing with the subject of coins with the following considerations in mind. Firstly, with the way in which they are used as a means of fixing dates; secondly, with their use by the emperors as an instrument of policy (that is to say, with coins as a medium for propaganda); and, thirdly, with their relevance for economic conditions generally, and for movements of trade in particular.

It is in connection with the use of coins for fixing dates that the work of the numismatist makes contact with that of the archaeologist. In many archaeological sites of the Roman imperial period, coins are of primary importance in dating the strata, or, where it is a matter of an isolated burial, of the other objects found along with them. In the case of dating a stratum, it is the object of latest date which provides the earliest possible date for the stratum. Coins frequently perform this function. There will always be a certain interval of time between the date of issue of the latest coin in any stratum and the date of the stratum itself, corresponding with the length of time for which the coin was in circulation. The possibility that this interval may have been quite a long one always exists where only one or two coins are present in the stratum.

* The following is the text of one of a series of lectures which were delivered to students of Ancient History I by the late J. L. O'Brien, Senior Lecturer in the Department of History at the University of Melbourne. It is published posthumously from his notes and, whereas the text of the manuscript has been transmitted here without alteration or abbreviation, the reference notes have been added. In most cases, the references cited below appeared in an abbreviated form in the manuscript and they are expanded here for the benefit of the reader.
A good example of this is provided by the stone fortifications of the Roman town of Verulamium. These fortifications were assigned by Sir Mortimer Wheeler, in the 1930's, to the principate of the emperor Hadrian (A.D. 117-138) or early in the principate of his successor, Antoninus Pius, not far from A.D. 140. This was done very largely on the basis of the latest coin found in the relevant stratum. 1 During the excavations carried out in 1955, the same relevant strata produced a coin issued by Antoninus Pius in A.D. 154/5, fifteen years or so later than Wheeler's date. 2 Some indication of the interval may be provided by the amount of wear which the coin has sustained. (When in an archaeological report a coin is described as “in mint condition,” this is a way of indicating to the reader that the interval is not likely to have been very long.) The coin of Antoninus Pius found in 1955 at Verulamium is described as “worn.” It was inferred from that, that the coin “had seen some circulation before being lost,” and this, in conjunction with the character of the pottery found, led the excavator, Mr. Sheppard Frere, to date the fortifications 3 to “not earlier than c. A.D. 180-190,” half a century later than Wheeler had done in the 1930's. In some of the more recent archaeological reports the practice is adopted of sub-dividing the coins into about half-a-dozen categories according to the amount of wear which they exhibit, and indicating this by using a series of numbers. Thus, in the Report on certain excavations at Camulodunum, in Essex, the Oxford numismatist, C. V. H. Sutherland, employs the numbers 1-7 to indicate conditions of the coins which he calls “very good,” “good,” “very fair,” “fair,” “fair-worn,” “worn” and “much-worn.” 4

An essential part of the use of coins for dating strata is, of course, the dating of the coins themselves, and the accuracy with which this can be done varies considerably from coin to coin, depending upon what indications of date are actually upon the coin. In the case of Roman coins of the period of the Empire, these indications range, to borrow Sutherland’s terminology, from “fair” to “very good.” Most other ancient coins are less well disciplined. The earliest coins issued by rulers of British tribes in pre-Roman Britain carried no inscription of any kind, and numismatists in that case have to depend upon the method of arranging the coins in a typological sequence: these pre-Roman British coins become somewhat easier to date with confidence, after the rulers have begun to put their names on the coins, and sometimes even the place where they are issued. The typological method also looms large in the process of dating the coins of the Greek city-states, where the coins, if they are inscribed at all, generally carry only the name of the issuing state.

The dating of Roman imperial coins is much facilitated by the presence, on the great majority of them, of the head of the reigning emperor. However, the head of a particular emperor is not necessarily an indication that the coin was issued by that emperor, since coins were frequently issued bearing the head of a past emperor or of some other deceased member of the imperial family. But, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, the head of an emperor is normally taken to indicate that the coin was issued during his reign. The recognition of the emperor’s head is, in addition, made easier by the realistic character of the portraiture; it is only rarely that any tendency to idealize the subject is displayed. Naturally, the emperors with the most distinctive physical features are the easiest to recognize. Nero is quite unmistakable.

In addition, the coin almost invariably carries the emperor’s name in some form or other, so that the necessity for portraiture-recognition only arises when the inscription is too worn or defaced to be legible. The portrait is a less safe guide in the later centuries of the Roman Empire, when portraits tend to become
COINS AS EVIDENCE FOR THE HISTORY OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Stylized and when many of the emperors reigned for such short periods that their coins were often being issued from provincial mints where they had never shown their face and the designers had little idea of what they looked like. If you were to take the coins of Valentinian I, Valens, Valentinian II and Gratian, in the 60’s and 70’s of the fourth century and arrange them according to portraits instead of according to the names they bear, you would get groups which correspond more closely to the mints from which the coins were issued than to the emperors concerned.

The portrait-head and the name together only place the coin within the limits of a reign, which will only make for narrower dating if the reign is very short, as in the case of the later centuries, it quite frequently is. But there are often other indications which make it possible to date a coin more narrowly. It may have been a commemorative issue connected with an event of a date known from other evidence, or the inscription may provide information of chronological value. Of these, the most consistently useful one is the number of the tribunician year of the emperor.

Augustus initiated the practice of numbering the years of his tenure of tribunician power, counting from July 1, 23 B.C. This practice was followed by his successors, and quite frequently the legend on a coin will include the number of the tribunician year, which enables the coin to be placed within a limit of twelve months. It should be observed, however, that the tribunician year is not necessarily the same thing as the year of the reign, since some emperors had been holding the tribunician power for some time before the deaths of their predecessors, and the years are counted from the original conferring of the tribunician power. Thus, in the case of Tiberius, the first year of his principate more or less coincides with the sixteenth year of his tribunician power. Some coins, in which the tribunician year is not included in the inscription, may have the letters COS followed by a numeral, indicating the number of times which the emperor has held the consulship.

The years in which he has been consul are usually known, and this dates the coin between the year of the consulship shown on the coin and the next year in which the office was held. This method allows for quite narrow dating in the case of the Flavian emperors, who held the consulship with great frequency, often in successive years. Sometimes the year of a consulship can be combined with a tribunician year, if both are given on a coin, to provide dating limits of less than twelve months; the consular year, which starts with the first of January, does not coincide with the tribunician year, which begins on different days with different emperors, but always on a day other than January 1. To take an example: Vespasian's tribunician years began on July 1, A.D. 69. His second tribunician year thus ran from July 70 to June 71. He began his third consulship on January 1, A.D. 71. This is tabulated on the next page.

Certain gold and silver coins of Vespasian include in their reverse legend the inscription TRIB.POT. II COS. III. They therefore fall between January 1 and July 1 of A.D. 71. Sometimes, when the overlap between the tribunician year and the consular year is narrower, as it is in the case of Claudius, the possibility exists of a coin being dated within a period of less than a month. But these are very exceptional cases.

Once certain groups of coins have been dated in this way, others which do not carry specific indications of date can also be given a probable close dating by comparison with them: such a case arises where coin A has a specific indication of the date on the reverse, or tail, of the coin, and coin B has not, but they both have exactly the same obverse or head. This, of course, depends on the frequency with which the obverses were changed, which in the case of the Romans was much
COINS AS EVIDENCE FOR THE HISTORY OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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THE TRIBUNICIAN AND CONSULAR YEARS OF VESPASIAN FOR THE YEARS A.D. 69-75.
COINS AS EVIDENCE FOR THE HISTORY OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

more frequently than it is with us. This frequency of changes in the design of coins is closely connected with the use of coins as a vehicle for propaganda.

Coins were one of the few means then available to the authorities of indicating to the general public what they ought to be thinking and feeling (that is, what sort of things they ought to be considering important, or be feeling grateful about). They accordingly played a much more important part in this way than coins do nowadays. Probably a closer parallel in recent times would be found in the use which has been made by various governments of postage stamps. If you look in Stanley Gibbons’ stamp catalogue, at the stamps of Germany and Russia, you will see that down to the establishment of the Nazi regime in the one case and the Communist regime in the other, changes in the designs of the stamps are very rare, and the designs themselves are extremely conventional. With the establishment of the new regimes, there come arresting designs, all conveying a message, and very frequent changes of design. Very much the same sort of thing happened to Roman coins as an accompaniment to the establishment of the regime of Augustus. Many writers have remarked upon the marked increase in the multiplicity of coin-types under Augustus, who set the fashion in this respect for his successors.

Most of the designs on the reverse of Augustus’ coins, and the legends accompanying them, are clearly intended to condition the public mind in one direction or another. Victories, military, naval and diplomatic, are recorded on the coins. The campaigns at Actium and in Egypt against Antony and Cleopatra, which resulted in the establishment of Augustus’ authority in the Eastern half of the empire, are marked by coins showing the goddess of Victory standing on the prow of a ship, or on a globe, and by legends like ASIA RECEPTA or AEGYPTO CAPTA. The recovery in 20 B.C. of the standards lost to the Parthians by M. Licinius Crassus is celebrated by coins bearing the legend SIGNIS RECEPTIS or SIGNIS PARTHICIS RECEPTIS, and public attention is drawn to other victories of Augustus’ generals in a similar way. The idea of Augustus as the saviour of the Roman state from Oriental despotism is carefully fostered by numerous coins with the inscription OB CIVIS SERVATOS within a wreath which seems to represent the “civic crown” awarded to a soldier who had saved the life of a citizen, and awarded to Augustus himself by the Senate in 27 B.C. Attention is drawn to his repair of the highways leading north from Rome by coins with appropriate designs and the inscription QVOD. VIAE. MVN. SVNT. Others again serve as a supplement to, and reinforcement of, the ruler-cult, such as those of 19-18 B.C., issued in connection with the establishment of the cult of Rome and Augustus at Pergamum in Asia, showing the facade of a temple with ROM. ET. AVGVT. inscribed on its architrave and COM. ASIAE. in the field; or those which show the altar at Lugdunum, in Gaul, with the legend ROM. ET. AVG.

Much use is also made of female figures representing abstractions like “Peace” and “Liberty,” accompanied by various appropriate inscriptions to remind the handler of the coin that these were things for which he had to thank the man on the other side of it.

Augustus’ successors learnt this lesson well—if anything, too well. Augustus had made the basic moves, and his successors did little but repeat them, without much widening of the scope or much development of new ideas. Some of them resorted to a faster ringing of the changes. In one year of the reign of Antoninus Pius, in A.D. 139, the silver denarius was issued with more than one hundred different types on the reverse of the coin, and the largest brass coin, the sestertius, with more than fifty.
It was more or less inevitable that this sort of thing should in the end defeat its own purpose. Like modern advertising, it either had to go stale or be developed to such fantastic proportions that no one took it seriously. When "Victory" or "Peace" or "Liberty" is endlessly repeated upon coins, they must sooner or later become just coins, especially if, as happened under the Later Empire, it became only too obvious that what the coins say is not true. The stage is reached, under the later emperors, where modern historians even show a tendency to interpret the inscription in reverse, to take a legend like SECVRITAS REIPVLCAE ("Security of the State") as a sign that something is wrong, or one like CONCORDIA AVGVSTORVM ("Harmony between the Emperors") to suggest the possibility that war, not recorded in the written sources, was in progress.

Nor are the messages likely to mean much to the user of the coins, if, as also happened, they have lost most of their value as coins. Which brings me to the question of the bearing of the numismatic evidence upon economic conditions. An essential part of the investigation of the economic decline of the later centuries of the Empire is the study of the coins themselves.

The coins of the Roman imperial period show a more or less progressive debasement throughout the history of the Empire. This is traced by Tenney Frank for the period down to the time of Caracalla. Before the time of Marcus Aurelius, the gold and silver coin (the aureus and the denarius: 25 denarii being reckoned to the aureus) may be regarded as substantially full-value coins, in spite of a gradual decrease in the silver-content of the denarius. But from Marcus Aurelius onwards, this debasement of the denarius proceeded more rapidly until, by the time of Septimius Severus, the silver-content of the denarii was down to half and in some cases less than half of those of Augustus. The gold aureus, although it had become somewhat smaller, remained pure, and served, when there was sufficient gold in circulation, to keep up the value of the denarius, which by now had become a token coin. In the second half of the third century the debasement of the denarius speeded up still more, until the silver-content fell as low as two per cent. Diocletian, at the end of the third century, seems to have made an attempt to put the coinage on a stable basis by introducing a number of new coins of varying weights and silver-content, including a silver coin more or less corresponding with the denarius of the first century.

The fall in the silver-content of the denarius would seem to have been accompanied, as one would expect, by an increase in the number of coins in circulation. At all events, the sites in Britain which yield these debased coins yield them in much greater numbers than the purer coins of earlier centuries. This phenomenon is mentioned in Wheeler's Report on the excavations carried out at Verulamium near St. Albans in the 1930's, and another site in Britain, the Saxon Shore fort at Richborough in Kent, has produced, up to the publication of the Fourth Report on its excavation, a total of 37,375 Roman coins, most of them dating from the late fourth century A.D.

Of particular relevance to the investigation of economic conditions at various periods, in different parts of the empire, is the study of the location and output of the mints which were issuing coins from various provincial centres; and this study is facilitated under the later Empire by the practice of putting the name of the provincial centre from which the coins were issued, in an abbreviated form, upon the coin itself. It is also of value for filling out the very unsatisfactory written accounts of the political history of the period, through the evidence which it provides of the areas controlled by the many short-lived emperors with a limited territorial range of authority.
COINS AS EVIDENCE FOR THE HISTORY OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Another aspect of Roman economic history for which the evidence of coins is of special value is the one with which Sir Mortimer Wheeler deals in his book, *Rome beyond the Imperial Frontiers* (1954), in which he reviews the evidence for certain aspects of Roman political and economic contacts with areas outside the empire, particularly free Germany and India.

NOTES

3. S. S. Frere. op. cit.
9. At this point in the manuscript, the following note was appended: "For further reading, see especially Michael Grant, *Roman History from Coins*, C.U.P. 1954, (which is) especially good on the use of coins for propaganda purposes."