

Coins as minted and coins as found

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A tribute to Leandre Villaronga is a good opportunity to try to think about a detailed aspect of numismatics. His work has been so thorough and so broad that the choice of subject is difficult. Yet a high proportion of his work has been concerned with either the detailed study of coin production from known centres – mints, series of coins, particular issues, and broad areas of coinage, or the study of coin distributions and the methods involved. This I would summarise as the study of the coins as struck and the study of the coins as found. My aim is to set out some of the differences between these two types of study in order to give back to Dr. Villaronga a little of what he has given to both myself and my pupils in help and encouragement.

The study of Roman coins as struck has a much longer history than the study of their distribution. The early collection aimed for one coin of each type for each emperor and this produced the catalogue arranged in alphabetical order of types. Further study divided the coins up into different groups struck in different places, which produced basic studies of mint production. This work only became firmly based when it was recognised that the fundamental unit of study was the die rather than the coin. It was no longer good enough to note that Constantinus Max Aug struck the reverse *Gloria Exercitus* with two soldiers and two standards. First the mint-mark had to be quoted, and now we want to know how many different dies were engraved for exactly that ruler, that type, and that mint-mark.

I have moved now beyond our present knowledge, for no one has yet done a die study for any of the common fourth century bronze coinage, so far as I know. The temptation is to cut corners by estimating production from a count of coins found. In some cases this might give a correct answer; in other cases the answer may be quite wrong. In all cases the estimate remains just that, a refined guess, until the basic work of counting the dies has been done. It is the gap between these two studies and the differences between them which I want to examine.

In its simplest form the study of the production of a coin series involves gathering together a cast or photograph of every known example, together with dimensions, weight, and metal content if known, to form a corpus. Ideally the obverse of every coin is compared with the obverse of every other coin and this produces a list of obverse dies. The reverse dies are likewise tabulated, and the combinations of different dies noted. This can lead to a diagram in which each die is represented by a number or letter and obverses and reverses are put into the order which involves least complication. Warren Esty (1990) has recently questioned this method by asking the very simple question «Is it right to assume that the mint worked in the simplest, most efficient, and most logical way?» Using the die studies and any other evidence of coin types, weight standards or metal standards the dies are put into a sequence and any coin from that series can then be placed in a mint, a run of striking, possibly even a year or a season. Finally, if the dies can be grouped by time-spans the relative number of dies at different periods in the series can be counted, year by year, for example, and varying output can be given to the historians for more general assimilation and use. Provided only that the initial gathering of surviving examples of the coinage has been efficient, that there is a reasonable survival of coins from a majority of dies cut, and that the work has been well done, it is possible to study that coin series and produce a firm series of facts.

Studies of coin distributions through coin finds are much more recent than the studies outlined above. It is probably fair to say that we are still in process of learning just what they do and can tell us. The distribution study involves a much greater amount of work in gathering the material because, unless it is published it is far too general in its aims to ask for information to be sent in by fellow workers. It is reasonable to ask a large museum, or even a small museum or a private collector, to send a cast of each of the five denarii of Otho in the collection. Because the request is reasonable it has a good chance of success. It is unreasonable to ask for full details of all the Roman coins in a museum which were found locally. If such a request were made it would, in the best circumstances, be answered with an invitation to work in the museum for a month or so to list the coins for yourself.

If the scale of work is so large, what returns may be expected from it, and are they worth it? There is a curious sense by which the information that comes from the study of coin finds is valuable because it explains why coins as found are such a bad guide to coins as minted. A coin minted in Rome and found in Barcelona has had to be sent out by the mint, delivered, put into circulation, used and lost.

Clearly, only some of the coins minted in Rome were sent to Barcelona. Different coins were put into circulation by different people and in different ways and they were used very differently. Some coins had long lives, others, short; some coins of low value were lost without great worry, the loss of others may have caused family crises.

Let us look at the negative side of distribution studies first. As soon as the work of David Walker (1988) on the coins from the Sacred Spring and Temple at Bath (near Bristol, SW England) appeared, something that had been suspected for a long time was proved. Some issues struck by the Roman mint in the second century were sent, perhaps in their entirety, to one province of the Empire. Once in that province, if they were bronze coinage, they did not circulate to other provinces. It is therefore now impossible to carry out any study on Roman coinage on material gathered from a limited area of the empire because the coinage lost throughout the Empire at any date is not homogeneous.

If only one denomination of the coinage that was produced at a totally constant standard for a short time was under study then it might be reasonably accurate to work on the coins found rather than go through the whole process of a die study. It would of course be necessary to make sure that the sample gathered contained coins from all parts of the empire. Even then, the study of the coins found would have limitations. If the series under study was from one mintmark of bronze coins of 337 to 340 there would be several emperors included –the three surviving sons of Constantine I. It would be possible to count the numbers of coins for each emperor, Constantine II, Constantius II and Constans, but these survivors do not necessarily relate directly to the number of dies cut for each emperor, nor the number of coins actually struck. It might be, as Dr. Kent (*pers. comm*) has suggested, that equal numbers of dies were cut, but that coins were held in the mint for some time before being issued so that only a proportion of coins struck for Constantine II were sent out before his death in 340 and the rest were melted down. If coins were sent out in the order in which they were minted, but with a time lag, we can never know this, for the produce of some dies would have been totally recycled. But if, as is much more likely, a proportion of all coins was let out, a die study would show a roughly equal number of dies for the three brothers, but a much lower survival rate of coins per die for Constantine II.

The moment that coins of different denomination or standard come under study the evidence of coin finds is clearly poor. The state produced a system of denominations and standards which made sense to itself; there is little chance that system was known, understood, or approved of by any number of coin users in different parts of the empire. There is not even any hope that all denominations and standards were distributed uniformly throughout the empire, so even if the people had wanted to use the coins equally they would probably not have had the chance. The type of problem at issue here is the differential distribution of semisses and quadrantes throughout the provinces in the first century AD, the minting and

distribution of radiates and denarii from 214 to 222, and the distribution and use of large and small denominations of bronze coins, when both were produced at the same time, in the fourth century.

But the factors which prevent the use of coins as found as direct evidence on the coins as struck are not only negative; in each case their bad aspects have good sides. The knowledge that the distribution of coins over the empire is not uniform holds the key to the differential distribution of coins, and therefore leads in to a study of what was distributed, when, and to where, and this might lead on to a knowledge of why. The fact that the numbers of coins of Constantine II of 337 to 340 found is surprisingly low leads us to a study of whether the disparity comes in the numbers struck, the numbers distributed, or the numbers lost.

Whatever the answer, it leads us on to a consideration of the mechanisms for coins production, distribution, use and loss. It might even bring in an element of Imperial politics. The fact that different denominations and standards of coins travel to different places, and are used and lost in different ways and to different degrees is annoying only when we want to study the coin as struck. It is exciting and informative when we want to study how coins were used, and how coin use differed from place to place and through time.

There are two points which have been implicit so far that need now to be brought out. Coins in general, from which an issue might be collected and a die study made, must derive almost completely from coin finds. It is just possible that some Roman coins have never been lost. The possibility is intriguing, but it would be pointless to spend much time on it. It could be that a European cabinet contains some gold coins which derived from a noble Venetian family who, in turn, received them from members of the family who shared in the booty from Constantinople of 1204, and that booty might have been seized from rambling palaces in which bags of jumbled old gold coins were found, some of which dated back to the fifth century. Such occurrences are, so far as I know, undocumented and must be a tiny proportion of modern collections. If coins known are generally coins found why have I separated the two groups and insisted that they are different? One reason is the reason given above of the difference in dealing with, and obtaining information about, such coins and the other is what Erik Christiansen (1987, 15-6) has called the stamp-collectors principle. Nearly all the great collections are formed on this principle of having at least one specimen of as many different types of coin as humanly possible. The great collections are therefore a highly selective distillate of coins as found. They concentrate types and categories and thereby totally distort every picture of production or distribution. But if your study is of the denarii of Otho most of your best material will be in the great collections, for they will all have at least a few of them, one of each reverse, and a survey of 50 great collections will give a reasonable idea of their qualitative nature. A survey of 50 large collections of site-finds might not reveal more than five denarii of Otho, and those will probably all be of the most common type.

But surveys of material in great collections also include hoards of coins, many of which may be the same and therefore an exception to the stamp-collectors principle, though even stamp collectors will save a choice envelope which has twenty stamps which are all the same. plastered all over it. And hoards are a category of coins as found which have so far not been dealt with separately.

Hoard, in their usefulness fall somewhere between the distributional truthful variety of site-finds, and the qualitative variety of collections, for they are ancient selections from circulation. This means that they are different from the general pool of circulation, and may well be different from the general pool of production, but those differences have a lot of evidence to give on the distribution and use of coins in the ancient world.

The factors which bias hoards, and make them highly unsuitable as a source from which to write the monetary history of an area, are intrinsic value, and political and economic expediency, in addition to the regional problems which affect all coin finds. If there are different denominations in circulation at one time, the tendency, is usually to bury in a hoard coins which have the highest intrinsic value. An example might be the preferential burial of denarii rather than asses. Hoards from a given period are therefore very bad indicators of the relative frequency of denominations in circulation or in production. If there is circulation of coin between different coin producing states there will be preferred currencies and coins for inter-state trade. Hoards which are moved about from area to area may well represent preferred means of exchange rather than the coinage of any given area or country. An example might be the currency of the Mediterranean area in the last two centuries BC. If, inside a state, the coinage is changing quickly it is obviously more sensible to bury only recent issues rather than a sample of the mixed circulation pool. An example might be the hoards of single phases during the reduction of the follis or nummus between 294 and 317. As in the previous section, all these barriers to the use of coin hoards as samples of either production or distribution are in fact entries to the study of the differential use of denominations, coinage of competing states, and the rate of change of coinage in circulation.

The obvious conclusion to these thoughts must be that if we are to understand the whole life of coins, birth, life and death, we must study all types of coin available. Only a broad coverage of a majority of known examples will lead to a proper understanding of the actual production process at the mint, and without that everything that we say about hoarding, distribution, use and loss is on very unsure foundations. But once the process of production is known, we must go on to see how the idea of a few administrators about what the state needed fares in practice as the coins are sent out and used with enthusiasm or total disdain.

Leandre Villaronga has contributed many studies to every aspect of the processes that I have been describing, and has almost certainly thought through these ideas already. In presenting them to him now I will only claim to be clearing my own mind in preparation for what I hope will be many years of joint action.

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