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# The interpretation of Roman coins – *practice and theory*

Peter Guest

*Numismatics, together with epigraphy*, provided the framework for the earliest syntheses of the Roman world from Gibbon and on into the nineteenth century. Historians such as Theodor Mommsen used the copious evidence from Roman coins to construct the first modern analytical explanations of Roman imperialism. The reasons for this are as obvious now as they were then – Roman coins are readily identifiable artefacts; they were decorated with persons, scenes, and events from the real and mythological worlds; we can arrange them into tight chronological sequences; and their function is well known. While those interpretations of the Roman empire and its provinces that originated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could hardly have been anything other than products of their times,<sup>1</sup> the field of numismatics remains rooted in these traditions over a century later.<sup>2</sup>

The recent debate regarding the usefulness of Romanisation as a model for interpreting Roman Britain provides a valuable counter-balance to the established Romano-centric view.<sup>3</sup> In the field of numismatics such alternative perspectives are not part of the research agenda with the re-

sult that the study of Roman coins occurs solely from the point of view of the producer, the Roman state and establishment, rather than the general population who represent the users of coins.<sup>4</sup> It is the aim of this paper to examine two aspects of the devolution of archaeology and numismatics. First, I will explore the reasons behind the isolation enjoyed by Roman numismatists and highlight some of the anachronisms that survive remarkably intact today. Second, I shall attempt to show how Roman coins might contribute to the archaeological study of Roman Britain and indeed can provide a valuable test of Romanisation as a model of cultural and social integration. In dealing with the second issue under examination, coin finds from the third century have been selected as the area of study. This is partly because the third century produces significantly greater numbers of coin finds than the earlier centuries, but mainly because it provides the opportunity to look back at Romanisation and question to what extent the circumstances of the third century were a result of processes underway in the first and second. The aim is to use the third century to identify the effects of earlier cultural interactions where possible and thereby isolate the processes (explicit and implicit) of change that occurred during the conquest and initial occupation.<sup>5</sup>

### PROGRESS AND DIRECTIONALITY

If the archaeological study of Roman Britain and the study of Roman coins have grown further and further apart over the last century or so, this is due to the fact that while archaeological theory has tried to integrate ideas from other social sciences in order to pose questions more relevant to the contemporary world, numismatics has preserved a far more conservative tradition. As the validity of the orthodox view of Roman Britain is being increasingly challenged, many of the prejudices and assumptions that have been the focus of archaeological debate continue to influence the study of Roman coins.

The most obvious expression of orthodox survival is in the question of the function of Roman coins in Britain. It is almost impossible to find an interpretation of coins as anything other than money whose primary use was as the means of exchange throughout the empire.<sup>6</sup> The main reason for this is that coins are a familiar class of object for us today when they are used widely and exclusively as money. Therefore, the basis of almost the entire study of Roman coins is simply and fundamentally derived from the extrapolation of function from the modern to ancient worlds. This is the legacy of Mommsen's great numismatic work, *Geschichte des*

*römischen Münzwesens* published in 1860, in which he laid the foundations of the analytical study of Roman monetary history.<sup>7</sup>

However, for the moment it is safe to presume that the conclusion is a correct interpretation of the past, even if the methodological principles themselves are flawed. Here we begin to see at what point archaeological and numismatic studies diverged from one another as the practice of reverse extrapolation for Roman coinage embodies the same two attitudes that have plagued Romanisation as a process itself, namely progression and directionality. The tendency throughout the twentieth century has been to view the Roman period as a positive episode in our history that brought many civilising changes to the population of Britain.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, this is a conspicuously two-dimensional perception of history with past, present, and future fixed on the same line of historical progression.<sup>9</sup> This linearity assumes that social history possesses a tendency towards increasing complexity and that our most complex societies at the end of the twentieth century have developed at the end of a long series of progressive steps.

These deterministic models of history progressing from *then* to *now* (or *them* to *us*) ignore the influence of variation (historical accident or chance) and the complexities of human societies that need to be emphasised in order to create more representative three-dimensional histories. At this point there is much to be learnt from the current debates within other natural sciences that are also questioning the progressive perspective.<sup>10</sup> Acknowledging other perspectives and the effects of historical variation goes some way towards balancing the notion of historical progression, but consequently undermines the theoretical basis of the orthodox model of Roman archaeology and, more specifically, coin use in the Roman empire.<sup>11</sup>

## PRACTICE: SECURITY OF MEANING

The premise that Roman coins were used by the population of Roman Britain primarily as a form of money still stands, despite the theoretical basis having been shown to be methodologically invalid. But even a stopped clock tells the right time twice a day. If Roman objects could have had numerous functions within Iron-Age Europe, the possibility also exists that Roman coins were imbued with a variety of meanings depending on when and where they were used and by whom.<sup>12</sup> Understanding that a variety of meanings could have been perceived in the ancient world weakens the conclusion that coins could only have func-

tioned as money throughout the empire. Similar arguments have been made in the past, perhaps most succinctly by Sture Bolin (1958, 15) when he observed:

A present-day institution can, of course, trace its descent directly from an ancient institution and retain the same outward appearance without necessarily having the same functions. In the course of development its functions may wholly or partly have changed their nature.

Bolin was a much under-rated numismatist whose doubts about the use of coins as a means of exchange in the Greek and Roman worlds went beyond the speculative.<sup>13</sup> Since these words were written, very little attention has been paid to Bolin's opposition to the orthodox interpretation of coins, which remains largely unchallenged, hardly altered since Mommsen's day. The user remains conspicuously absent from current numismatic studies, particularly in the northern provinces of Europe incorporated into the empire between the first centuries BC and AD. I can think of only a handful of instances of a numismatist directly asking how people might have reacted to Roman coins or assessing the impact that using such an obviously Roman object must have had upon the cultures of a new province's native population.<sup>14</sup>

Qualification requires quantification and here the numismatist is better served by the archaeological record than many other specialists. In fact, the numismatist has an embarrassment of riches when it comes to material available for study, with many thousands of coins recovered from sites and hoards. However, even in a field that is an obvious candidate for wider archaeological interpretation, coins from excavations and hoards have been used mainly as indicators of the economic fortunes of a settlement or region, however cautiously this has been attempted.<sup>15</sup> This assumes that Roman coins contained a certain security of meaning that I suggest is largely deceptive, methodologically as well as theoretically. The traditional approach to studying Roman coins is centuries old and yet the study of these artefacts remains above all committed to exploring issues relating to why coins were struck rather than how they were used.

### THE THIRD CENTURY – WHOSE CRISIS?

The years from AD 222 to 296 are important to this study for two reasons. Firstly, the number of coins recovered in Britain as site finds and from hoards increases dramatically during this period, and, secondly, Britain



had been incorporated as a province within the empire for two hundred years and more. The third century also saw the collapse of the Emperor Augustus' tri-metallic system of currency as the silver denomination, the *denarius*, and its eventual replacement, the *radiate* (introduced in AD 214), were debased at an ever faster rate.<sup>16</sup> By AD 260 all bronze denominations had virtually disappeared and the *radiate* contained as little as 2% silver (having had almost 50% when introduced). Over the next few years even this vestigial amount of precious metal was further reduced as the mints struck vast quantities of these coins. The Emperor Aurelian reformed the coinage around AD 274 by improving the silver content to about 4% and restricting circulation. It appears that after this reform the coin-using population of Roman Britain began striking their own local copies – *barbarous radiates* – needed to make good the local short-fall in supply from the official mints (Burnett 1987, 24–26; Reece 1987, 19–21).

Britain produces very large quantities of debased radiates, whose intrinsic value was very low and which must have been struck in enormous quantities. Leaving aside questions regarding why the cycle of debase-ments occurred, it is abundantly clear that at this time the population of Roman Britain consequently had greater access to coins than ever before. As site finds, coins from the later third century are especially common,<sup>17</sup> and they also comprise the most frequently discovered type of hoard from Roman Britain (Robertson 1988; Casey 1980). In relative terms we can conclude that from AD 260 to Diocletian's currency reform in AD 296 Britain experienced greater actual monetisation than at any time up that date. For the first time coins regularly appeared on rural settlements and in peripheral areas that previously had shown few signs of adopting Roman forms of material culture, although it must also be noted that in some areas coins were still largely limited to circulating around the army's forts and dependent *vici*, particularly in the militarised northern region.<sup>18</sup>

The correlation between precious metal content of Rome's silver denominations and the level of production at the mints has formed the basis of a long-standing academic argument concerning price inflation and its possible effects in the Roman empire. This does not directly concern the objectives of this paper, although it does serve to remind us once again of the overwhelming economic perspective from which coins are discussed.<sup>19</sup> The fact is that the Roman treasury could not convert its finite reserves of silver into ever greater quantities of coins without tampering with the silver standard, whether by reducing their weight or silver content, and usually both.

This situation can be interpreted in an entirely different way if it is accepted that even the most advanced societies in the ancient world did not recognise or understand basic economic theory and, therefore, that the single most important reason for the Roman government to strike coins was to pay what it owed.<sup>20</sup> At certain times the level of state payments rose too quickly to be met by new and recycled sources of precious metals, particularly when payments to the military were increased. The consequence of meeting consumer demand in this form was that the fineness of these coins had to be reduced by the means described above. The political background to the third century suggests that the cost of civil war exacerbated the problems of stretching silver resources to meet the increased demand for coins from the frontiers of the empire. Therefore the decision-makers in the treasury at Rome faced a dilemma that had a very real effect on the coins struck by the Roman mints. There was a tension between maintaining a high standard silver coin that had limited circulation on one hand and expanding production to satisfy consumer demand for low value coinage while sacrificing the dignity of the silver denomination on the other (Reece 1987, 42–43).

The overall trend from the first to late third centuries describes an inexorable drift towards meeting the demand for coins, from the Emperor Nero's debasement of the denarius in AD 64 to Diocletian's currency reforms in AD 296. The long periods of consumer-led coin production, during which the silver coins were debased, were always followed by reforms that improved the silver standard but reduced the number available to be circulated.<sup>21</sup> The main problem was that the idealised Roman currency system did not provide sufficient low value coins to satisfy the need for small change within the expanding empire.<sup>22</sup> By AD 270 the heavily debased radiate had a lower value than the bronze denominations of two centuries earlier and could consequently act as small change. Paradoxically, at this time there were only low-value billon coins in circulation and the shift away from the original Roman system was now at its most extreme.<sup>23</sup>

The history of Rome's currency from the first to late third centuries is at odds with the model of Romanisation as a largely one-way process of cultural assimilation, from native to Roman. The greater monetisation of the third century was not a result of Roman civilisation spreading throughout the provinces, rather it occurred as a by-product of two centuries of reducing the fineness of silver coins in order to pay the state's debts. The tri-metallic currency system of the first century AD was forced to change in order to meet the demand for coins from the frontier

provinces, thereby monetising an increased proportion of the population. Despite the efforts of the Roman élite to re-establish the principles of Augustus' system by reforming the coinage on various occasions, the currency of the empire was inevitably drawn away from these ideals by the provinces. This process of provincialisation ultimately saw the needs of the periphery lead the centre at the end of the third century.<sup>24</sup>

Most numismatists would agree with the statement that the successful economic integration of the empire depended, to a greater or lesser extent, on the population of the provinces becoming increasingly integrated after conquest and occupation. The administration of the traditional Roman currency system restricted monetisation within the empire and, thereby, acted as a barrier to the integration of the provinces within the wider economy. We might legitimately ask whether full monetisation of the population and commercial integration were ever goals envisaged by the Roman conquerors. From the available evidence it seems that any pressure to achieve these aims came from the provinces rather than from the Roman government.<sup>25</sup>

#### CULTURAL ASSIMILATION: A ONE-WAY SYSTEM?

Perhaps the greatest problem faced by the process of Romanisation as a model of acculturation by which native societies adopted "Roman" culture is that it lacks the flexibility to include the fact that Roman society was itself constantly changing. All societies are intricately complex and naturally dynamic systems and Rome at the centre of an empire was open to a bewildering diversity of cultural forces that ensured no aspect of Roman culture could ever remain static. Once Roman Britain had matured beyond the days of Tacitus, the model of acculturation becomes increasingly misplaced as we can no longer identify the form of *romanitas* that the natives were supposed to be emulating.

During the third century the large number of coins hoards from Roman Britain mirrors the patterns of hoarding from all the European provinces of the empire (Guest 1994). Viewed in terms of Romanisation this could be interpreted as the successful acculturation of the provinces within the Roman system. However, the currency of the third century has been shown to be a product of changes brought about by the needs of the provinces and the homogeneity of the empire in terms of coins and hoards needs some qualification. Can we state that Britain was more fully Romanised in AD 270 when the province produced a pattern of hoarding similar to that recorded in Italy? The answer must be no. If the coinage in



use at the time developed as a result of tensions between Roman and provincial cultural needs, then perhaps these hoards were similarly a result of cultural interactivity. Again the inability of "romanisation" to represent anything more complex and diverse than one-way acculturation means that it quickly loses significance as an interpretative model after the transition following initial occupation. By the third century perhaps twenty generations had passed since the cultural upheaval of the Roman conquest and, over this long period of time, Rome itself had become increasingly provincialised as the provinces became more Romanised. Any interpretation of Roman imperialism and Romanisation must contain the mechanism for accepting the complexity and diversity of the empire by viewing historical change as a multi-directional process.

### SUMMARY

Coins are as integral to the study of Roman Britain as any other class of artefact. By bringing the perspectives and methodologies of study up to date we can avoid many of the nineteenth-century prejudices that remain firmly entrenched within numismatics. Questioning the basis of the progressive perspective that dominates the traditional view of Roman Britain creates a less linear view of the past and allows other experiences a greater representation.

The premise that coins were used primarily as money in the Roman empire ignores the complexity of the evidence we have before us. By emphasising the users of coins as a respectable subject for study, we have a more relevant perspective of the past – one which does not fit well with the assumptions of earlier generations of academics. Romanisation as an interpretative model has received much criticism in recent years and the apparent incompatibility with a complex and diverse past undermines its validity also in the study of coins.

Fundamentally the past does not need to be viewed as a distant reflection of our own world and in order to fully understand past people we must speak their languages not only our own. As L. P. Hartley wrote: *The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.*

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## NOTES

1. Freeman 1997 provides a useful summary of the intellectual environments that influenced Mommsen and the early British Romanists up to Francis Haverfield.
2. Presumably this situation arose as a consequence of the divergence of numismatic and archaeological thinking that has resulted in the separation of these scholars. Numismatists have maintained an independence from archaeology – for example the *British Museum* has a *Department of Prehistoric and Romano-British Antiquities* as well as a *Department of Coins and Medals*, while the *National Museum of Wales* has a *Department of Archaeology and Numismatics*. This has afforded numismatics a healthy degree of autonomy, but in following a German tradition of research it has tended to become isolated from even the most general theories current in Romano-British archaeology. The notion of cultural assimilation along the lines of Romanisation does not feature in numismatic literature.
3. Currently this takes the form of a post-colonial critique attempting to decentre the study of the Roman empire and put forward a case for the validity of the non-élite as a subject of study, for example Hingley 1996.
4. This is not surprising given that numismatics has failed to incorporate a model of cultural change (n. 2). This point is a slight exaggeration as a small number of scholars have managed to promote the archaeological study of coins (Reece 1987; Casey 1988). In general, however, the idea that the Roman empire contained *discrepant experiences* has not found fertile soil in numismatics (for example the titles of papers in King and Wigg 1996).
5. The problem is that an end product can be the result of a number of potentially valid scenarios.
6. Despite the occasional exceptions noted in note 4, a glance at recent numismatic publications bears this out. For example, Duncan-Jones 1994; Howgego 1990, 1992, 1995 – none of these mention people as users of coins. This is simply an observation not a criticism in itself since such studies are often very useful in other ways. Nevertheless, it is this favoured perspective together with the lack of any apparent balance in terms of the approaches adopted that leaves the subject so unhealthily one-sided if we are to present a balanced picture of the ancient world. "Money" itself is open to a variety of definitions, but I shall continue to understand money to mean coins used as a means of commercial exchange as outlined by Polanyi (1957).
7. Not that this has been the approach exclusively favoured by numismatists. Bolin (1958, 14) criticised this theory for its methodological frailties thus: "Mommsen has quite simply shifted the monetary system of his own day two thousand years back in time, and in testing various ancient currencies he has based his analyses and made his classification on principles which were valid for the coinage of his own time". This paper would not exist had those dissenting voices overturned the orthodox view.

8. See Webster 1996, Freeman 1996, Barrett 1997, and Hingley 1997 for recent summaries of previous and current ideas.
9. Hingley's *progressive perspective* – Hingley 1997, 84.
10. The linear progressive view of history shares many similarities with the classic model of evolution from single-celled organisms, via fish, mammals, and ending up with *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Our own "twig on the tree of life" is most recognisably represented as a line of figures walking to the right, the males becoming progressively more upright and less hairy with each step. The directionality of this progression naturally suggests that there was little reason for the evolutionary existence of *Homo habilis* other than as a precursor to ourselves.
11. Arguing for a less *Homo sapiens* orientated view of evolution removes the arrogant notion of destiny and suggests that as a species we have had relatively little impact. In fact, the world remains much as it did hundreds of millions of years ago in the Age of the Single-Celled Organism (Gould 1996, 171). Not directly helpful to Roman Britain perhaps, but it provides an alternative perspective that, if developed further, presents a more modest view of change.
12. Barrett et al. 1989. The importance of the debate lies primarily in accepting alternative, possible, meanings, not necessarily in their precise applicability to Roman Britain – see Aitchison 1988.
13. Bolin's approach can be summed up with his own words: *One of the main tasks of science, is to examine and doubt the validity of the self-evident* (Bolin 1958, 14). His studies of Roman coins convey a dissatisfaction with the traditional view of numismatics. In response to Bolin's questions it has been argued that although the means of deduction may well be faulty, it is the end result that is important and we know from various ancient sources that coins were overwhelmingly perceived and used as money. This is truly the case, although a pedant might doubt the relevance of written sources describing the Near East or Rome in the first century AD to the interpretation of Britain two hundred years later.
14. For example Reece 1988, 41–57. I use the term numismatist cautiously.
15. For example Robertson 1988, Casey 1988, Reece 1995, Davies 1991, Shotter 1990.
16. The pressure to debase the silver coin was not unique to the third century, but had already begun to be felt soon after the system was introduced. From the time of the Emperor Nero and sporadically throughout the first and second centuries, the weight and fineness of the denarius were reduced, although these debasements were less obvious and more gradual than during the third century.
17. Reece 1995, 183. If these coins from Romano-British sites are aggregated together and those dating from AD 222–238 are given the value 1, then the ratios of later coins are as follows: AD 238–260, 1.1; AD 260–275, 19.8; AD 275–296, 16.6 (including barbarous coins).

18. For the spread of coins into rural and peripheral areas see Reece 1991 and Hingley 1989, 139–148. For the restricted circulation of coins in north-western England see Shotter 1990 and 1995.
19. It is difficult not to be drawn into the debate about inflation in the empire, particularly as the third century is often pointed to as the period when inflationary pressures directly resulted in the successively severe debasements of Rome's silver coins. In principle any argument in favour of inflation is invalid for the Roman period, which did not resemble the highly industrialised, monetised, and commercial world that produced the modern theory of price inflation (Rathbone 1996, 324). Evidence for increases in prices in the empire is limited to say the least, consisting mainly of a few records from Egypt (Finley 1985, 178 and fn. 5) and suggests that while prices did rise over time, they did so very slowly (Duncan-Jones 1994, 25–32) and sporadically, with long periods of stability interspersed with short bursts of steeper rises (Rathbone 1996). It is also worth remembering that inflation does not necessarily pose a threat to consumers, instead in the modern world it tends to endanger the well-being of those who lend money rather than their debtors.
20. Despite the protestations of modernists to the contrary (Howgego 1990 and Lo Cascio 1981), Finley's description of the ancient *economy* most comfortably fits the available evidence (Finley 1985, 18–34 and 182–183). For *state payments* as the primary reason for the striking of coins see Crawford 1970, 46, Burnett 1987, 90 (and caveats) 91–92, Duncan-Jones 1994, 45–46, and 108–112).
21. Nothing reveals the obvious lack of understanding of simple economic principles in the ancient world more than this cycle of debasement and reform.
22. Even the smallest copper denominations found in first-century Roman Britain had a value that was too high for them to act as small change (Reece 1987, 28–33). I mention the expanding empire because it appears that these shortages of coin were most acutely felt in the peripheral provinces (Reece 1973).
23. The tension between producer and consumer dictated coinages, and this continued on into the fourth century. The reform of AD 348 was yet another attempt to improve silver standards that merely reduced coins in circulation. Only in AD 356 did the system fundamentally change with small bronze denominations being struck almost in sufficient quantities to meet the need for low-value coins, while the good-quality silver coins were more of a rarity.
24. This represents an alternative ancient history from coinage – less Grand Narrative but more representative of the forces of change that affected the Roman empire.
25. If this accurately describes an historical phenomenon, I am equally certain that it was never perceived in such an abstract way, nor can there be any evidence that the forces of change were consciously understood or used to



advance the fortunes of one section of society, or area of the empire, against another.

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