

Roman Imperial type-selection : the degree of immediacy

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ROMAN IMPERIAL TYPE-SELECTION:
THE DEGREE OF IMMEDIACY

An even superficial knowledge of the earlier Roman imperial coinage shows clearly that the commemoration of state events by appropriate coin-types, if made at all, was made fairly soon after those events had occurred. Examples of this are very numerous indeed – much too numerous to list individually; and it must suffice to cite a mere handful of prominent instances. One thinks naturally of the wide range of types issued at Rome in 19 B.C. to celebrate Augustus' successful pressure on Parthia the year before¹; of the *Ludi Saeculares* types of 16 B.C. celebrating the Games of the previous year²; of the Lugdunum type of 8 B.C.³ commemorating the first Gallic campaign of the young C. Caesar; and of Tiberius' sestertii of A.D. 22–3 recording the rehabilitation of the earthquake-stricken cities of Asia Minor after their five-year remission of taxes⁴. Other obvious examples can easily be added – Tiberius' commemoration of his son Drusus' second tenure of tribunician power in A.D. 22–3⁵; Gaius' bounty-parade of the praetorians in A.D. 37⁶; Claudius' elevation and reception by the praetorians in A.D. 41⁷; Nero's closing of the temple of Janus in A.D. 63⁸ (contrary to other evidence)⁹; Domitian's *Ludi Saeculares* types of A.D. 88¹⁰; Nerva's *Fisci Iudaici Calumnia Sublata* type of A.D. 96¹¹ and *Vehiculazione Italiae Remissa* type of A.D. 97¹²; and Trajan's *Rex Parthis Datus* type of A.D. 114–7¹³.

The coin-types of virtually all these instances are dated, and were either effected or issued within about a year of the events to which they referred. We naturally wish to know if they were merely effected in that period, or actually put into circulation. On this point no help is forthcoming from the ancient historians or from epigraphical evidence. The historians of the early empire tell us, in regard to coinage, no more than that Julius Caesar assumed personal control of the *aerarium* and, by implication, the mint¹⁴; that Tiberius' gold and silver was coined at Lugdunum¹⁵; that Nero struck an

Dr. Sutherland starb am 14. Mai 1986 im Alter von 78 Jahren. Er konnte noch die Korrekturen dieses Aufsatzes lesen.

¹ RIC I², pp. 62–4.

² RIC I², pp. 67 f.

³ RIC I², p. 54, nos. 198–9 with note *; cf. MN, 1985, 113 ff., esp. 115.

⁴ RIC I², p. 97, no. 48; see also Sutherland, Roman History and Coinage, 44 B.C.–A.D. 69, forthcoming, no. 18.

⁵ RIC I², p. 97, no. 45.

⁶ RIC I², p. 110, no. 32.

⁷ RIC I², p. 122, nos. 7–12.

⁸ RIC I², p. 166, no. 263.

⁹ Cf. Sutherland, Roman History and Coinage, 44 B.C.–A.D. 69, forthcoming, no. 39.

¹⁰ RIC II, pp. 167 f.; pp. 199, 201 f.

¹¹ RIC II, p. 227, nos. 58–9; p. 228, no. 72.

¹² RIC II, p. 229, no. 93; p. 230, no. 104.

¹³ RIC II, p. 291, nos. 667–8.

¹⁴ Suet. Div. Iul. 76.3; cf. NC 1985, 243 ff.

¹⁵ Strabo 4.3.2.

Apollo Citharoedus type¹⁶ and lightened the weight-standards of the aureus and denarius¹⁷; that Galba coined in Spain after rising against Nero¹⁸; that the coins of the immediately previous rivals to empire were not recalled by Vitellius¹⁹; that Vespasian coined at Antioch²⁰; and that Trajan called in and demonetized old and worn coin²¹. An important harvest of facts, certainly, but one which throws very little light on the organizational aspects of the coinage. Some help on this comes, indeed, from the inscriptions of Trajan's time²² which detail the operational personnel of the mint of Rome during his principate and specify the workers of varying kinds under its technical supervisor. But we still do not know who chose the types, mint by mint, or who decided the quantities in which they should be struck, metal by metal or denomination by denomination, or who defined the acceptable interval of time after which a notably topical type must appear.

At this point speculation has to begin. We have to assume that the magistrates in charge of the *aerarium*, whoever they were at any given period²³, being in any case aware of certain more or less predictably fixed items of annual imperial expenditure such as payment of the armed forces and the civil service²⁴, would have necessarily maintained liaison with the imperial nominee in charge of the *fiscus* – that branch of treasury which lay outside the scope of the state's magistrates. For if a *princeps* wished to undertake a project which fell outside the responsibility of the *aerarium* (e.g. a special *donativum* or *congiarium*, or a very costly personal construction like Nero's *domus aurea*)²⁵, it was the state's mint-workmen and mint-premises which had to coin the necessary money even if the cost was not debited to the public *aerarium* but to the emperor's personal account. In other words, the state-officials in charge of the *aerarium* and the mint had to regard not only the more or less regularly recurrent figures of a regularly periodic public budget, but also special claims upon that budget²⁶, and, in addition, what may be called the personal budget of the *princeps*. Only so would they know, in any given year, how much money should be coined to supplement stocks withdrawn from the *aerarium*, and in what metals and what denominations.

This, in any given year, could scarcely be a matter of instant decision. Financial magistrates beginning a year's office in January could not at once be certain of their working figures, and very possibly not for a month or two. And then there was the question of types – by whomsoever discussed and decided. It was a question, indeed,

¹⁶ Suet. Nero 25.2.

¹⁷ Pliny, NH 33.3.

¹⁸ Plut. Galba 20.2.

¹⁹ Dio Cass. 64.6.1.

²⁰ Tac. Hist. 2.82.

²¹ Dio Cass. 68.15.

²² CIL vi. 42-4, 239, 791.

²³ Cf. Tac. Ann. 13.29; by Trajan's time the effective head of the mint of Rome was an equestrian *procurator monetarum* (CIL vi. 1607, 1625).

²⁴ Cf. the speculative reconstruction of the Augustan financial budget given by Tenney Frank, *Economic Survey of Ancient Rome* i, 1934, pp. 4 ff.

²⁵ Cf. M.T. Griffin, *Nero: the End of a Dynasty*, 1984, pp. 133 ff.

²⁶ For example, the very heavy cost of the reception of Tiridates in Rome in A.D. 66, charged (according to Dio Cass. 63.1.2.) to the *aerarium*.

which touched the imperial interest very closely²⁷, and that interest must have been carefully weighed on the emperor's behalf. But by whom? One is, of course, tempted to suggest that, if the *procurator a rationibus* came to acquire the extraordinarily wide powers credited to Claudius Etruscus, under Domitian, by Statius²⁸, a primary choice lay with this official. But his other duties were immensely wide, and make this suggestion as unlikely for himself as for his predecessors. One therefore thinks more easily of the *amici principis*²⁹, or the *consilium principis*³⁰, or of a specialist body³¹, possibly acting in concert with the *procurator a studiis*. Nor was the actual theme of a type or types the only consideration to be discussed and settled. Some kind of official pictorial sketch, or even a relief-model, had to be produced, capable of being transformed into a cut die from which coins could be satisfactorily struck. Thus, if the choice of types was a duty imposed on a small committee, or even a single person, no immediate implementation could be expected. Finally, that choice involved yet another. Should a given type be one among many, or, as seems to be the case with Augustus' «two Caesars» type at Lugdunum³² virtually exclusive of all others? The proportion of types had to be decided at some level.

If there is some reason to suppose that, in any given year, no specific instructions for new-type coinage would reach the mint's operatives for some weeks after that year began, what would the mint be engaged in doing during that interval of time? The answer may be that it was refining and assaying coinage-metal, making and weighing coin-blanks, and (for why not?) cutting imperial portrait-dies, since an emperor's titles and the numeration of his consulships and *tribunicia potestas* would of course be now known. Consequently the receipt of orders for new reverse types could at once be followed by their technical preparation as soon as a sufficient number of models had been prepared for the guidance of the engravers. And, naturally, when the coinage of any given year included the continuation of a type or types struck previously, this could proceed immediately as soon as the budgetary authorities announced the total of new coinage to be produced, and the proportion of former types to be included. It has to be remembered that the imperial coinage, like those of antiquity in general, was intrinsically valuable as precious metal, and was therefore subject to a degree of constant wastage by hoarding, melting down, and even export³³. Annual injection of new coinage would thus have been a normal necessity; and it is difficult to find even a single occasion during the earlier or later empire when there was any appreciable gap in the production of a central or primary mint. Every year, it would seem, such a mint was obliged to fulfil a stated quota of new coinage.

²⁷ A comprehensive bibliography of recent views on this subject is provided in Dr. Barbara Levick's «Propaganda and the Imperial Coinage» in *Antichthon* 16, 1982, pp. 104 ff.: to her own views as expressed in that article I have replied in *Num. Chron.* 1986, forthcoming.

²⁸ *Silvae* 3.3. 103–5.

²⁹ See M. Grant, *Aspects of the Principate of Tiberius*, *NNM* 116, 1950, pp. 53 ff.

³⁰ See J. Crook, *Consilium Principis*, 1955.

³¹ See J.M.C. Toynbee, *Archaeological Journal* 1942, pp. 33 ff.

³² *RIC I*², pp. 55 f., nos. 206–12.

³³ For official concern at wastage by export see *Tac. Ann.* 3.53.

It was this vitally important necessity which quite evidently led to what Mattingly termed³⁴ the military organization of the mint of Rome under Trajan. How far that system can be projected backwards is of course quite uncertain, though Trajan's reasons for imposing it must have been developing even earlier. The «military» concept arises from the description³⁵ of Felix, an imperial freedman, as *optio et exactor auri argenti et aeris* at the mint, with a second *optio* (though not also *exactor*) below him. An *exactor* was one who saw to a full rendering of what authority required³⁶, and in the context of the Trajanic mint he was the ultimate technical authority, controlling the quality and quantity of coinage produced, and presumably answerable to the *tresviri a.a.a.f.f.* It was his concurrent position as *optio* that suggested an atmosphere of military discipline, for an *optio* was, in a primary sense, a man individually chosen by a military superior to help him with his duties³⁷. The term could thus mean, in a less specifically military sense, a personally selected deputy³⁸; and Felix was thus a technical deputy responsible to the *tresviri* or to Trajan's *procurator monetae*³⁹. His duties, however, would certainly not have included the selection of types.

In so far as the mint's technical superintendant was charged also with the control of *aes* coinage, the problems here were, at least in the Julio-Claudian period, sometimes different. The early empire did not always see the annual production of *aes* that was to be normal later. Acceptance of worn coins was more readily tolerated, and some considerable gaps in production occurred from time to time: there was the absence of all new *aes* at Rome except quadrantes between c. 6 B.C.⁴⁰ and A.D. 10⁴¹, and the total interruption in *aes* coinage between A.D. 54 and 63. Nevertheless, at times when gold, silver and *aes* were all being produced the partition of the work of the mint called for great precision in planning, and as *aes* types developed increasing topicality under Tiberius, Gaius and Nero the process of selection, design and final approval would have been exactly analogous to that which obtained for gold and silver.

There is no good reason to doubt that the degree of immediacy in the choice and issue of topical coin-types in the early empire was very close. The Roman mind was by nature annalistic, and it is noticeable that events of great importance which occurred when a mint was temporarily closed (e.g. the dedication of the Ara Pacis Augustae, or Augustus' three closures of the temple of Janus)⁴² were not recorded on coins of a later date. Those who selected the types were, in all probability, concentrating primarily on information of interest to Rome itself and to Italy, where the impact of annual record would be strongest. But it would be foolish to forget that the annual pre-Domitianic pay of 225 denarii a head to the men of a large, standing citizen-army would have included a proportion of new coins each year. The degree to which the impact of new

³⁴ BMCRE i, p. lviii.

³⁵ CIL vi. 42.

³⁶ Cf. Columella 3.13.10 (agriculture); Quintilian 1.3.14 (literary quality); Tac. Ann. 11.37 (judicial execution).

³⁷ Paul. ex Fest. p. 184 ed. Müller.

³⁸ Derived from the sense of the verb *optare*.

³⁹ CIL vi. 1607, 1625.

⁴⁰ RIC I², p. 76, nos. 437–42.

⁴¹ RIC I², p. 78, nos. 469–70.

⁴² Res Gestae 13.1.

types on the armed forces was studied is well attested by the swift references made to the revered Germanicus and his equally revered wife Agrippina on the gold and silver of their son Gaius «Caligula», the «Baby Boot», who had spent his earliest years with his parents amid the soldiery on the Rhine.

