

Coins of the Roman Empire [R.A.G. Carson]

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R. A. G. Carson

Coins of the Roman Empire

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University of California Press, 1990. pp. xiv + 367, 64 plates. \$ 125.00.

There is no shortage of treatments of Roman coinage, and the rate at which they continue to appear reflects both interest in the field and new developments in scholarship;¹ it is an oddity that none has been devoted exclusively to the coins of the Roman empire, which constitute far the greatest and most varied portion of the surviving material and, potentially at least, the most valuable as a historical source. This volume is welcome both for its own sake and because it provides what are likely to be Robert Carson's last words on many subjects. Perhaps no one has been as quietly influential as he, and since the retirement of Mattingly there has been no comparably effective numismatist of the traditional mold. Carson has never been seduced by fad or fancy, and his own contributions have sometimes been put forward so modestly that they have almost crept into the canon. Such is his reticence that one will find here few citations leading back to his own fundamental works (many of which have later been elaborated by others), the fruits of which emerge most clearly here in Part II. Even this book is modestly put forward, defended as part of an English-language tradition, «another attempt to present in a somewhat different fashion an overall account of the Roman coinage, but in this instance restricted to the coinage of the imperial period only» (p. xii).

The affinity of this book with Carson's career is most evident in Part I, a chronological survey running from Actium to 498. Mattingly had all but completed the work on volume 5 (Pertinax-Elagabalus) of *BMCRE*, which it was left to Carson to put in order and then to revise;² Carson's own volume 6 (Severus Alexander-Balbinus and Pupienus), which substantially altered both the format and the focus of the catalogue, appeared in 1962. Since then the British Museum collection has been developed, largely under Carson's direction, in anticipation of the much-needed revised edition of *RIC* 5; and *RIC* 6, 7 and 8, all edited by him, have appeared in the same period.

The focus of his work is reflected both positively and negatively. Carson is naturally most comfortable writing about what he knows best, and thus the chapters covering the period up to the Severans are often dogmatic and, in some cases, misleading or inaccurate. For

¹ For example H. Mattingly, *Roman Coins from the Earliest Times to the Fall of the Western Empire* (2nd ed. London, 1960); R. Reece, *Roman Coins* (London, 1970); J. P. C. Kent, B. Overbeck and A. U. Stylow, *Die römische Münze* (Munich, 1973); C. H. V. Sutherland, *Roman Coins* (London and New York, 1974); J. P. C. Kent, *Roman Coins* (London and New York, 1978). A. M. Burnett, *Coinage in the Roman World* (London, 1987) is the most up-to-date and sensible of the lot, but unfortunately without bibliography of any kind; much of it has recently been translated into French by G. Depeyrot, *La numismatique romaine de la République au Haut-Empire* (Paris, 1988), with the deletion of the last three chapters and the addition of a French bibliography. See also G. Depeyrot, *Le Bas-empire romain: économie et numismatique* (Paris, 1987).

² *BMCRE* V², by Harold Mattingly. Second edition prepared by R. A. G. Carson and P. V. Hill (London, 1975).

example, there are a number of interpretive statements disguised as fact. At p. 6 it is flatly stated that coinage at Rome resumed only in 19 B. C., even though most recent work has focused on 23, a much more plausible date; and the first coinage was almost certainly *not*, as suggested here, in gold and silver (p. 6).

Again (p. 24, repeated in slightly different form, p. 26) «As Rome did not fall to the Flavians until the very end of 69, no coinage was struck there for the new ruler until 70»; this is no more than an inference from the fact that none of the early Flavian coinage bears titulary earlier than Vespasian's second consulship (70), though it is certainly possible that Roman issues lacking *COS ITER* or *COS II* were struck earlier than 70.

Carson draws attention to the relative abundance of coins of Nerva's *COS IIII* issue (January 1–25, 98) and notes that dies must have been prepared, and presumably coins struck, well before the first of the year; the medallions of Commodus prepared for issue on January 1, 193 (mentioned at p. 57) might have been cited as a parallel, but even taken together these hardly constitute sufficient evidence for «regular practice» at the Rome mint (p. 35), or strong support for the «cyclical» theory of production originally propounded by Carson himself and mentioned several times here (already at p. 22 for Otho; p. 37 for Trajan; p. 82 in general).

In other cases there is a reluctance to take a firm stand on more purely numismatic questions. The discussion of the mint for Gaius' gold and silver is so equivocal that one would think there was positive merit to the move of the mint from Lugdunum to Rome in 37, or that advocates of continued minting at Lugdunum rely only on die finds (p. 10).

«Whether Lugdunum was also the mint of Claudius' precious-metal coinage is a question yet to be settled» (p. 12), but in the discussion of the pre-reform coins of Nero the mint is apparently presumed to be Rome (pp. 14–15). By p. 254, Gaius «appears to have been responsible for transferring the precious-metal coinage back to Rome».

Again, at p. 36, on Trajan: «The coinage of this reign continued to be primarily the product of the mint of Rome, though for an issue of asses and semisses, both in orichalcum, late in the reign, another mint is perhaps to be sought.» Here it is found on p. 40, where the situation is described as follows: «These facts [*sc.* resemblance to the types of Antioch and Trajan's presence there in 116] have been taken to indicate Antioch as the mint of the series, though arguments for Rome itself as the mint have been advanced.»

p. 41, Hadrian: «As in most of the preceding reigns the coinage of Hadrian continued to be in the main centralized in Rome, but some precious-metal coinage is attributed to a mint in the East where a much more plentiful issue of silver tetradrachms was also produced.» But on p. 44, «It seems possible that much of the coinage assigned to eastern mints is no more than Rome coinage ranging in style from the aberrant to the crude».

What is the reader to think? In neither of these two latter cases do we learn Carson's own views, and after a while the use of such expressions as «perhaps to be sought», «arguments have been advanced», «is attributed to» and «seems possible» begins to wear.³

³ Examples can be multiplied. «One study ... has attempted the presentation of Hadrian's coinage as a detailed sequence of issues,» without further comment (p. 41); «It has been considered probable» that some of Elagabalus' coinage was struck at Nicomedia, p. 70; «the traditional chronology ascribes a three-year reign to Allectus, ... down to the invasion and reconquest of Britain by Constantine Chlorus [*sic*] in 296, but recently it has been strongly argued that this event should be dated to 295», p. 140; and so on.

In part the format of this section, which is arranged reign by reign, permits sidestepping of questions that seem, taken individually, insignificant; but when such examples multiply the reader is left to piece out, if he can, the development of the Roman coinage system. He will be utterly in the dark with regard to the provinces, since there is no attempt to deal systematically with the intersection of «mainstream» issues of Rome and those of the provinces. The omission of Alexandria is perhaps pardonable, since its coinage remained within the borders of Egypt and seems to have been influenced by that of Rome, rather than *vice versa*, when any influence at all is traceable. But the mints of Caesarea and Antioch, both of which struck large if intermittent coinages, are mentioned only occasionally, even though their linkage to Rome was more direct, the influence of their products substantial, and their occasional Latin-legend coinages barely distinguishable from those they struck in Greek. The cistophori get regular mention, but only as the exceptional precious metal coinage struck outside Rome.⁴ As the work of the late David Walker showed, it is no longer adequate simply to plead (p. xiii) that «this considerable body of coinage requires consideration in a separate work».

Quite apart from the consequences the omission of provincial silver has for our picture of imperial currency, the existence of occasional issues from the mint of Rome for provincial circulation (acknowledged here as certain or probable under Severus Alexander and Philip I, and as possible under Trajan) must have implications for the organization of the mint itself. The system of *officinae* – a thread that runs throughout – is traced all the way back to Tiberius, often on the most tenuous of evidence.⁵ Even the fullest discussions (those of MacDowall and Kraay) fail, in the reviewer's opinion, to establish that the subdivisions, if they existed before the time of Philip, have any meaning for us, unless we are content with the equation reverse type = *officina*.⁶

⁴ Even the cistophori may have been added to the discussion by afterthought: those of Domitian, for example, are treated twice, at pp. 30–31 and 33.

⁵ Carson sees 4 *officinae* for Tiberius' AE, p. 9; 4 for Gaius and Claudius, 1 for preform Nero (p. 14); 6 for 64–65, 3 for 66–68 (p. 15); 1 (!) for Clodius Macer (p. 19); 6 for Galba (p. 21); 6 for Vitellius (p. 23); 6 for Nerva (p. 35); no comment on Trajan or Hadrian; 6 *officinae* «continued» under Antoninus (p. 46); «construction of a picture of the coinage» is «complicated by the number of personages for whom coinage was produced» (M. Aurelius, p. 49); 6, then 5 types for Pertinax (p. 59); «for some reason only five *officinae* appear to have been active» for Didius Julianus (p. 59); 5 *officinae* for 193–196 (p. 61); 6 for Severus Alexander (p. 73); Maximinus «continued to strike in 6 *officinae*» (p. 76); 6 for Gordian I and II and Balbinus and Pupienus (p. 77).

⁶ Cf. p. 73: «It is evident at a number of points in the imperial coinage that the mint of Rome operated as an organization of a specific number of *officinae* each producing coinage with a given reverse. The evidence for this theory, and specifically for an organization in six *officinae* comes in the reign of Philip when for the first time the antoniniani carry each the number of the six producing *officinae* marked by Roman numbers I to VI or Greek numerals A–S.» But as Curtis Clay has put it («The Roman Coinage of Macrinus and Diadumenian», *NZ* 93 (1979) pp. 21–40 at 23 n. 6), «The usual assumption that the different reverse types were produced by different *officinae* within the mint is still far from proven and in many cases seems to me to hinder rather than to advance our understanding of the coinage. The dies showing the different reverse types were certainly engraved by one and the same group of artists; the same obverse dies, as is well known, were frequently employed with two or more different reverse types; the number of simultaneous reverse types not infrequently rose or fell; and the volume of the coinage was not always divided equally among the different reverse types. What do we gain, then, by speaking of «*officinae*» rather than of «simultaneous reverse types?»»

The second century discussions are often little more than collations of novel types with historical events, in the manner of Mattingly in *BMCRE* but without the occasionally exquisite nuance of interpretation. It is here most of all that one misses some treatment of the style of the coinage, for technically the Trajanic, Hadrianic and Antonine portraits represent the high point of imperial numismatic artistry – though one can sympathize with the view that not all of them are successful (p. 49).

With the third century, Carson's enthusiasm and depth of experience begin to emerge. It is mints and their organization that interest him, and his discussion is authoritative. One regrets that the tenuous nature of conventional attributions (e. g. Emisa and Laodicea for Septimius, Nicomedia for Elagabalus) is not more often mentioned, but it is good to have such obscure figures as Jotapian, Pacatian, and Saturnius placed in proper context. (Amandus is mentioned on p. 128, without discussion of his alleged coinage.)

Still, there are lapses. «No certainty exists as to the correct identification of the mint or mints of the coinage of Postumus», but a «third possibility that deserves consideration» – Lugdunum, in preference of Cologne or Trier as a Postuman mint (p. 111) – becomes «his main mint, Lugdunum» on p. 113; thus «it is possible that Laelian established a new mint, and that it is at this time that the mint of Trier was established». Carson also supposes that two mints struck gold for Victorinus as well as for Tetricus I and II (where the mints are supposed to be Lugdunum and Trier, p. 115).⁷ At p. 120 the Aurelianic mint which Callu (followed by Estiot) identified as Byzantium is regarded as uncertain, and therefore escapes mention in the index.

Discussion of the period from 305–313 illustrates problem of dealing with the later empire, for mint-by-mint treatment (the only practical one) obscures the larger picture of uniformity; but this difficulty is encountered by anyone who would address the fourth and fifth centuries, and here the reader may consult relatively up-to-date volumes of *RIC* for fuller discussion. On the whole the presentations for later periods successfully communicate the overall unity of the coinage while appropriately noting local variations, particularly in gold and silver. For the fifth century, Carson's is the most accessible treatment available, filling an long-standing gap.

Far the most useful part of the book is Part II, «Output, Systems, and Techniques», broken down into eight sections of varying length. Given the focus of Part I on the type content of the coinage, as well as the controversy that attaches to the impact of numismatic imagery and the subtleties of numismatic language, it is surprising that chapters 19 («The obverse») and 20 («The reverse») are written as if A. H. M. Jones's influential essay did not exist, and indeed entirely without annotation; but the other chapters are most welcome indeed. Those who wonder where the metal came from may now turn to chapter 15, «Coinage metal and coin production» (pp. 221–227); and changing weight standards and relationships among denominations are succinctly discussed in «Monetary systems» (pp. 228–243). Here it is welcome to see that Carson has abandoned his proposal that the Caracallan antoninianus was a coin of 1½ denarii. Chapter 17, «Mint organization», updates and condenses his own discussion in the Mattingly *Festschrift*.

⁷ This in contrast to B. Schulte, *Die Goldprägung der gallischen Kaiser von Postumus bis Tetricus* (Typus 6, Aarau, 1983) p. 24 who says «diese Untersuchung [ergibt] keinen zwingenden Grund, für die Goldprägung zwei Münzstätten anzunehmen, mit Ausnahme des Aureus Nr. 6 des Marius. Alle anderen Goldmünzen stammen mit grosser Sicherheit aus einer einzigen Münzstätte».

Perhaps most satisfying of all is chapter 18, «Mints: their activity and marks», which gives some continuity to this vertical aspect of a picture presented horizontally in the narrative chapters of Part I. A tabular presentation of the mints, reign by reign, would have been convenient, but students may usefully compose this for themselves.

If this review has focused on perceived shortcomings, it is because Carson's work is likely to remain, for the near future, the student's first point of contact with the Roman imperial coinage; it is necessary for him to know that only part of the picture is presented here, and that some questions are susceptible to other approaches. On the whole, though, the book is a sound (and superbly illustrated⁸) survey of the coinage, which, carefully read, indicates areas for further investigation. The bibliography combines a full listing of basic reference works with a rather eccentric selection of books and articles that is more representative for the third century and beyond than for the earlier empire.

The book invites comparison with others in the series, and most naturally with that of Colin Kraay, the first and still the paradigm for what a series such as this should offer: a sound (if not innovative) introduction to the state of knowledge, elegantly presented and with broad illustration. The book may have limited aims, but it fulfills them, and it is one that every serious student will have to own.

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⁸ The illustrations, though taken almost entirely from coins in the British Museum, overlap less than might have been expected with those in Carson's *Principal Coins of the Romans*, and are of far better quality.