

Roman Provincial Coinage, Supplement I, and Volume II [Burnett, M. Amandry]

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Roman Provincial Coinage. Supplement I, and Volume II.

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The publication of RPC I in 1992 was a major event in numismatics: for the first time, the provincial coinages of the Julio-Claudian emperors and their successors of AD 68-69 were catalogued in detail, from Spain to Egypt. No other catalogue of provincial material combined such breadth and depth, and there can be no doubt that it will remain the standard reference in the same manner as RIC for Roman imperial coinage.

Since then, a supplement to RPC I has appeared (1998), presenting new types, corrections, and additional comments. Once again, it is an extraordinarily detailed and wide-ranging work for a publication of a mere 60 pages and 11 plates. The coverage of RPC I was so comprehensive that the new coins listed in the supplement are often known only in a single specimen, and most of these came to light only after RPC I's publication.

The second volume of RPC covers the Flavians, and thus takes us close to the end of the first century. One suspects that this will prove to be the shortest of the projected ten volumes, but even so, a vast amount of material is included. Incorporation of aurei and denarii from eastern mints, and Thracian and Asian coins with Latin legends and SC on the reverses, into the RPC scheme, shows how fluid notions of 'provincial' and 'imperial' are becoming.

A marvellous aspect of RPC is the fact that the authors can now summon up a wealth of detail when producing arguments. 'Phantom coins' and misreadings have been eliminated, and a much clearer view of the material emerges than any previously available. The pronouncements of RPC therefore have considerable authority. The introductory sections of RPC I stimulated comment and further research, and it is in this spirit that I offer comment on some of the topics explored in the general introduction of RPC II.

Several people have questioned the claim in RPC I that permission to coin was granted by the emperor or governor and that this permission was a requirement. The idea that cities had to petition for the right to coin is suggested by some inscriptions found on a few issues, but it does not imply that such petitioning was universal. A requirement, however, would imply a degree of imperial involvement

in the production of civic bronze coinage, as opposed to merely local control. In a review of RPC I (NC 1993, pp. 292-299) I expressed reservations about the notion of imperial permission. The first chapter of RPC II reviews the evidence, particularly the meaning of the word (p. 2). Whether permission was required or not is therefore unanswerable.

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The question of local or Roman control extends to the silver coinages of Asia, Cappadocia, Lycia, Cyprus, Syria and Egypt. These are seen as being 'firmly under "Roman" control' (p. 5), but much of the argument for this appears to rely on a perceived system of 'co-operation' between mints. A small number of mints seem to have been involved in the production of silver for the provinces, in particular Rome, Caesarea in Cappadocia, Antioch in Syria, and Alexandria in Egypt. A pattern of minting, considered to be more than 'coincidence' (p. 5), can be discerned: 'there appears to be a co-ordination between periods of minting'. Sometimes more than one mint produced a coinage (*e.g.* the Cappadocian silver was produced by both Caesarea and Rome); sometimes a mint produced coinage for a region which did not make its own silver (*e.g.* Antioch for Cyprus, or Rome for Lycia). 'Cooperation between provinces in the minting of imperial silver' is briefly discussed on pages 5 and 11, but the nature of this co-operation is speculative. We do not know for certain that the patterns represent 'co-operation', or that production of these coinages was directed by the 'Roman authorities'. In RPC II the co-operation is seen as a manifestation of co-ordination of silver production 'throughout the empire' (p. 5), even if the small number of coins produced does not amount 'to any significant fiscal policy' (p. 11). In these cases, weighing up whether something is significant or purely coincidental is problematic; what seems highly significant from one perspective need not from another (for example, whether one finds significance in the correlation on p. 275 between estimated number of obverse dies for tetradrachms, estimated number of tetradrachms struck, estimated cost of four Roman legions and the fact that Titus had four legions in Judaea). Concluding that these coinages were under 'Roman' control raises as many questions as it answers: Were they used primarily to pay state servants? If so, why

so many different sorts of coinages? Why not denarii (after all, denarii were being struck in the provinces in this period)? If they were made by the 'Roman' state primarily for use by provincials, does this invalidate the idea of the coinage being produced primarily for state payments? Who bore the costs of production? If provincials bore the costs of production, and were the primary users, what sort of 'Roman' control are we talking about? As noted above, the output of dated Syrian tetradrachms under Vespasian is interpreted in terms of military pay during the Jewish War. Coincidence is once again invoked (pp. 11, 274-5), although on p. 12 the 'small scale of the provincial silver means that it may be a fruitless task to look for historical explanations'. A connection with the Jewish War in this case would seem to suggest that in general high output of provincial silver could be interpreted as military pay. However it is perhaps worth noting that Tyre had only recently ceased production of its tetradrachms (p. 294), which had previously been the staple silver currency of the southern Levant. Antiochene tetradrachms do not appear to have circulated in the southern Levant in any quantity under the Julio-Claudians, but the hoard evidence shows that they did from the Flavian period onwards (p. 274). Perhaps the high output of these Flavian coins has more to do with some sort of reform, replacing the Tyrian tetradrachm with the Antiochene, rather than simply paying state servants.

The Flavian period is remarkable for a number of provincial silver and bronze coinages apparently being struck at Rome (pp. 11, 13). After reviewing the evidence that Rome produced silver and bronze coins for Cappadocia and other places, and Antioch produced silver for Cyprus (this is the 'co-operation' between mints mentioned above), RPC then looks at the question of whether Alexandria produced tetradrachms for Syria. Large groups of Syrian tetradrachms have an unmistakable Alexandrian style, and Alexandrian obverse dies were apparently used to strike some of these coins (*e.g.* RPC II, no. 1949). This would seem to be good evidence for the tetradrachms being made at Alexandria and sent to Syria, and therefore it is a good example of the 'co-operation' discussed above, but RPC II takes this as evidence that Alexandria merely made the dies, and proposes that the coins themselves were struck at Antioch, with the occasional obverse die being 'sent... to the wrong place' (p. 276). If this is so, it weakens the argument for Antiochene production of Cypriot silver (based on style alone), and raises a question as to whether we can be certain that all Rome-style coins were actually made at Rome.

There are problems with RPC II's approach to silver standards. The analyses of David Walker have been shown to be problematic, for reasons that cannot be discussed in detail here.¹ His surface analyses did not overcome the problems of preferential corrosion of the copper at the surface of the coin ('surface enrichment'). This can be overcome by examining samples taken from the interior of the coin, avoiding the surface altogether. The inaccuracy of his results is accepted in some

¹ For a discussion of this, see K. BUTCHER, M. PONTING, Rome and the East: Production of Roman provincial silver coinage for Caesarea in Cappadocia under Vespasian, AD 69-79, *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 14, 1995, pp. 63-78, and 'Atomic Absorption Spectrometry and Roman Silver Coins', in: A. ODDY, M. COWELL (edd.), *Metallurgy in Numismatics*, vol. 4, (London 1998), pp. 308-334.

sections: 'Butcher and Ponting looked at some contemporary denarii from the mint of Rome, for which Walker gave a mean fineness of c. 91%, and found that their silver content was only c. 79%' (p. 11); but in others his analyses seem to be corroborated: 'he recorded a fineness for most of the coins of around 90%. The analyses provided by the Centre E. Babelon confirm these results' (p. 262). The metallurgy of Roman silver coinage was such that if Walker got the figures wrong for one group of coins whose mean silver content he estimated at about 90%, the same conclusion must be applied to the other 90% group as well. The 'confirmation' of Walker arises, I suspect, from new analyses being performed without excluding the surface enriched areas.

Uncertainty about silver standards makes it difficult to know how provincial silver related to the denarius. Some years ago I suggested that the Cappadocian coinage under the Flavians was sufficiently base in comparison with the denarius for it to have been struck on a 'Rhodian' standard, where a Rhodian drachm was worth $\frac{3}{4}$ of an Attic drachm (the equivalent of a denarius). RPC is right to point out that the conclusion was based on the analyses of Walker and therefore the figures are wrong; it is on shakier ground for concluding that the equivalence of 1 Cappadocian drachm = $\frac{3}{4}$ Attic drachm is thereby invalidated, but the reasons for this cannot be pursued here. In any case, the problem of the relationship between Cappadocian silver and the denarius is not alleviated by the observation, because the Cappadocian coinage is still very base compared to the denarius.²

Bronze denominations are interpreted as assaria, according to size and weight, although these vary from one region to another. Some have expressed doubt about the possibilities of reconstructing the denominational systems in use;³ and I must admit I concur with this view. RPC considers this 'pessimistic' (p. 123). The optimistic approach is to discover the values of the coins in terms of assaria, which is difficult, because hardly any coins have value marks. RPC is candid about these problems, and the difficulties inherent in the denominational structures proposed. It is assumed that the 1-assarion ought to be the commonest denomination (on the assumption that a system of assaria was being used). There is sometimes an unhelpful 'fuzziness' to the classification, e.g. '2-assaria or 3-assaria' or '1/6 assarion or 1/2 assarion' (p. 27), but there are reasons for this. Sometimes the denominations are 'tentatively' identified (p. 24); at other times RPC appears dogmatic: 'the denominational system was as follows' (p. 26). The size and weight of the presumed assarion varied from one region to another according to regional preferences. In Lycia-Pamphylia we find the assarion is between 16-20 mm and weighs between 4.16-4.82g; in Pisidia it is between 21-22 mm and weighs about a third more, 6.42-6.66g. At Amasia it is between 20-26 mm and weighs 8.33g. 'Instead of logical proof, the best we can hope for is internal consistency, and consistency with what happened before and after' (p. 123). Assarion diameters varying between 20

² K. BUTCHER, M. PONTING, Silver standards at Caesarea in Cappadocia, in: J. NOLLÉ, B. OVERBECK, P. WEISS (edd.), Internationales Kolloquium zur kaiserzeitlichen Münzprägung Kleinasien. 27. – 30. April 1994, München, *Nomismata: Historisch-numismatische Forschungen* 1 (Milan 1997), pp. 167-171.

³ e.g. C.J. HOWGEGO, *JRS* 1993, pp. 201-202.

and 26 mm do not strike me as particularly convincing support for the notion of internal consistency, but even if this is acceptable, there are other internal inconsistencies: for example in Asia, where the only coins clearly marked with values (Chios) do not fit with the denominational structure constructed for Asia in RPC I (pp. 24-25; 123-124). The Asian structure was constructed using weights and diameters as a guide, and assuming that the assarion was the commonest unit. But the Chios coins are too heavy and too big to fit this structure. As a result, the situation in Asia seems unclear: the assarion could be a coin of 19-22 mm or a coin of 17-19 mm, depending on whether one extrapolates from the coins of Chios or from RPC I. Hence the 'fuzzy' values mentioned above. It would seem that there is still plenty of room for pessimism about the hope of ever reconstructing the denominational patterns in a satisfactory manner.

Metal analyses for RPC I and II have added a new dimension to the study of base metal coinage, and particular the use of brass and bronze (pp. 122-123). Some issues and some denominations appear to be made out of brass, and others of bronze. This observation, also noted in RPC I, is followed by the conclusion that 'there was no pattern in the use of brass and bronze to differentiate denominations, although there was a tendency for particular issues to be made out of one or the other' (p. 123). If it is true that issues *tended* to be made from one metal or the other, might these not tend to represent different denominations according to metal? The authors may be right, that there was no difference for issuers or users, but better evidence is needed, such as frequent die-links between coins made of the two materials. Otherwise one could always make the case that there was a differentiation. In RPC I, an issue by the strategos Sosandros at Smyrna provides the best evidence that alloy did not matter: the coins were overstruck on issues that appear (on the basis of a few analyses) to be of brass or bronze. Even then, presumably the differences in colour would have been apparent when new. The inductive leap from Sosandros' coinage to the conclusion that metal did not matter in Asia (and perhaps elsewhere) is a bold one. But to suggest that the metals did signify differences in value would cause serious problems when trying to work out denominational systems based on size and weight alone.

Some minor points:

In Syria, the use of the term 'Seleucis' (pp. 26-7, 267, 268) is, as far as I am aware, anachronistic, and were it to be applied rigidly Aradus ought to be included in Seleucis rather than Phoenicia (p. 27).

p. 276: I have not assigned tetradrachms to Caesarea Maritima. The tetradrachm group in question may belong there, but it depends solely on the stylistic similarity of these coins to the Judaea Capta coins, and the assignation of the latter to Caesarea. Judaea Capta coins are apparently uncommon at Caesarea, which does raise the question of whether they should be attributed to the city.⁴

⁴ J. DEROSE EVANS, Ancient Coins from the Drew Institute of Archaeological Research Excavations of Caesarea Maritima, 1971-1984, *Biblical Archaeologist* 58 (1995), pp. 156-166.

2032 (Laodicea): Why is the crude bust of Helios on the obverse identified as 'Domitian as Helios'?

2033 (Laodicea): Seyrig in his unpublished notes for a catalogue of Syrian civic coinage recorded small bronze coins with the types bearded head / Dionysus standing, associated with Domitian's issues dated Julian year 132 (AD 84/5).

p. 300. The decision to omit the coinage of Nabataea, as in RPC I, seems a little peculiar to me. The coins are 'fully catalogued' by Meshorer in Qedem 3, but some of the other coinages included in RPC I and II are fully catalogued in other publications, and Qedem is not a publication which is particularly easy to find. Perhaps there are problems fitting the coins into the chronological framework of the volumes, because the reigns of the Nabataean kings did not coincide closely with those of the emperors.

I should stress that these observations, both general and pedantic, are not meant to detract in any way from the brilliance of RPC II. We now have a detailed account of provincial coinage from the first century BC up to the end of the reign of Domitian (AD 96). No other catalogue of provincial coinage comes close to RPC. Once again, a superlative achievement.

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