

# Art and Economy: Images on Roman Coins

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Much is being made, these days, of the important role of archaeology in the study of ancient economies. Archaeology's strength, it is felt, is its potential to produce large data sets, which by their very nature are less prone to human biases, both at the level of data generation and of data interpretation, and hence eminently suitable for statistical analysis. For other reasons as well, many now feel that archaeological "big data" offer the most reliable information for the study of ancient economic activities.<sup>1</sup> The skepticism towards archaeological sources still expressed by eminent historians like Moses Finley in the 1970s and 1980s is a thing of the past.<sup>2</sup>

This development is integral to the transformation Classical Archaeology has undergone over the past generation. Gone are the days when ancient art was a main focus of Classical archaeologists. Current material culture studies of the ancient world are driven to a significant (and increasing) degree by research agendas aimed at major social and economic questions, directly challenging the preeminence past generations accorded to the literary sources. In the writing of ancient history, archaeology is increasingly encroaching on terrain that was once the sole domain of text-based historians.

This is a welcome development, but as is almost inevitable with scholarly (r)evolutions of this type, embracing the new goes hand-in-hand with a perhaps overly zealous rejection of the old. This conference – the largest regular conference on Classical Archaeology in the world, held only once every 5 years – illustrates this clearly. "Art," so important in ancient Greece and Rome, is hard to find in the 1000+ presentations at this massive meeting, and when art does crop up it tends to be in terms of luxury goods, trade connections, prestige imports and self-representation, *vel sim*. Art reduced to economic commodity, with little or no attention for the visual as a forum of social or political expression and discourse. Even Art's most immediate entanglements with ancient economies, through images on coins, for example, are largely ignored. The main coin-related topics at this conference include reports on coin distributions, levels of monetarization, serial production processes, metrological studies of coin hoards, circulation, monetary policies, cities and coinage, money and merchandise: in fact, just about every aspect of ancient money except the images on coins.

This lack of attention for the visual elements of ancient societies is a problem, for "art", (i.e. visual representation through architecture, statues, reliefs, mosaics, (wall)-paintings, statuettes, appliques, lamps and other decorated pottery and metal-ware, cameos and engraved gems, coin imagery, etc.) is one of the major spheres of social interaction utilized by the Greeks and the Romans (and many others, of course) to negotiate the instantiation of key social and political ideals and ideologies. Ancient economies were not immune to those ideologies, of course. On the contrary, they were profoundly shaped by them, and played an active role in shaping them.

We can well illustrate this interface between economy, ideology, and art with the aid of Roman coins and a bit of “big data”. Roman coins were bearers of an unprecedented diversity of images, particularly on the reverse. This comes into clear focus when we look at Roman imperial coins minted during one short period of time – AD 268–276 – for which we have exceptionally detailed and comprehensive information thanks to the MER-RIC project.<sup>3</sup> Its analysis of the imperial coinage of this nine-year period is based on a dataset of 104,000 extant Roman imperial coins dating to those years, which they classify in over 4540 distinct entries/unique types. These coins were produced by (only) 12 mints and were issued in 15 different denominations. They depict 71 different gods, heroes, personifications and people, 59 different objects and attributes, and 10 different animals, all in the span of a mere nine years.<sup>4</sup>

The production of such a rich visual variety of coins would be unthinkable if the images on the coins were meaningless. Clearly they were integral to the function of coinage in Roman society, and hence, studying coin images should be an integrated part of studying Roman coins as a whole. With two case studies I hope to show that this extends even to the study of coins as monetary instruments; in other words, that even purely economy-oriented studies that utilize coins cannot afford to ignore the imagery on them and their visual impact.<sup>5</sup>

Our first example concerns the first issues minted by Alexandria during the reign of Nero. In the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth years of his rule (AD 56/7–59/60) the city minted sets of ten tetradrachms annually, all with the same obverse bust of Nero and each with a different reverse. These are (in no particular order): Agrippina Minor, Claudia Octavia, Demos Romaion, Demeter, Dikaiosyne (fig. 1), Omonoia, Roma, Neos Agathos Daimon (fig. 2), Eirene, and Pronoia Neou Sebastou (fig. 3).<sup>6</sup> Each coin is comprehensible individually, but their full meaning is achieved jointly. As a set they legitimize Nero’s accession to the throne and display the promise his reign holds. Only one coin of the series has fueled any real discussion, and this concerns the identity of the seated figure on the Pronoia Neou Sebastou coin (fig. 3). It hinges on the interpretation of the genitive *Neou Sebastou*. Does it indicate the possessor of the *pronoia* (foresight)? If so, the seated figure is Nero, the new Augustus whose *pronoia* is being celebrated. But *Neou Sebastou* can also be taken as the object of the *pronoia*, in which case the coin celebrates the (unspecified) *pronoia* for (rather than of) the new Augustus (i.e. the *pronoia* of Octavian-Augustus which had once again ensured a conflict-free transition of power to a new successor).<sup>7</sup>

The latter interpretation is preferable, because it allows the identification of the seated radiate figure as Augustus himself, rather than Nero. In Rome, the image type of a seated radiate figure next to an altar which can be identified as the *Ara Providentiae*, first appeared on early Tiberian coins (fig. 4). It depicts an actual statue of Augustus which was associated with that altar. This statue is also depicted on an elephant-drawn cart in funerary processions for deceased emperors (fig. 5). It thus perfectly embodies



Fig. 1: Alexandria, billon tetradrachm, rev.: Dikaiosyne; AD 56/7.



Fig. 2: Alexandria, billon tetradrachm, rev.: Neos Agathos Daimon; AD 56/7.



Fig. 3: Alexandria, billon tetradrachm, rev.: Pronoia Neou Sebastou; AD 56/7.



Fig. 4: Rome, ae. sestertius, rev.: Augustus (radiate statue of) by the Ara Providentiae; AD 22.



Fig. 5: Rome, ae. sestertius, rev.: Radiate statue of Augustus in an elephant-drawn chariot; AD 34–37.

the Augustan *Providentia* (*Pronoia* in Greek) for the seamless succession of emperors, without which, so the regime claimed, Rome would descend back into the chaotic power struggles and civil wars which had devastated the pre-Actian republic.<sup>8</sup>

The statue was one of an array of imperial ‘icons’ that could be deployed to represent or emphasize specific facets of the ruling ideology which underpinned the imperial claims to authority and legitimacy. Visually literate Roman citizens would “know” such images, or would recognize the need to know them in order to understand their specific function or meaning in a given context. Concerning this particular image, what a Roman in AD 56 would or could know, was that up till then the only seated radiate figure depicted on coins and in other official media, both in Rome and the provinces, was that of Augustus (fig. 4).<sup>9</sup> The default identification of this seated figure, then, would have been Augustus, and more specifically Augustus at the Ara Providentiae. Needless to say, the *providentia* of Augustus would fit in very well in this series, which we could then verbally render as:

The **providentia** of Augustus has ensured that Rome has a **new Agathos daimon**,<sup>10</sup> descended from Augustus through his mother **Agrippina**, husband of his predecessor’s daughter **Claudia Octavia**, supported by **Roma** and her people (**demos**), guarantor of **harmony, peace, justice**, and prosperity (**Demeter**).

The alternative suggestion, that the *pronoia neou Sebastou* coin of the series depicts an image of Nero radiate and seated, creates major (and unnecessary) problems. The coins give no iconographic hint suggesting that the seated radiate Augustus type now depicted Nero, and identifying him as Nero would result in an imbalance of the set. It would mean that two reverses would refer directly to Nero (the Neos Agathos Daimon and the Pronoia coins), and none to Augustus. In short, as there is no compelling reason not to identify the seated radiate figure as Augustus, and at least two good reasons not to identify him as Nero, his identity as Augustus should be beyond dispute.<sup>11</sup>

Clearly this set of ten coins is programmatic.<sup>12</sup> It disseminates a message of political importance. There are two points to keep in mind here. The first is that the message is best understood when the ten coins are viewed together; the second is that we should not make the mistake of thinking that the coins were the only medium used to disseminate the desired message. Statues, reliefs, paintings, and other, more ephemeral ‘imagery’ – in speeches at important public events, for example – would generally have served as the more elaborate fora for the dissemination of the ideals and concepts involved. The coin issues played a supporting role, at best setting out the bare bones of the message(s), and intended primarily to trigger memories of occasions and places where the associated ideals were conveyed to the populace more elaborately.

All this has major implications for the economic aspects of this and similar coin issues. In the first place, it is worth noting that this series was minted in the local Alexandrian mint, not an imperial Roman one. That local mint did not issue any coins at all

during the first and second years of Nero's reign. In fact, it did not *need* to issue coins at all, as the economically necessary supply of coinage was furnished by the imperial mints. Local mints abounded in the Eastern half of the Empire, but with some exceptions they minted coins only sporadically, and in small numbers. In one hundred years of local coin production, the average annual output of the mint of Corinth, for example, was about the equivalent of what it would cost to finance one legion for one day.<sup>13</sup> The Alexandrian local mint was an exceptionally active one, but even it could skip years of minting without, apparently, any disruption to the local economy.

This suggests that these 'provincial' coins were not primarily monetary in function. They were perhaps distributed at important celebratory events, or paid out to specific sectors of society on particular occasions. Initially, at least, the possession of such coins could serve as identity markers in terms of the 'haves' and the 'have nots', for example, as in who would have received the coin set and who not. We could go on, but the point is clear; in terms of both meaning and function of such sets of coins as the Alexandrian one discussed above, the economy does not provide the primary framework of reference, at least not at the moment of production and initial distribution. How that changed in the subsequent course of time is a different, equally knotty problem, which we do not need to discuss here.

We turn now to a different group of coins, minted under Aurelian (AD 270–275), all bearing some variant of the legend *Sol Dominus Imperii Romani*. These are imperial Roman coins that have been widely cited as key evidence for an Aurelian policy to elevate the sun god to the supreme deity of the Roman Empire.<sup>14</sup> This is understood to have been a major religious reform with lasting effects. But the evidence for this reform



Fig. 6: Antioch, ar. antoninianus, rev.: Sol; AD 270–275.

is not nearly so clear-cut as it is made out to be. It is true that Aurelian issued a high number of coins depicting Sol, but the sun was by no means the only deity to appear on his coins. Iconographically, Aurelian's Sol was indistinguishable from the sun god on coins of his predecessors and successors (fig. 6).<sup>15</sup> This is in sharp contrast to the iconography on the coins bearing the *Sol Dominus* legend. These are unique and enigmatic, to the point that in some cases we must wonder whether the image accompanying the legend is actually intended to depict Sol (figs. 7, 8). The bust in figure 7, for example, does not have any of the characteristics of busts of Sol whatsoever. It looks much more like an imperial portrait than an image of a deity, let alone the Sun god.

Besides these iconographical issues, another problem is the fact that these coins were minted for only a short period of time (April – November AD 274), and in one mint only. Some scholars maintain that this was the mint at Rome, but it is now fairly certain that it was, in fact, Serdica.<sup>16</sup> It seems quite remarkable that an Aurelian religious revolution of the postulated magnitude, importance, and – it is widely claimed – enduring success, should be proclaimed on only a few coins minted at one mint only.

These problems alone should raise enough questions to cast doubt on the common interpretation of these coins. 'Big data' now adds a powerful additional argument. As mentioned above, the MER-RIC project identifies 4540 different coin-varieties for the nine years it covers (AD 268–276). Of these only seven are *Sol Dominus* types (0.15%) and the combined total number of coins belonging to the seven *Sol Dominus* issues is only twenty (0.092% of the 104,000-coin data set). In other words, the *Sol Dominus* coins minted for a few months in AD 274 in Serdica were exceedingly rare, and seen by only a minute portion of the Roman population. This confirms what the iconographic analysis



Fig. 7: Serdica, double aurelianus, Obv.: Male bust right, chlamys and cuirass, longish hair. SOL DOMINVS IMPERI ROMANI; AD 274 (April–November).



Fig. 8: Serdica, double aurelianus, Obv.: facing bust of Sol, radiate (seven rays), above the protomes of four horses, two jumping right, two left. SOL DOM IMP ROMANI; AD 274 (April–November).

of the coins had already indicated, that these coins cannot be interpreted as heralds of a major religious reform with lasting effects.

Why, then, were these rare coins with their anomalous iconographies minted in Serdica? There is no easy answer to this question, but it is impossible to maintain that they had a purely monetary, economic purpose. Both the text and image on the coins are far too striking and exceptional for that to be the case.

What these two examples show is that in the Roman Empire, both provincial and imperial coins could have very strong symbolic or ideological functions, conveyed primarily through the strikingly large array of images and image types depicted on their reverses. This means that there were powerful non-economic interests at play in the decision-making process leading up to each new issue of coins. These interests affected not only the design, but also the distribution and reception of newly minted coins. One could say that Roman coins were politically, economically, socially and culturally coded to varying degrees. All aspects of the coins – mint, denomination, distribution, imagery, etc. – contributed to this coding, with the role of images being particularly robust in comparison to other ancient (and modern) coinage systems.

To understand these coded Roman coins, we must examine all facets as interwoven and mutually dependent elements of their overall meanings and functions. That this includes images is a given, and in this coded context we must beware not to assume straightforward, self-evident, or unique meanings for the images under consideration. They form part of a visual semantic system that was itself heavily coded.<sup>17</sup> This means that there is no quick fix for the interpretation of coin imagery. It can only be done as



part of a concerted drive to decode Roman art as a whole.<sup>18</sup> As these examples have illustrated, big data approaches to the analysis of coin imagery have an important role to play. In the case of the Aurelian coinage, the MER-RIC project provided powerful evidence demonstrating the rarity of the Sol Dominus coins. Comparable information for the first Neronian issues in Alexandria is not available yet, but could easily be of similar value.

In conclusion, we can state that the two case studies presented here illustrate that one cannot divorce image analysis from the rest of the analysis of Roman coins. Only an integrated approach has the potential to identify their major cores of meaning. As Classical Archaeology turns away from the traditional, normative study of “high art” in the Greek and Roman worlds, we must take care not to eschew every form of Art history in modern Mediterranean archaeology. Losing sight of the major role images played in the ancient Greek and Roman world would be a great disservice to Mediterranean Archaeology, Classics, and modern scholarship as a whole.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., the Oxford Roman Economy Project [<http://www.romaneconomy.ox.ac.uk/>] (22 March 2019)]; Bowman Wilson (2009); D’Ercole (2017) gives a good overview of the shift towards archaeological data in the study of ancient economies since the 1960s.

<sup>2</sup> See D’Ercole 2017.

<sup>3</sup> [www.ric.mom.fr](http://www.ric.mom.fr) (4<sup>th</sup> April 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Note that this study encompasses Roman imperial coins only, and excludes provincial coinage.

<sup>5</sup> On the history, current state and future potential of numismatics as a discipline, cf. Haselgrove – Krmnicek 2012; Kemmers – Myrberg 2011. For an interesting perspective on coinage in Archaic Greece: Kurke 1999; Italy: Collins-Elliott 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Martin 1982, 157–163; Bergmann 1998, pl. 32; RPC I, 5201–5210, etc.

<sup>7</sup> Bergmann 1998, 159–163.

<sup>8</sup> Bergmann 1998, 100. 106. 157–164 pl. 20, 3–4.

<sup>9</sup> Hijmans, forthcoming, chapter 6; Bergmann 1998, 106 n. 654.

<sup>10</sup> Short for Νέος ἀγαθὸς δαίμων τῆς οἰκουμένης; POxy 7, 1021, 8–10.

<sup>11</sup> Martin 1982, and to a lesser extent Bergmann 1998, use complex text-based arguments to identify the seated figure as Nero, giving too little weight to the visual history of the type.

<sup>12</sup> Bergmann 1998, 158 f.

<sup>13</sup> M. Amandry, personal communication.

<sup>14</sup> On the notion that Aurelian elevated the sun to Rome’s supreme deity, cf. Hijmans (in press), chapter ten (rejecting it). There is a long tradition of describing Aurelian’s devotion to Sol in highly christianizing terms. Halsberghe (1972, 148) claims that Aurelian was “brought up to revere the Sun god” and became “even more devout” in the course of his reign. Wallraff (2001, 28–37) speaks of an emerging “pagane Sonnenfrömmigkeit” in the second and third centuries, resulting in “eine neue Form der Sonnenreligiosität,

die dem Christentum als eigenständige Größe gegenübertrat". This new solar religion had many roots, but was supposedly a unified phenomenon. Note, however, that Wallraff (2001, 37–39) stresses that these religiously laden terms are problematic, and that any attempt to find central organizing principles or coherence in Roman solar religion fails. Cf. Bergmann 1998, 275 f.; Matern 2002, 43–45; Salzman 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Hijmans forthcoming.

<sup>16</sup> See most recently Wienand 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Hölscher 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Hijmans forthcoming, chapter 1.

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