

# Between Lumps and Coins. Italy in the First Millennium BC

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## Abstract

Although the Greek cities in southern Italy were already minting coins in the sixth century BC, Italic peoples did not adopt coinage before the third century BC and used raw and formless pieces of copper alloy instead. In the third century BC, heavy cast bronze bars and *aes grave* as well as smaller bronze and silver coins were added as currencies.

This raises the question why and how this change occurred. In order to get a better understanding of the different types of money and their use, contextual analyses will be applied to a few significant examples. In relation to the historical context of the Punic wars it becomes visible how aspects of authority and identity contrasted with those of anonymity, thus affecting the choice which sort of money was appropriate in different circumstances.

## Introduction

It is well known that coins developed in Asia Minor in the seventh century BC and spread very soon through the Greeks to the west. At the end of the sixth century BC, several Greek cities in southern Italy were emitting coins. The number of cities increased in the fifth century BC<sup>1</sup> Despite the arrival of Greek coins in the southern regions of Italy and intensive trade between many Greek and Italian cities, the Italic peoples used so-called premonetary objects made out of copper alloy instead.

Cast pieces of copper alloy with no proper or only a rough shape, called *aes rude* (fig. 1), were in use in the first millennium BC They quite often show signs of breaking or cutting, sometimes also markings with a meaning unknown today. References in ancient texts support the assumption that these lumps served monetary functions: Pliny the Elder quotes Timaeus who reported that the use of *aes* was established before coins in Rome.<sup>2</sup> Proof of their use as a means of payment as well as a measure of value may be found in legal texts dating back to the fifth century BC, where fines were fixed in *aes* instead of cattle.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the lumps, the cast bars that appeared in the sixth century BC have a more defined form. They commonly bear signs on one or both sides that are known in literature as the pattern “*a ramo secco*”, a dry branch (fig. 2). These pieces still had no standardized weight and were chopped as the need arose. These bars are usually quite ferriferous and are connected with Etruria. In and around Latium, another kind of bars (fig. 3) developed in the third



Fig. 1: Piece of aes rude.



Fig. 2: Cast bar with ramo secco pattern.





Fig. 3: Cast bar with tripod and anchor.

century BC They were made out of different alloys containing copper and tin and carried different pictures like objects or animals. Again, no weight standard had been established and chopping was very common. Additionally, Rome produced the heavy cast bronze coins, the *aes grave* (fig. 4), which were based on the Roman pound, and therefore easier to compare. Soon after their introduction, a reduction in weight and size took place, which implies that a shift from its intrinsic value to an extrinsic value occurred. In parallel to the heavy cast coins, several issues of struck silver and bronze coins were added to the Roman coinage.<sup>4</sup> At the end of the third century BC, Rome established a very successful money system with the denarius, which replaced almost all other Italian silver coins and influenced societies for a time far longer than the Roman Empire existed.<sup>5</sup>

Prior to the introduction of the denarius, the different types of money did not replace each other but were used simultaneously, as is shown in the record of hoards and sanctuaries. This raises the question why different seemingly incompatible money systems remained in use for centuries. The meaning and functions of money are the key element to answering this question. Even nowadays it would be quite difficult to provide an all-encompassing definition of money, bearing in mind the different kinds



Fig. 4: Aes grave coin with prow.

and shapes like coins, banknotes, e-cash or even cryptocurrencies. For ancient Italy, it becomes an even more challenging task. On the one hand, the functions of money are of an economic nature: a medium of exchange, a means of payment, a store and a measure of value. On the other hand, there are also social aspects that influence the use of money, depending on its range of use in market situations or in social obligations like ceremonies, dedications, taxes or fines. These social practices may affect whether objects are accepted or rejected by all participants of society or only by certain groups.<sup>6</sup>

In the following, contextual analyses will be applied to a few significant examples, in order to get a better understanding of the character of the different types of money and their use within society.

## Contextualization

### Hoard

The first type of context discussed here, hoards, is the most difficult to work with. In most cases, hoards are buried in isolation and therefore lack a wider context. But the assemblage can be seen as a context in itself. Depending on its composition, one can think of a treasure, a ritual deposition or the stock of a merchant or a metalworker. Its interpretation is therefore not easy. Another hindrance is that most of the hoards are found by chance, for instance during agricultural activities or construction work, since they are usually not visibly marked. Many finds were therefore not properly excavated or published.

One case may serve as an example for the phenomenon of depositing *aes* in hoards. This hoard was found in 1940 near Ardea about 30 km south of Rome by a farmer.<sup>7</sup> Parts of the hoard could be saved and put on record, before all of the material was sold on the black market. Due to that, it was possible to rescue 31 pieces of *aes rude* weighing from 1 g to 459 g, 160 *aes grave* coins, and 17 struck bronze coins, dating the deposit into the third century BC. As the hoard was disturbed and looted, its full content has not been recorded. Nevertheless, the accumulated deposition of lumps, as well as cast and struck coins together in one place may prove its function as a store of value.

**Graves**

The second context is the grave. In 1987, Giovanna Bergonzi and Paola Piana Agostinetti wrote an article with the title “L’obolo di Caronte”, which provided a framework for the study of coins in graves.<sup>8</sup> Although incomplete data and the lack of sufficient publications affected their work, they carried out statistical analysis on the graveyards of the classical and transalpine world. Due to the limitations of the dataset, caution is advised when interpreting these numbers.

Σ graves	Chronology			Burial type		Grave type					Sex/Age			Σ of <i>aes</i> in graves				
1180 in 21 Necro- poleis	8 <sup>th</sup> century B.C.	7 <sup>th</sup> – 5 <sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.	4 <sup>th</sup> – 3 <sup>rd</sup> centuries B.C.	cremation	inhumation	a pozzetto	a fossa	a camera	a cassone	a cappuccina	n.a.	male	female	child	1 piece	2 pieces	3 pieces	>3 pieces
Σ graves with <i>aes</i>																		
87 7.4 %																		
Σ	8	51	28	8	21	5	4	56	14	1	6	9	8	1	38	21	7	19
%	9.2 %	58.6 %	32.2 %	9.2 %	24.1 %	5.7 %	4.6 %	64.4 %	16.1 %	1.1 %	6.9 %	10.3 %	9.2 %	1.1 %	43.7 %	24.1 %	8.0 %	21.8 %
															Σ of <i>aes</i> in total: 286			

Table 1: *Aes* in graves in Central Italy.

From Central Italy, 21 necropoleis were taken into account, containing 1180 graves. The graves chronologically span six centuries, dating from the eighth until the third century BC. Only 87 tombs (7.4 %) contained *aes*, clustering mainly in the seventh to sixth centuries BC. The rate does not seem to be very high, but it is well comparable to coins in graves. For instance, 16.6 % of the graves in Central Italy contained coins,<sup>9</sup> only 0.5 % in Sicily and 4.0 % in Magna Grecia,<sup>10</sup> and 14.0 % in mainland Greece.<sup>11</sup> In 9.2 %

of the graves with *aes*, the deceased were cremated, 24.1 % were inhumations. For the remaining two thirds information was not available. *Aes* appeared in different tomb types as well as in graves for males, females and children. Frequently one specimen of *aes* was deposited, but two, three, or even more pieces were also common as grave goods. The amount of metal cannot be estimated and compared, because information concerning the weight is missing.

The custom shows no clear correlation with sex, age or condition of the dead, and the differences of the grave type and type of burial were surely more a reflection of the fashion of the time. Although the data have to be treated with caution, it becomes clear that *aes* was put into graves as a gift over a period of 600 years. The lumps, as well as coins, were a recurrent form of grave furniture, although they were far from prominent. If we follow Bergonzi and Piana Agostinetti in interpreting the coins and lumps as pay for the ferryman, these pieces served as a socially constructed means of payment within a framework of rituals, with an ambivalent function both as gift and as money.

### Sanctuaries

Hoards and graves are usually closed contexts that provide a spotlight on a certain moment in time. In contrast, the third context, sanctuaries, can provide information over a longer period, which makes them all the more interesting for long-term studies.

A good case study is provided by the sanctuary of Mater Matuta in Satricum (Latium), where cultic activities can be traced from the beginning of the first millennium BC to Hellenistic times. Satricum was situated to the southeast of Rome and is mainly known for the temple of Mater Matuta on the acropolis. Cultic activities can be identified there from the ninth/eighth century B.C on, if not earlier.<sup>12</sup> Several temple buildings, one on top of the other, indicate a long tradition of use and destruction.<sup>13</sup>

Three large votive deposits are known: The first one<sup>14</sup> was situated somewhere under the temple building and contained different objects of the seventh and sixth centuries BC, amongst others a great amount of pottery and metal objects like jewellery, bronze sheet figurines, tools, vessels, and *aes rude*. Due to its very early excavation in the 1890s, very little additional information is available about the context of this feature.

In contrast to this, the second deposit<sup>15</sup> was unearthed much later in the 1980s, so the state of knowledge is much better. The feature was situated in an elongated natural pit west of the temple building. The pit was remarkably large (ca. 50 m long and 15 m wide) and contained a very large amount of pottery, weaving tools and figurines, bronze jewellery, weapons, vessels, tools, sheet figurines, and *aes rude* from the fifth and fourth centuries BC in twelve partially overlapping strata with different characteristics: some of them included carefully placed depositions, others consisted of secondarily relocated dump, and yet again others were founding or sealing layers. The detailed documentation shows that the votives, and amongst them *aes rude*, were deposited directly in closed assemblages, as well as in secondary depositions.





Fig. 5: Cast bar with Umbrian inscription.

The third deposit<sup>16</sup> was also found very early at the end of the nineteenth century. Therefore much information is lost. It was re-excavated in the 1980s to solve open questions, but a comprehensive publication is still lacking. It was situated directly opposite to the temple entrance in an old water basin about 12 m wide. The content dates from the third to the first centuries BC and consists of pottery, terracotta statues, and anatomical votives. The metal objects consisted of pieces of jewellery, weapons, vessels, tools, sheet figurines, aes rude, and a few cast and struck coins. Several modifications to the feature before, during and after its replenishment show diverse manners of treating votives.

The three features prove the use of aes rude over a time longer than half a millennium. Especially the joint utilization of aes rude and coins in the third votive deposit stands as a bridge builder between coinage and the lumps, which both were taken out of the daily routine and sacralized. It is an interesting question why the quite anonymous coins and lumps were chosen as a votive, since one would expect in a sanctuary the selection of an object with a special meaning. Following the anthropological theory of the short-term and long-term transactional orders by Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry,<sup>17</sup> adapted by Joris Aarts<sup>18</sup> for Roman archaeology, the transition from the profane market situation with short-term transactions into the ritualized temple surroundings took place within a personalized ritual to establish a long-term connection between dedicant and deity beyond the anonymous character of money. By passing into the ownership of the deity they lost their economic functions in favor of a



Fig. 6: Roman quinarius with attacking Dioscuri.

conversion to a votive. These objects could not leave the sanctuary anymore and were, when needed, dumped within the boundaries of the sacred precinct.

### **The Bar with an Inscription**

Interestingly, it seems that some of these coins or lumps with former functions of money made their way back from the sanctuary to the profane market, when they were used in the interest of the deity, for instance to pay repairs and renovations to the temple. So sanctuaries could benefit from the possibility to recirculate valuable items.<sup>19</sup> The find of a cast bar of the type bull left/bull right (fig. 5) at ancient Tifernium Tiberinum, nowadays Città di Castello in Umbria, supports this theory.<sup>20</sup> It was discovered very early in 1899 by charcoal burners directly beneath the surface without further context. An Umbrian inscription was added after the original production of the bar on one side in retrograde letters, reading: FUKES SESTINES. The exact translation is still a matter of debate, but the general meaning seems clear: FUKES is linguistically related to the Latin word *focus* or *lucus*, meaning fire/hearth or grove. SESTINES refers to Sestinum, nowadays Sestino, a settlement quite close to Tifernium Tiberinum.<sup>21</sup> It is assumed that the phrase stands for a sacred place in a sanctuary, meaning '[object] of the hearth or grove of the Sestines'. This might be an example of an object intentionally leaving a sanctuary, and being marked as such, also to clarify that the bar had not been stolen. Taking this idea one step further, one could think of the sanctuary not only in the role of a bank<sup>22</sup> but, beyond that, in the role of an issuer or at least a re-issuer of money by marking them with an inscription. But as long as this object is unique and nothing is known about its context, the question remains a matter of speculation.





Fig. 7: Brettian bronze coin with attacking goddess.

### **Between Lumps and Coins, between Anonymity and Authority**

Summing up the information gathered from the different features, the contextual analyses show the different monetary roles of aes and its relation to coins. The hoards testify to its use as a store of value, the ancient texts to its function as a means of payment and a measure of value. The presence in sanctuaries and graves documents its significance in sacred contexts as a gift for deities or the deceased. Depending on the interpretation of the role of the pieces in graves, a function as a ritual means of payment becomes visible. Having looked at the different contexts, one still wonders why the Italic peoples continued to use the lumps for so long and did not adopt the idea of coinage from the Greek cities before the third century BC.

Interestingly, the upswing of cast and struck coins happened when Rome was fighting with Carthage for the hegemony in the Mediterranean basin. In those troubled times, the requirements for a store of value apparently lay on countable coins, which concentrated value more than aes could do on the basis of weight, also to pay the mercenaries<sup>23</sup> in the often changing political alliances. The value of coins was directly connected with aspects of identity and authority, as was recently pointed out by Clare Rowan for the coinage of the second half of the third century BC<sup>24</sup> This also becomes visible due to the new iconographical emphasis on the representation of weapons and fighting. Roman coins of that time for instance show the prow (fig. 4),<sup>25</sup> Victoria with the *tropaeum*,<sup>26</sup> or attacking Dioscuri (fig. 6).<sup>27</sup> It also becomes apparent in the coinage of other stakeholders in Italy. Especially the coinage of the tribes, the Brettii,<sup>28</sup> the Lukani<sup>29</sup> and the Mamertini,<sup>30</sup> flourished with an emphasis on different fighting deities (fig. 7) and depictions of fighting



Fig. 8: Brettian bronze coin with warrior.

(fig. 8). The fact that all these coin productions ceased when Rome had gained victory shows the importance of coins as a tool for communication, as official information carriers concerning authority and identity.

In contrast, the bronze lumps were totally anonymous, without any iconography or legend, thus being a non-official sort of money. The unattributed character of aes might have been a reason for its long and continuous use in parallel to coins because they could meet a certain requirement that coins could not. In special circumstances like ritual acts, it could have been undesirable to use a store of value that was strongly connected to the authority and identity of a political unit, to avoid an overlay of the personal connection between the dedicant and the deity with a political statement. This could for instance explain why the Hellenistic votive deposit of the Mater Matuta sanctuary of Satricum contained comparably few coins but a lot of aes rude. Considering furthermore that the decline of Satricum happened in times of war in direct connection with the rise of Rome,<sup>31</sup> one could imagine that the local dedicants preferred not to take coins that stood for these hostile authorities, but used aes instead as a statement. Finally, the conservative character of cultic activities could also have urged the use of the traditional lumps and to refuse the modern coins.

In conclusion, the reasons how and why coins and lumps both remained in use for centuries seem to be manifold, influenced by different social, political and practical aspects. With the success of the denarius, the use of the anonymous lumps ended, as well as the production of non-Roman coins in Italy. This gave the Romans the possibility to fully control this medium of communication with implications on all previously mentioned aspects within the societies in the growing Roman Empire.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rutter 2001, 1–6.

<sup>2</sup> Plin. *HN* 33, 42–47.

<sup>3</sup> Kunkel – Wittmann 1995, 158–160.

<sup>4</sup> A short introduction with further references is provided by Rutter 2001, 44–50.

<sup>5</sup> Still nowadays, several countries use the nominals “denar” or “dinar”, as for instance: Algeria, Iraq, Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, and Tunisia.

<sup>6</sup> Seaford 2004, 16–20; Murgan – Kemmers 2016, 278–279.

<sup>7</sup> Cesano 1942.

<sup>8</sup> Bergonzi – Piana Agostinetti 1987.

<sup>9</sup> Bergonzi – Piana Agostinetti 1987, 192.

<sup>10</sup> Bergonzi – Piana Agostinetti 1987, 186.

<sup>11</sup> Bergonzi – Piana Agostinetti 1987, 182.

<sup>12</sup> Stobbe 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Waele 1981a; Waele 1981b; Waele 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Graillot 1896, 135; Barnabei – Cozza 1896, 29; Barnabei – Mengarelli 1896, 190–192; Murgan – Kemmers 2016, 281–282 with further references.

<sup>15</sup> Beijer 1987, 280. 283–284.; Bouma 1996a; Bouma 1996b.

<sup>16</sup> Barnabei 1896, 99–101; Barnabei – Mengarelli 1896, 191–193; Petersen 1896, 161. 173; Mengarelli 1904, 268; Murgan – Kemmers 2016, 282–283 with further references.

<sup>17</sup> Bloch – Parry 1989.

<sup>18</sup> Aarts 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Smith 2001, 19–20.

<sup>20</sup> Haeberlin 1910, 143–144 no. 2. For the bar type see Crawford 1974, 132 No. 5, 1 <<http://numismatics.org/crro/id/rrc-5.1>>.

<sup>21</sup> Untermann 2000, 439–440; Crawford 2011, 93.

<sup>22</sup> Bromberg 1940.

<sup>23</sup> Rutter 2001, 7–9.



<sup>24</sup> Rowan 2014.

<sup>25</sup> For instance Crawford 1974, 147–148 No. 35, 1 <<http://numismatics.org/crro/id/rrc-35.1>>.

<sup>26</sup> For instance Crawford 1974, 154 No. 44, 1 <<http://numismatics.org/crro/id/rrc-44.1>>.

<sup>27</sup> For instance Crawford 1974, 154–155 No. 44, 6 <<http://numismatics.org/crro/id/rrc-44.6>>.

<sup>28</sup> Rutter 2001, 157–161.

<sup>29</sup> Rutter 2001, 129–130.

<sup>30</sup> SNG Copenhagen No. 428–470.

<sup>31</sup> Stibbe 1982, 20–21.

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