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ANCIENT COINS AND THE CLASSICS

By HAROLD MATTINGLY

SOME excellent people there are who hate digging things up, hate things dug up, and hate people who dig them up. It takes many sorts to make a world and I would not pick a quarrel with any such; but it is not primarily to them that I would direct my remarks—unless indeed in any case the heart is not too hardened to admit of softening. To put the point more directly, coins are undeniably a part of archaeology and, tempted though I am to secure an easier approach to your attention, I cannot pretend that they are primarily a literary source.

We can all agree at once that the literary remains of antiquity are by far the most important part of our inheritance, that, of any knowledge that really matters, a great proportion comes to us through them, that it is for their sake mainly that we study the ancient world at all. But, for all that, the lover of classics who shudders at an inscription, a vase or a coin, who thinks that he has all the heart, the kernel, the spirit himself, while the archaeologist has only the shell, the husk, the corpse, is making a very grievous mistake. He is in serious danger of becoming a mere sentimentalist and dreamer, delighting in encountering his own thoughts and emotions in his favourite writers, but seldom really establishing contact with their mind at all. If we find it too easy to understand exactly how an ancient writer thought and felt, we may safely suspect that we are misunderstanding: if we imagine that we can make understanding easier by shutting out the objective realities of the author's world and shutting ourselves in with him in the inner world of thought, the suspicion will become a certainty. Aeschylus, Thucydides, Virgil lived in particular times and places that conditioned and moulded them to what they were. If we are really interested in them, and in the humbler human beings of their time, who after all were far more like us, we shall want to know about those times and places. Approached along this line archaeology loses its dry-as-dust aspect: it is a means of access not to the death, but to the life of the ancient world.

May I then for a few minutes try to recommend a single

branch of archaeology—coins—to the interest of classical readers? Coins are small objects, easy to lose, not too easy to handle, seldom easy to read except when perfectly preserved. If the information in picture and letter, contained in ancient coins, could be imagined written large on stone, it would attract an excited attention quite incommensurate with the mild interest at present given to it. And yet such an enlargement of scale would add very little to the reality. Coins lack the μέγεθος τι, just the element of size: they have nearly everything else which can interest and absorb a lover of antiquity. They take us direct into the daily life of the people: we handle the very coins once handled by the Greeks of Periclean Athens, the Jews of Galilee of the day of Christ, the Romans of the age of Cicero and Caesar. We can collect in one view before us the famous currencies that ruled the world-markets—the ‘owls’ of Athens, the ‘colts’ of Corinth, the Persian daric and shekels, the Roman denarii and aurei. Or, if we tire of watching the smooth flowing of the stream of coinage, we can look where it comes to the rapids or the fall. We can see the Roman *As* declining from a full pound to a bare half ounce, or the Roman denarius falling away from silver to copper coin. These coins tell a tale—not always easy to read, but certainly not theoretical or dry: it is often the tale of individual lives ruined far and wide in the wake of the great calamities of nations. They bring us near the meaning of history in terms of happiness or misery to the men and women who helped to make it.

Again, if you are a lover of art, where will you find so complete a picture of the unfolding of Greek art—in time and space—as in a well-stocked coin cabinet? Once learn to overcome the handicap of smallness and you will not have to complain of lack of quality. You will soon learn to love the curious stiffness of the archaic style, as in the first Athenian ‘owls’, the shy grace of the awakening transitional style, as in the noble tetradrachms of Syracuse, the full bloom of finest art, as in the glorious masterpieces of Syracuse, Catana, or Agrigentum. Nor will you fail to find much to attract you in the ages of ‘decline’—the graceful, if less robust, art of the cities of Magna Graecia, in the fourth to third century, the fine Seleucid portraiture, and

finally the great picture-gallery of Romans, from Caesar to Constantine. Only do not shut yourself up inside select periods of art and refuse to see merit outside them. Use your eyes, admire the best as the best, but do not let it spoil you for the good: at any rate, admire and despise honestly, not as a snob. The great orthodox principles of taste are not arbitrary or ill-founded; but they are often misapplied. Love the noble Hellenic work—but do not forget that what we mean by Hellenic is not confined to one small people, but has been fed from many national sources; and, if you must cast a stone at Roman work, remember that the Roman was probably at least as artistic as we are and that, quite seriously, he had so many other things to do.

And, finally, history. We have so far banished history from our own coins that we do not readily realize how full of it the ancient coin often is. To the Greek the artistic side, if not the practical, predominated, though even here history will find its way. But the Greek moneyer dealt with history allusively and hardly in any other way. He will add a small feature to a normal type and leave it without emphasis, though that small feature is all-important for the particular issue. A lion as symbol may point to an alliance of a Greek city with Carthage, or a triskelis, 'three legs', the badge of Sicily, may tell of the designs of Agathocles, tyrant of Syracuse, in Magna Graecia. But it is in the Roman series that history finds a continuous and eloquent record. The Roman had more liking, perhaps more talent, for such pictorial chronicling of history. If he sometimes puts down scenes with comic crudeness, he can also use the symbolism of pictures with consummate skill. The result is that the Roman student neglects coins at his serious risk—the teacher of Roman history, or Roman literature for that matter, at a very heavy loss. The Roman moneyers, intent largely on the glorification of their own families, have preserved for us traditional portraits of the early kings—Romulus, Numa Pompilius, Ancus Marcius—the great figures of the early Republic, Brutus the first Consul or Ahala—and have chronicled in picture such scenes as the rape of the Sabine women, the death of Tarpeia, and, later, the leading in triumph of Perseus of Macedon or the surrender of Jugurtha to Sulla.

Less consciously, in many cases, but no less certainly, when we begin to read their pictorial alphabet aright, they have set down the history of their own times. The prow of the *Aes* tells for ever how Roma fought Carthage for her life on the sea. The denarius with its warrior-goddess on obverse, and Castor and Pollux on reverse, tells of Rome advancing to conquer the world. Here and in many cases we are still debating the exact reading of the signs; but the language is clearly an intelligible one and we shall reach certainty in time. In the later Republic, the types of coinage, changing with a new frequency, mirror the history in a new way. Side-lights fall on the party strife of the Sullans and Marians, of the *optimates* and *populares* of Cicero, of the Caesarians and Pompeians. There is a new interest in personalities. The gods begin to recede and the historical hero of a past generation, a Sulla, for example, comes to the fore. When Julius Caesar puts his own portrait on the coins we feel that a process, long at work underground, has at last emerged into daylight. Whether we are reading poetry or prose, history or myth, the coins have treasures to offer us.

With the Roman Empire the coin record reaches its maximum of fullness and meaning. Emperor after emperor is fixed as an individual type in history, event after event is recorded, often in a light which helps us to understand its bearing on its generation. We see the imperial Rome as she rose in her magnificent temples, baths, and forums, the records of the activities of the emperors, of their bounties and their sacrifices, the story of their civil and foreign wars. Captive Judaea is placed by Vespasian on his sestertius, subject but loyal Britannia by Hadrian on his. The German Wars of Augustus, the conquest of Britain by Claudius, the conquest of Dacia by Trajan, find in turn their record. When we reach the dark years of the third century, coins begin to acquire a new importance. They not only illustrate, but restore the history and tell us of important facts, lost from the record. We know with certainty from the coins, and from no other source, that, at the end of the reign of Gallienus, Postumus in Gaul attempted to overthrow the central government, in order to establish a

new political unity based on the West, and that the pretender Aureolus fought and died in his commission.

Religion is no longer believed, as it was two generations ago, to be the main theme and motive power of ancient coinage. But it undoubtedly contributes more than any other theme to the coin-types. In the coins we can trace pagan polytheism in its most diverse manifestations down to its defeat and submission to the cross of Christ. If you would know the commonplace truth about the religious life of the people, not the theology of the schoolroom, nor the fancies of the poets, study the types that were handed about daily on the coins.

Lest I should wander too long on these pleasant paths of thought, let me turn, in closing, to the subject of collecting. Can ancient coins be collected as a hobby with reasonable ease and at reasonable cost? Fine and rare Greek coins are for the millionaire only, but, even in the Greek series, some very attractive coins can still be bought at reasonable prices in series which happen to be fairly common, the Corinthian, for instance. But the Roman series is the best of all for the small collector and gives much the largest return on a small investment. Both in the Republic and in the Empire interesting and attractive silver types can still be bought for a few shillings each: even the rare types seldom run above a very few pounds. The sixpenny and threepenny trays at a dealer's will often yield quite good bargains in copper, and miscellaneous lots at auction often provide hours of amusement at a little over the metal value of the coins. In my own experience I have found that coin-collectors live happy and die old. *Quid plura?*

DESCRIPTION OF PLATE 8

(1) A Persian daric 5th cent. B.C.: *obv.* The Great King running with bow in hand; *rev.* incuse. (2) An Athenian tetradrachm ('owl') 5th cent. B.C.: *obv.* Head of Athena; *rev.* Owl. (3) A Corinthian stater ('colt') 5th-4th cent. B.C.: *obv.* Head of Athena; *rev.* Pegasus. (4) A tetradrachm of Agrigentum, 5th cent. B.C.: *obv.* Two eagles on body of hare; *rev.* Charioteer. (5) A tetradrachm of Antiochus the Great of Syria, c. 200 B.C.: *obv.* Head of Antiochus; *rev.* Apollo seated l., holding arrow, on omphalos. (6) Roman denarius, c. 88 B.C.: *obv.* Head of Tatus; *rev.* Rape of Sabine Women. (7) Roman denarius, c. 59 B.C.: *obv.* Brutus; *rev.* Ahala. (8) Roman denarius, c. 61 B.C.: *obv.* Faustus; *rev.* Felix. (9) Roman aureus, c. A.D. 46: *obv.* Claudius; *rev.* Arch. DE BRITAN. (10) Roman aureus, c. A.D. 71: *obv.* Vespasian; *rev.* Judaea captive. (11) Roman aureus, c. A.D. 108: *obv.* Trajan; *rev.* Trajan, Dacian, and Senate.



Some typical Greek and Roman Coins