

Making Money on the Move: Reevaluating the “Mobile Mint”

Most ancient coins are thought to have been minted in fixed locations. Although we cannot assume that this was always the case (Esty 1990; Buttrey 1997), the static mint has generally proven a serviceable model to explain the evidence (e.g. legends, weight, types) discernable in the majority of ancient coins. Some coins, however, present features that scholars have interpreted as the result of “mobile mints” – mints moving with a ruler or magistrate. This paper will suggest that such a “mobile mint” does not satisfactorily describe the anomalous features presented by these coins. These features rather attest to a startling variety of organizational methods that rulers and magistrates used to issue coins on the move.

A review of ancient minting practice indicates that the people, tools, and raw materials necessary for the creation of coins, with the notable exception of ephemeral features such as furnaces and water sources, are all remarkably mobile. The concept of mobile mints has thus seemed plausible at first glance. For nearly a century scholars have assembled features that appear to be diagnostic of mobile minting (Elmer 1930; Taylor 2015): a wide range of types, highly differentiated geographic distribution, shared monograms or controls between different cities or styles, die links between different cities, and a lack of preceding mints prior to the mobile mint’s arrival. Careful study of three cases interpreted as mobile mints suggests that the situation was much more complex and interesting than scholars have thought. We see a wide variety of circumstances, means, and models that produced these coins. We find not mobile mints, but a range of scenarios, including mobile magistrates, mobile dies, mobile engravers, entire mobile workshops, requisitioned mints, and transferred mints. There was a wide spectrum between mobility and stability in ancient minting practice. Within all ancient mints, a host of moving parts were combined and deployed as circumstances required; even some fixed mints of long standing are associated with mobile magistrates and mobile engravers.

If we dispel the false dichotomy between mobile and stable, we precipitate a more nuanced understanding of the wide-ranging mobility of ancient minting practices and how they might illuminate dynamics of rulership, economy, and administration across the ancient world. Rulers and magistrates from the Hellenistic *diadochoi* to the Roman tetrarchs, from the Parthian court to Republican Rome, have all taken advantage of the inherent mobility of the ancient mint's component parts to make such money on the move.

Select Bibliography

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