

Coinage and Literature: Two Complementary Approaches to Archaic Roman Civilization

According to Cicero (*Brutus* 72-73), in 240 BCE Livius Andronicus, a Greek freedman from Tarentum, staged his first play in Rome, thus setting the official starting date of Latin Literature. In Cicero's narrative, the arrival of Livius in Rome is closely connected to the end of the war between Rome and Tarentum in 272 BCE. Cicero's chronology for Andronicus' activity in the late third century BCE is further confirmed by Livy (27.37.7). The birth of Roman literature seems therefore to have happened in the years right after the end of the First Punic War and was kickstarted after the end of the Pyrrhic War by the Roman conquest of Tarentum, one of the most influential Greek cities in Southern Italy. Andronicus' most lasting contributions to Latin literature is arguably his *Oduisia*, an artistic translation of Homer's *Odyssey* in Saturnian verses. The revolutionary character of this work lies in its attempt to reconcile Greek themes and Roman style.

Roughly in the same years, the city of Rome began the production of its own coinage, characterized by four elements: the traditional Italian bronze bars (*aes signatum*), the Greek-inspired silver and bronze coins and then the *aes grave*, large bronze coins which later became the most typical of early Roman coinage. In the words of Andrew Burnett, *aes grave* coinage represents "an amalgam of the central Italian idea of heavy metal currency with the south Italian (and Greek) idea of round coins" (Burnett 1987: 5). The constant dialogue between Roman tradition and the Southern Italian one is then a fundamental element for a better understanding of the contemporary beginnings of Latin literature and Roman coinage.

In the same years, right after the end of the Pyrrhic War, Tarentum, Andronicus' fatherland, adopted for its silver coinage a weight standard compatible to the one adopted by Naples (Tarentum: *HN Italy* 1020-1046; Naples: *HN Italy* 586-588), usually defined as

Campano-Tarentine silver issues. The Roman military conquest of Southern Italy in the course of the third century BCE, initiated by the end of the Pyrrhic War and continued with the First Punic War, created the conditions for an economic *koine*, that became manifest in the production of coins with compatible weight standards in cities like that of Naples and Tarentum that had previously issued coinage on different standards. The inception of the production of Roman silver coinage, initially produced in Naples itself and with Neapolitan types (*RRC* 13/1), should be seen as a sign of the establishment of the economic and *tout-court* cultural interactions between Rome and these important Southern Italian cities.

On the same note, Gnaeus Naevius, a *libertus* from Campania who probably fought in the First Punic War, was the first one to celebrate the *virtus* of Roman infantry and the unhappy love of Aeneas and Dido in the “archeology,” the prelude to his monumental (but unfortunately largely lost to us) *Bellum Poenicum*. As shown by the already mentioned monetary *koine* and by the pivotal role of Southern Italian freedmen for the beginning of Latin literature, Latin literature and Roman coinage originated in the middle ground between Greek and Roman tradition that characterized the third century BCE and was at least partly related to Roman military conquest.

Since their inception, literature and coinage thus represent two complementary and deeply interrelated heuristic tools to better understand Roman civilization. This paper aims to investigate the constant dialogue between literary texts and numismatic sources especially in the formative years of the early third century BCE, showing how Roman Archaic coinage represents a privileged tool to enhance a more organic understanding of the Roman civilization as a whole.

Bibliography

Burnett, A. 1987. *Coinage in the Roman World*. Bloomsbury: Spink.

HN Italy = Ritter, N. 2001. *Historia Numorum Italy*. London: The British Museum Press.

RRC = Crawford, M.H. 1974. *Roman Republican Coinage*. London: Cambridge University Press.