

Heads and Tales: Regional Significance of Images on Roman Coins

The Roman Empire, at the height of its power, stretched from Iberia to the Levant, from Britain to North Africa. Contained within this vast empire was an abundance of regional variation in customs and tradition. The Romans were adept not only at replicating and improving upon important aspects of cultures within their empire, but also at exporting their own practices to their many provinces. These practices would in turn be shaped by those provinces. A prominent example of this is the Roman adoption of Greco-Egyptian concrete and their export of their own improved version across the empire. This Roman concrete became the foundation of not only Roman, but also Provincial, construction and architecture (Ward-Perkins-1970). This paper proposes that, similarly to concrete, Rome not only adopted, improved upon, and exported a coinage system, but created one which adapted to meet the cultural identities of the provinces.

Roman coins portray a wide range of visages, events, or symbols of significance from Rome as well as the provinces. Roman coins were minted in hundreds of cities and towns across the empire (Heuchert-2005). Not only did these coins portray familiar images of Roman emperors, myths, and significant events, but they also portray stories and images native to their mint of origin. Minting coins, being a function of the empire, always maintained an identifiable Roman aspect; however, die makers at provincial mints often introduced subtle changes in keeping with their provincial identity. For example, coins found in the Syrian town of Apamea display scenes of Noah's Ark (SNG von Aulock 3506), while others found in Egypt from the reign of Hadrian feature the Apis Bull (Egypt, Hadrian, AD 134/5). These two coins exemplify the inclusion of regional identities by provincial mints.

This paper aims to demonstrate that imagery on coins remained important where it was already established prior to Roman occupation, while in places where it was introduced or

greatly expanded upon it became a new medium of cultural expression. In the Levant, it was found that “coins from the mint of Neapolis, Samaria, show the sanctuary of Zeus on Mount Gerizim in the second century, rendering the landscape in great detail (DeRose Evans-2011).” These coins maintain the image of the Graeco-Roman pantheon while infusing the imagery of Samaria well after Rome’s initial entrance into the region. Meanwhile, across the empire in Iberia, Roman coinage enjoyed greater inroads than the Carthaginian coinage which had preceded it. The number of mints grew from five before the Roman conquest in the Second Punic War to dozens by the mid first century B.C. As such Iberian coinage, much like Iberian society at large, underwent a long period of Romanization (Ripollès-2005). Coinage from the peninsula tends to favor latin scripts over native ones, while Roman gods or emperors also appear often. While the coinage of this area emphasizes its Romanization, native images, such as the Iberian Horseman, were also commonplace (AE as of Segobriga, reign of Augustus. MAN 212.569.)

One may conclude from the images displayed on provincial Roman coins that coinage played an important role not only as a functional form of currency for the empire, but also as a means of presenting variations in regional customs, tradition, and identity. Awareness of this additional function of coins may assist us in developing a deeper understanding of the relationships between Rome and its provinces.

Bibliography

J.B. Ward-Perkins. "From Republic to Empire: Reflections on the Early Provincial Architecture of the Roman West." *The Journal of Roman Studies* 60 (1970): 1-19.

Volker Heuchert. “The Chronological Development of Roman Provincial Coin Iconography.” In *Coinage and Identity in the Roman Provinces*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University

Press, 2005: 29–57.

Jane DeRose Evans. "From Mountain to Icon: Mount Gerizim on Roman Provincial Coins from Neapolis, Samaria." *Near Eastern Archaeology* 74, no. 3 (2011): 170-82.

Pere P. Ripollès. "Coinage and Identity in the Roman Provinces: Spain." In *Coinage and Identity in the Roman Provinces*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005: 79-95.