

Coins as Tools of Conquest in Roman Iberia, 211-55 BCE

It has become traditional in the scholarship of the ancient world either to separate numismatics and history or to use numismatics as a supplement to illustrate a point, such as using Pompey's triumphal coins to demonstrate how Pompey advertised his achievements. By relegating coinage to numismatic or economic studies, however, one overlooks the way that the Romans themselves viewed coins. If coins were merely a tool for monetary transactions, it is unlikely that the Romans would have paraded plundered coins in so many triumphs or overstruck their own coins on plundered coins during the Punic Wars. Parading the coins indicates that the Romans saw these coins as representations of power, in particular their power over newly-conquered peoples. While recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of triumphal plunder (Östenberg: 2010; Rutledge: 2012; Welch: 2006) in elite representations of power, and (Harl: 1996; DeRose Evans: 2013) has acknowledged the importance of coinage in spreading Roman economic power and authority, few scholars have examined the role that coins played as a visual symbol of Roman power, both as an object of Roman domination and through the visual message on the coins. Nowhere is the relationship between coinage and power more overt during the Republican period than in Roman Spain.

After the siege of Carthago Nova in 209 BCE, the Romans began the arduous process of conquering and assimilating the Iberian Peninsula while gradually developing tools for asserting their authority over Iberian tribes. This included long-term strategies for minimizing rebellions, including reminding Iberian tribes of Roman military power through physical objects such as coins, whose images referenced Roman military victories and Roman triumphs. Because these coins' images were an assertion of Roman power and were handled on a daily basis, they served as a continual reminder of Roman authority and of Iberian subjugation, playing an active role in

spreading Roman authority through their dual nature as a means of transaction and as a visual representation of power. I assert that the Romans consciously employed coins as an active tool of conquest in areas that were difficult to conquer or that were prone to rebellion by flooding those regions with “victory coins.” This self-conscious policy is particularly apparent in Roman Iberia, where there are not only significantly more hoards than in other provinces such as Cisalpine Gaul or in Greece—138, 72, and 23 respectively—but there are significantly more victory coins in Iberian hoards compared to other iconographic types. Moreover, of the approximately 180 different victory coin issues minted between 211 and 55 BCE, nearly every issue appears in at least one hoard in Spain and some of those coins appear in ten or more hoards (Crawford: 1969, 1978; Villaronga: 2011; Chaves Tristan: 1996). The date and location of the hoards also supports the argument that the Romans consciously circulated victory coins in Iberia, since many correspond to periods of rebellion and immediately after rebellion (Chaves Tristan: 1996; Richardson 1986). Furthermore, the conquest and control of Iberia was inevitably intertwined with coinage in the Roman mindset first through the seizure of coinage for triumphal plunder and second through the importance of the Iberian silver mines for the Roman economy (Harl: 1996). The relationship between the display of Roman power and coinage would remain prevalent in the Iberian Peninsula into the early imperial period. Ultimately, by the first century BCE, the power of coin images had been internalized to the point that Iberians used coins first to resist Roman power by reverting to pre-Roman coinage and then to celebrate their loyalty to Rome by using Roman images on their own coins.

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