

A Coin's Eye View of Roman Imperialism

Coins offer a unique view of history that often confirms what historical sources report, such as the famous denarius of Brutus showing two daggers and the cap of freedom after the assassination of Julius Caesar. But sometimes coins shed light on otherwise unknown aspects of Roman history that reveal political and military tactics and maneuvers that in turn raise larger questions about Roman goals and strategies. This paper analyzes the coinage of Narbo Martius in Gaul that, compared with the literary accounts of the period, sheds a more detailed, nuanced, and granular light on Roman expansion into the western Mediterranean, and reveals in Roman imperial policy contradictions and complexities that are lost, obscured, or unacknowledged by retrospective or politicized historical accounts.

After Rome won control of Spain, a land route through Gaul was needed to supplement the sea routes to Spain. In 120 BCE, Q. Fabius Maximus and Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus defeated the Arverni and Allobroges, and each subsequently celebrated a triumph in Rome that same year (Broughton. *MRR* I, 516, 520-21, 524). Coinage from 119 BCE confirms the triumphs, with denarii showing the figure of Roma crowning a trophy surmounted by a Gaulic helmet and flanked by a *carnyx* (the Gaulic war trumpet) and Gaulic shields, a typical display of Roman military prowess over a defeated foe (Futrell. 101-102). Cicero reports that in 118 BCE, the Romans took the novel step of founding a Roman colony in Gaul, Narbo Martius, the first Roman colony founded outside of Italy (Cicero, *Brutus*, 158-160). Built to protect the new Roman road through Gaul, this unusual colony represents an important point in Roman imperial history.

The coins of Narbo Martius reveal an even more complicated, detailed story, however. Cicero reports that the two men who won spots to lead the colony were Cn. Domitius

Ahenobarbus the younger, and the upcoming orator, L. Licinius Crassus. Typically, *three* commissioners were appointed to supervise the foundation of new settlements (*tresviri coloniae deducendae*: Livy 32.29.3-4). Cicero does not comment on this discrepancy, nor does he mention the accompanying coinage that, with its serrated edges and startling iconography, was clearly minted in the colony itself (Crawford. 35, 601; cf. K. Harl. 46; Burnett. 50-52). The coinage is further organized into five separate subissues, with five junior moneyers from prominent Roman families issuing under their own names (Hamilton. 90-92). It is likely that the usual three commissioners were reduced to two in order to allow for five junior moneyers to be included in the crowded field.

The iconography of the coinage also shows the profoundly different approach to conquest that the Romans took with Narbo Martius (Scott and Webster, *passim*), with the reverse showing a triumphant Gallic warrior riding in a biga and carrying a *carnyx*, and a Gallic shield; so not defeated but rather victorious. Why this unusual, unique depiction of defeated enemies on Roman coinage? The answer, not found in any historical source, lies in the fact that the Romans were establishing a Roman colony in recently defeated and hostile territory, and hoping to engage and pacify the newly-subdued Gauls with a combination of intimidation and the economic incentives of increased trade and prosperity. A standard coinage that both Romans and Gauls would recognize and accept was a novel and striking tactic in Rome's engagement with the Gauls.

That this strategy ultimately did not work is seen in Rome's conflicts with the Teutones and Cimbri, defeated by Marius in 102 and 101 BCE respectively. With Caesar's final defeat of the Gauls in the 50s BCE, Roman coinage returns to the earlier iconography of defeat seen in 119 BCE; ironically Vercingetorix, defeated at Alesia in 52 BCE, was chieftain of the Arverni,

the same tribe that Fabius Maximus and Domitius Ahenobarbus had conquered in 120 BCE. The coinage of Narbo Martius, however, illuminates an important and pivotal period of Roman imperial strategy that is otherwise lost to history.

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