

## Leadership Through “Obversity”

Though historians opine, coins cannot. For example, Trajan had a series of coins minted with images of canopic jars (RPC III, Trajan 4179) and other Egyptian artifacts. Such images suggest he had a stronger presence in Egypt than is traditionally recognized. Though there are many coins celebrating Trajan’s victories against the Dacians, Marcus Aurelius (RIC III Marcus Aurelius 1048) and Constantine (RIC VII Rome 298) were the only two emperors who minted coins portraying the bridge, suggesting that Trajan did not view it as a great achievement in the way his successors did. Often due to Augustus’ propaganda campaign after the civil wars, the battle of Actium is portrayed as being on the same level of severity as a skirmish, i.e. not particularly significant. But the fact that Brutus and Cassius had enough influence and land to control a set of mints in order to fund their armies against Octavian and the fact that they publicized their opposition would suggest otherwise. Julius Caesar was so disliked by Brutus’ army that they minted coins celebrating his death. (RRC 508/3) Soon after their defeat, the Romans melted down most of the coins the two had minted, making those coins incredibly rare in modern times.

Some of the only images of monuments that did not survive appear on the backs of coins. For example, Nero’s triumphal arch was only erected for about a decade (Platner-2015), and due to it being destroyed so quickly after his death, no known depictions of it exist. Our only representation of the arch comes from the obverse of one of his sestertii. (RIC I Nero 143) In addition, no contemporary pictures of the lighthouse of Alexandria exist. Our only description comes from the 12th century historian, Ibn al Shaik, who detailed its appearance at his time (Handler-1971). Modern artists have used this and archeological finds to estimate its appearance, but we find the only real corroborating picture on the reverse of provincial coinage. (RPC III,

Trajan 4736) While these coins may appear to have little historical value, the image does highlight what the Romans considered the defining and important features of this monument.

Coin imagery also reveals a religious tolerance which is not typically noticed when studying Roman history. Tolerance of other religions might seem far fetched considering their treatment of Jews and Christians, but many coins would feature other pagan gods like the Egyptian Isis Pharia. (RPC III, Trajan 4736) In the 1st Century AD, the Romans incorporated many of the Egyptian gods into the Roman pantheon. Because many of our primary sources for Roman mythology were written prior to the addition of these foreign deities, our understanding of which gods the Romans worshipped may be inaccurate. Through an examination of imagery on coins a case can be made for the reexamination of the value of various historical events, achievements and landmarks in the ancient Roman world.

#### Bibliography

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