Nathan T. Elkins and Stefan Krmnicek (Eds.)

‘Art in the Round’

New Approaches to Ancient Coin Iconography
Flavian Typology: The Evidence from the ‘sottosuolo urbano’ of Rome

Marta Barbato

Introduction

Regarding the debate on the purpose of coin iconography and whether or not it was used to convey a message as a mean of ‘propaganda’, in a sender and receiver scheme, new analytical perspectives were opened by research on regional differentiation in coin supply and on the unequal and different (but not at random) distribution of coin types in the Western Empire. With site finds, quantitative analysis, in particular of the aes coins, has shown that Roman coin types carried a targeted visual language, suggesting an Empire-wide and a sophisticated semantic system with different messages. Recent case studies have pointed out a ‘propagandistic’ value of coins and the importance of their contextual analysis, that is to ‘...build a model based on coins as found (not as minted)’ (Kenmners 2009). On the other hand, different explanations for the regionalized supply of coin types distribution do exist (Duncan-Jones 2005).

I have chosen a case study to test the assumption that there is an ideological aspect involved in the coin supply and the regionalized distribution of Roman imperial coin types by a unique sample from the centre of the Empire, which is compared with other Italian and provincial contexts.

In the course of studying the coins of the Flavian emperors (AD 69–96) from the Sottosuolo urbano (SSU2) of Rome (Barbato in press), I undertook an examination of the types attested for the emperor Vespasian and also Titus in this sample. The composition of this group is arranged as follows: coins kept in the Capitolini Museum coming from the late nineteenth and twentieth-century municipal excavations in the city of Rome (among which the Sottosuolo Urbano 2 sample is included), plus coins from other published urban excavations (King 1975; Reecce 1982; von Kaenel 1984; Rovelli 1985; Travanti 1985; Candilio 1988; Rovelli 1989; Rovelli 1990; Molinari 1995; Munzi-Caviechi 1997; Catali 2008). Obviously, each coin must be identified by RIC number to qualify for inclusion in the database of coin types.

As far as the Capitoline sample is concerned, no coins were picked out but simply selected at the beginning of the twentieth century in order to form a first group of finely preserved coins for the exhibition and a group of coins in poor and very poor condition kept in the cabinet. It is, therefore, certain that the rare sestertii with the Flavian Amphitheatre issued under Titus and Domitian were not in the coin assemblage from SSU2 and that no coin was taken out from the group (Barbato in press).

In any case, the nature of this rare issue, ‘instrument of largess and not simply currency’, recently proposed (Elkins 2006, 218–220; Elkins 2000a), is suggested by its ‘abundant’ presence, unparalleled in other coin assemblages from Rome, in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, which is comparable with research on Roman medallions and their find spots in Rome (Molinari 2002a, 205–213).

Before considering coin types specifically, it must be mentioned that another large sample of Roman coins is available for the city of Rome, the so-called Sottosuolo urbano 1 (SSU1). Unfortunately, the SSU1 group is available, for the Flavian coinage, only for Titus (Komnick 2000).

When one looks at the sample from Rome and does not include the SSU1 coins of Titus, it turns out that some important types (or issues) are under- or over-represented compared to the Titus sample in the SSU1, when the latter is taken alone. This happens for the restoration coinage and the Minerva type (issued in the name of Domitian COS VII). Restoration coins in the sample from Rome, excluding SSU1, are just 10% of the aes coins of Titus, a very low percentage compared with the number attested in the SSU1 (20%), which is comparable with other data from Italy: Veneto region 18% (Komnick 2001, 149–151), Ostia 25% (Spagnoli 2007). On the other hand, if we merge

1 For the records of coins, an on-line catalogue is available at http://www.museicapitolini.net.
all the data from Rome, this causes the percentage rise (restoration coinage 18%). The same pattern occurs, with overturned value, for Minerva types (Fig. 1).

Internal differences between these two assemblages from Rome, when considered one by one, can be generally attributed to the fact that the material comes from the most disparate urban contexts in both chronological and functional terms, but unfortunately the contextual information is lost (Reece 1996, 341–446, 448; Molinari 2002b, 252; Kemmer 2006, 239).

Distribution of Types: Vespasian (AD 69–79)

The analysis will be focusing on Vespasian’s reign, as it is by far the one with the largest number of comparable samples available. From this perspective, results in type distributions from this ‘partial’ coin assemblage from the city of Rome are checked against patterns from other contexts, Italian and provincial (Noreña 2001, 153–155; Kemmer 2006, 220, for the importance of a quantitive approach).

Silver coinage is very scarce in the sample (Barbato in press). Data available for the issue of denarii in AD 70 (January–June) seem to confirm the general picture drawn for this year at provincial level (Kemmer 2006, 221–223), with the overwhelming presence of the historically appropriate type of Pax (Carradice and Buttery 2007, 54; 67% in the sample from Rome), compared to the other types attested.

Moving to the more abundant aes coinage, the year AD 71 and 72–74 are the most significant; data from a quantitative point of view as ‘peak years’; single issues dated to 72–73, 73–74 and 74 are grouped together in order to be more reliable in quantitative terms, as types minted in these years are almost always the same and drawn from the massive series of 71 (Carradice and Buttery 2007, 22–28, 51; Carradice 2012, 381) (Fig. 2).

The Thermopolium hoard has been been described in the analysis below, but its particular nature as a hoard and the problem of the lack of small aes denominations in it must be kept in mind (Vitale 2008, 39; Lanna and Molinari in press).

For the year AD 71, the data confirm what has already been noted by other authors, focusing on the regional distribution of Vespasianic types in the northwestern provinces compared with other geographical contexts (Kemmer 2006, 228–240).

Data show also that Italy represents a different case. The trend from Rome is grosso modo comparable with the trends observed in the region of Veneto (with the addition of the adjacent region of Friuli Venetia Giulia) and Pompeii: the most represented type is Aequis (32%) (Fig. 3), which is not casually considered representative for the ‘effective correspondence of medium and message’ (Noreña 2001, 158).

On the other hand, the mass of bronze coins circulating in Italy, and specifically in Rome, differs, according to iconography, from the aes coin assemblage attested in provincial regions to the extent that the Securitas type, the most represented at provincial level (Fig. 7), is not attested by specimens in Rome, where, after Aequis, Judaea is the most prominent type (Fig. 9); although Judaea types are not common outside Italy. So, percentages of aes types circulating in Rome represent a unique circulation pool, which also Pompeii (Talierci Menisiti 2005; Cantilen 2008) and the regions of Veneto and Friuli Venetia Giulia of RMs 1992–2007; RMFr 2010) partially differ from (Figs. 4, 5 and 6).

In fact, in the latter the type of Roma is not simply just attested but it is in larger proportion, despite what happens in the sample from Rome, in which it is virtually not represented at all (just the 1%). Given this anomaly of the Roma type distribution, it has to be pointed out that in AD 71, the type of Roma appears on sextertii and dupondii whose survival in the hoard from Rome is actually very low for these years (Barbato in press), indicating a remarkable shortage of sextertii and dupondii in Rome for this year. Since we consider the iconography on coins for its intrinsic value, regardless of denominations, we should also be aware to what extent considerations of the imagery are affected by denominational composition of the sample (Hekster 2003, 23–24; Beckmann 2009, 151–154).

As is visible in the charts, the Concordia type is attested both in the Pompeii excavations and in Rome in similar and comparably low percentages. In provincial contexts, aside from the differences already noted for the type of Securitas, it can be observed how even the sample from Germany (Fig. 8) differs from the assemblage published for the site of Nijmegen and more generally from the region of the Lower Rhine (Kemmer 2006, 231; FMRD 1–V). In the sample from Germany, Securitas does not appear, but Roma comprises an important proportion among reverse types. The Concordia type is not present as it is at Nijmegen (Kemmer 2006, 223–224).

In AD 72–74, Felicitas and Aequis are the most represented types, followed by Ves and Victoria, in the sample from Rome (Fig. 9). The same trend is apparent at Pompeii (though there is a small number of specimens found in excavations), and in particular by the Thermopolium hoard (Figs. 10 and 11). A different pattern appears in the Veneto region, where Felicitas is present, but in very low quantities (not visible in Fig. 12). Provincial areas are incomparable to this pattern because of the eagle and Pax types, but Felicitas is well represented in those contexts too (Fig. 13).

Targeting on a Regional Basis

Vespasian’s bronze reverse types are an interesting mixture of conservatism and innovation: themes of victory, peace and the establishment of a new dynasty (Carradice 2012, 383–386). In the sample from Rome, all the types from the virtual composition of the virtus/aequitas, to the imperial benefits, Victoria and Concordia (Noreña 2011, 108–111), and then Judaea, are appropriate to the historical situation and to the way that Vespasian came to power after a long period of turmoil (Noreña 2001, 158). Victoria was originally the goddess who grants victory in battle but CAIV 7, 4–7 in the Urbs, along with its paucity in provincial contexts where we find just the more general type of Victoria, communicating to the audience a broader sense of imperial victory, in its ‘potential universalism’ (Noreña 2011, 162), rather than to a specific victorious battle or war. At the same time, it is worth noting that the Judaea Capta type is reserved by Titus in AD 80–81, but it is, by then, far from the dominant theme with Victory. This is notable in Rome and Italy, where the type is totally absent, and in provincial contexts too, where we find only two specimens from Upper Germany with the Judaea type (FMRD IV 3/3; FMRD V 2/7).

Moreover, the presence of the type of Roma in all the assemblages and, mostly, the evidence ex silentio of the sample from Rome is significant if the idea of Roma is indeed intended to be broadened to include the renewed supremacy of Rome, along with the notion of freedom and civilization after a period of civil war and chaos, which would be more appropriately conveyed outside Rome, which is targeted with different themes (for this problem, see above). In this sense, the attempt to consider the combination of types in precise years and contexts confirms its validity and potential (Kemmer, 2006, 240–244; Eikens 2009b, 34–35; Kemmer 2009, 140–141).

In the time span between 72–74, it has been shown that the homogenous relevance of the Felicitas type, in connection with Victory, in almost all the samples, communicated the widespread idea of the state of happiness and prosperity gained by Roman military success and the emotional well-being of the imperial community and its inhabitants. As has already been observed, the bulk of reverse types of the Flavian coins is characterized by the prevalence of types representing personifications that transmit imperial virtues and benefits that derive from them. It has also been observed that architectural or ‘denotive’ types, are relatively scarce in the sample(s) from Rome and elsewhere (Eikens 2011).

In the case study presented, attention to coin types on the basis of a regional distribution turns out to be, once again, meaningful and useful in order to shed more light on the integrated semantic system that conveyed specific messages targeted at regional scale.

Nevertheless, this research also highlights the risk of summing too much from a quantitative analysis based on small numbers of coins, affected by the structure of the sample; in this case, the lack of some denominations is possibly due to the provenance of the material.
Fig. 1 Aes types of Titus in the assemblages of Rome.

Fig. 2 Venetian aes coinage per year.

Fig. 3 Aes coinage, AD 71. Types attested in the assemblage from Rome (SSU2 and other finds, n=38).

Fig. 4 Aes coinage, AD 71. Veneto and Friuli Venetia Giulia (n=36).

Fig. 5 Aes coinage, AD 71. Pompeii excavations (n=30).

Fig. 6 Aes coinage, AD 71. Pompeii, Thermopolium hoard (I, R, S) (n=292).

Fig. 7 Aes coinage, AD 71. Nijmegen (Kemmers 2006, 224, fig. 5.16) (n=147).

Fig. 8 Aes coinage, AD 71. Upper Germany (FMRD 1-V) (n=476).
Fig. 9 Aes coinage, AD 72–74. Types attested in the assemblage from Rome (SSU/L and other finds) (n=81).

Fig. 10 Aes coinage, AD 72–74. Pompeii excavations (n=23).

Fig. 11 Aes coinage, AD 72–74. Pompeii, Thermopolium hoard (I, 8, 8) (n=262).

Fig. 12 Aes coinage, AD 72–74. Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia (n=69).

Fig. 13 Aes coinage, AD 72–74. Upper Germany (FMRD 1–V) (n=255).

References

Abbreviations

FMRD: Die Fundmünzen der römischen Zeit in Deutschland (Berlin 1960–2010).


Programme

Thursday, 15 November 2012

Keynote address

Tino Hölscher (Heidelberg)

Historienbilder der römischen Republik. Das Repertoire der Münzen im Vergleich zu anderen Bildgattungen

Session I: Image and Theory

Gunnar Dunke (Heidelberg)

Sekundäre Ikonographien. Prolegomena zu immobilisierten und imitierten griechischen Münztypen

Ragnar Hedlund (Uppsala)

"Whose image is this" - again? Exploring new frameworks for the interpretation of ancient coin imagery

Session II: Coin Iconography in Numismatic and Material Contexts

Clare Rowan (Warwick)

Iconography in colonial contexts: the provincial coinage of the late Republic

Frank Daubner (Stuttgart)

Statische Bilder, statische Identitäten? Zu Münzdarstellungen römischer Kolonien in Makedonien

Marta Barbato (Rome)

Flavian typology: the evidence from the "sottosuo lo urbano" of Rome

Johannes Noll (Munich)

Kleinmünzische Lokalprägungen und Inschriften

Ute Wartenberg-Kagan (New York)

The Clazomenae hoard: an archaeological and iconographical puzzle

Lutz Flesch (Tübingen)


Friday, 16 November 2012

Session III: Type Specific Studies and the Importance of Coin Iconography

Maria Cristina Molinari (Rome)

The two Roman types with two-faced god on 3rd century BC coinage

Kyle Erickson (Lampeter)

Zeus to Apollo: back again: shifts in Seleucid policy and iconography

Mary Jane Cuyler (Sydney)

Ptolemaic coins and the Soteriē of Nero

David Wigg-Wolf (Frankfurt)

Constantine’s silver medallion from Ticinum:فئ "one small step" or "a giant leap"?

Session IV: Coins, Literature, and the Visual Arts

Christopher Simon (Yale)

Etyymology as image type in republican nd imperial coinage

Bernd Steinbock (Western Ontario)

Coin imagery and Latin panegyrics as means of imperial communication

Patrick Monsieur (Ghent)

The relationship between Greek coins, gems and pottery stamps: an introduction through the archaeological evidence of Chios

Martin Beckmann (McMaster)

The relationship between numismatic portraits and marble busts: the problematic example of Faustina the Younger