

Chapter 2

Outline history of Roman Republican coinage

The study of the history of the coinage of the Roman state, including that of the Republican Period, has a history going back several centuries. In the past two hundred years in particular there has been an impressive corpus of relevant literature, such as coin catalogues and a wide range of analytical-descriptive studies. Of these the volume essential in the study of Roman Republican coinage definitely continues to be the catalogue provided with an extensive commentary written by Michael H. Crawford over forty years ago.¹⁸ Admittedly, some arguments presented therein, such as the dating proposed for particular issues, have met with valid criticism,¹⁹ but for the study of Republican coin finds from northern territories, substantially removed from the Mediterranean world, this is a minor matter. In the study of coin finds recovered in our study area from pre-Roman and Roman period prehistoric contexts, we have very few, and usually quite vague, references to an absolute chronology (i.e. the age determined in years of the Common Era) therefore doubts as to the very precise dating of some of the coin issues are the least of our problems. This is especially the case when these doubts are raised mostly with respect to the older coins of the series. These types seem to have entered the territory to the north of the Sudetes and the Carpathians a few score, and in some cases, even over a hundred, years after their date of minting. It is quite important on the other hand to be consistent in our use of the chronological findings related to the Roman Republican coinage, in our case, those of M. H. Crawford, when comparing the corpus of coin finds from our study area with analogical materials from other regions.

To date, there are no examples of the earliest coins and pre-monetary coinage of the Roman Republic among the coin finds from the area of Central and Eastern Europe found north of the Sudetes and the Carpathians. Therefore there is little

¹⁸ Crawford 1974. If not indicated otherwise information included in Chapter 2, including the date of issue of the coins, were drawn from this study. For a discussion of Roman Republican minting in Polish: Kunisz 1994; Ziółkowski 2001; Awianowicz 2010; Zawora Skabiczewski 2011.

¹⁹ See e.g. Hersh and Walker 1984, pp. 103-134; Ziółkowski 2001, pp. 337-338; Mattingly 2004, pp. 199-214 and 227-234.

sense in introducing the reader to the complicated subject of the beginnings of the Roman coinage in which many details are still the subject of dispute. It is enough to recall that until the onset of the third century BC, the main currency in the Roman Republic were unworked lumps of bronze (*aes rude*) although the first, isolated issues of Greek-style bronze coins struck in southern Italy date to a slightly earlier period, after 326 BC. Since approximately 280 BC, cast bronze bars bearing on each side a recognizable type (*aes signatum*) and cast bronze coins (*aes grave*) started to be issued in Rome. Presumably during the same period, in southern Italy and soon after that also in Rome, Greek-style coins (so-called Romano-Campanian coinage) were also struck in silver (didrachms) and bronze. The *aes grave* series included the as, with a mark of its value “I”, in theory, the weight of one Roman pound (ca. 324 g), multiples of the as (tressis – 3 asses, dupondius – 2 asses, and exceptionally, also higher denominations), and its fractions (the principal being the semis – 1/2 of an as, the triens – 1/3 of an as, the quadrans – 1/4 of an as, the sextans – 1/6 of an as, the uncia – 1/12 of an as and the semuncia – 1/24 of an as). The denominational mark of the semis was “S”, the uncia was marked with one pellet, the triens, the quadrans and the sextans featured the number of pellets corresponding to their value in unciae (triens – four pellets, quadrans – three pellets, sextans – two pellets). The name for the pound in Latin is *libra* hence the weight standard of these issues is referred to a libral. The role of smaller bronze denominations was presumably played by Greek-style struck coins. This situation was sustained in general until the beginning of the Second Punic War (218-201 BC) except that *aes signatum* ceased to be issued somewhat earlier, in the 240s BC. Years 225-217 BC bring the last issue of *aes grave* with the portrait of a deity on the obverse and a ship's prow on the reverse. The prow series of *aes grave* were issued approximately parallel to the final didrachm issues. These didrachms, with a weight of ca. 6.75 g, issued en masse in 225-214 BC are commonly referred to as quadrigati because their reverse design is Jupiter in a quadriga.

The monetary system based on the quadrigatus and *aes grave* foundered in the early years of the Second Punic War. This, presumably, was due to the heavy financial burden entailed by the involvement of the Roman Republic in this conflict. More reductions were made in the weight of the bronze coins; at the same time, the debasement of the quadrigatus took place. This is also the time of the introduction of the first Roman coins struck in gold, the stater and the half-stater. Around 211 BC a new system took form, based on a new silver coin, the denarius, and also, on the bronze as, now reduced to 1/6 of a pound (sextantal weight standard). This system would be sustained in its general form until the end of the Republican period and carry over into the first three centuries of the Empire. Struck in very good quality silver, the denarius (literally “containing ten”), weighing at first ca. 4.5 g but soon reduced to a little over 4 g, had a value of 10 asses; this was indicated by providing the coins with a denominational mark – “X”. The weight of bronze coins also was gradually reduced. Around 140 BC, the value of the as was officially lowered to 1/16 of a denarius; this change was indicated on the denarius itself, with

a denominational mark described as “X (crossed)”, in effect a ligature of characters comprising the number XVI. Other silver coins issued at this time had the value of half a denarius (quinarius; denominational mark “V”) and a quarter of a denarius (sestertius; denominational mark – “IIS”) with a proportionately reduced weight. Even so, the quinarii and sestertii were never issued on the same great scale as the denarius, on which in practice the entire Roman monetary system rested. The basic system of bronze denominations – multiples and fractions of the as – had remained unchanged since the time of the introduction of *aes grave*. The only difference was that after the 80s BC, the issue of bronze coinage was stopped, only to be revived a few decades later, during the civil wars of the 40s BC.²⁰ Outside this consistent monetary system remained the victoriatus, a silver coin with a weight of 3/4 denarius, introduced approximately at the same time as the first denarii, and taken out of use in the 170s BC. The victoriatus took its name from the goddess Victoria portrayed on its reverse; on its obverse was the head of Jupiter. The value relationship of the victoriatus and the denarius remains an open question. Finally, gold coins were issued in the late third century BC with a nominal value of 20, 40 and 60 asses; their issue stopped with the end of the Second Punic War. The next regular issues of gold coinage would be revived by Julius Caesar only in the 40s BC.

The earliest Roman coins were anonymous, inscribed only with the legend ROMA to indicate the Roman state as their issuer, or *ethnikon*, in reference to the citizens of Rome, a form taken directly from Greek coinage – ΡΩΜΑΙΩΝ in the Greek version, or ROMANO in the Latin. In principle, presumably from the final years of the third century BC, already after the introduction of the denarius, the production of coins in Rome was under the authority of junior officials – *tresviri monetales* (*tresviri aere argento auro flando feriundo*). At the beginning, before the end of the third century and the beginning of the next, only a very small number of coins were provided with inscriptions that can be interpreted as the name of the moneyer. The practice of placing the names of the *tresviri monetales* on coins became widespread during the second century BC. Starting from the end of that century the names of senior Roman officials may be seen on a small number of coins. The designs on bronze coins issued during the second and the first century BC were standardized; apart from a very small number of exceptions they have the image of a god or a goddess on the obverse (as a rule, Janus on asses, Saturn on semisses, Minerva on trientes, Hercules on quadrantes, Mercury on sextantes and Roma or Bellona on unciae) and the prow of a ship on the reverse, analogically as in the final issues of *aes grave*. The denominational marks on bronze coins (“I” for the as, “S” for the semis, and so on) also remain practically unchanged since the time of the introduction of *aes grave*. The standardization of the designs initially applied also to the denarii, which had on their obverse the helmeted head of Roma and the galloping Dioscuri on the reverse. With time, the Dioscuri were replaced on the reverse by an image of a god or a goddess in a quadriga or in a biga, hence the

²⁰ Hollander 2007, p. 25.

popular name – denarii *bigati*. Starting from the late second century BC the styles on the denarii become less uniform and by the first century BC no longer follow any rules. Coins issued by individual moneyers feature a rich selection of images of gods, heroes, historical personages, scenes from mythology, beasts, edifices and other images related either to the Roman state at large, or to the aristocratic family of the moneyer. It is also notable that on some coins, in fact, on the coin dies, small control marks were added, letters, numerals and symbols. These marks presumably were an instrument of quality control, helping to detect irregularities in mint production made using a specific die marked in this way.

The internal unrest of the final decades of the Republic brought a new phenomenon, the appearance of Imperial coinage as Roman generals waged civil war on one another, the first of them (following those of Sulla in the 80s BC) issued coins with their name on them, and starting with Julius Caesar, also their portrait. In general the designs placed on Imperial coinage conveyed a heavy propaganda message, one mostly directed at the army. This does not mean that with the introduction of the Imperial issues coinage was no longer minted under the authority of the moneyers. *Tresviri monetales* continued to issue coins with their names until the ascendance of Emperor Augustus, in the late first century BC. Nevertheless, it would happen that for an extended period, for instance, during the 40-30s – from the death of Julius Caesar to the time when Octavian took full control of the Roman state, practically all of the Roman coinage was Imperial coinage. Many Imperial coins were struck outside Rome, by military mints on the move with the army. Because it was wartime and there were financial difficulties, not all Imperial coins adhered to the standards of weight and silver content. The best known example of devaluation not sanctioned in any way is the large scale issue of the so-called legionary denarii of Mark Antony, minted in 32-31 BC for army pay during the wars with Octavian. These coins had on them designs and inscriptions that refer to the legions included in Mark Antony's army, hence their popular name.

From the numismatic perspective, it is not easy to set an unambiguous dividing line between the period of the Republic and of the Empire.²¹ M. H. Crawford brings his catalogue up to 31 BC, the year when Octavian defeated Mark Antony in the Battle of Actium and assumed, albeit not at once, full control over the Roman state. Volume 1 of the monumental Roman Imperial Coinage catalogue by Carol Humphrey V. Sutherland opens with this same year of 31 BC.²² For the purpose of this study, 27 BC is adopted as the dividing line between the Republican and the Imperial coinage. This was the year in which Octavian adopted the title of Augustus, after which he could be spoken of as Emperor Augustus. This title, which for Octavian Augustus became *de facto* his name, was placed on coins justifying,

²¹ See Ziółkowski 2001, pp. 312-313.

²² Sutherland 1984, p. 1.

in a way, our choice of 27 BC as a watershed in Roman numismatics.²³ The arguments for using the year 27 BC as the exact point in time separating the two major periods in the history of the Roman state and coinage, is no less frail than those for using 31 BC for the same purpose. In the reorganization of the Roman coinage after the period of civil wars, Augustus retained the system based on the denarius, raising its weight and silver content, previously slightly lowered. The denarius struck in almost pure silver with a weight of ca. 3.99 g was still valued at 16 asses; issued in small quantities, the quinarius continued to have the value of half a denarius. Multiples of the as (dupondius – 2 asses, sestertius – 4 asses) and its half (semis) were struck in brass (orichalcum), the as itself and the quadrans – in copper.²⁴ Augustus also continued the gold coinage (aureus) revived on a more regular basis by Julius Caesar, now valued at 25 denarii.²⁵ The high standard of the denarius was sustained until AD 64, when Nero reduced its weight to ca. 3.18 g, lowering at the same time its median silver content to ca. 93.5%.²⁶ Subsequent decades brought steady devaluation of the denarius; by the AD 190s the silver content in the denarius would drop below 50%, and during the second half of the third century AD, the denarius practically became a copper coin with only symbolic silver content.

For the Republican period, there are therefore many issues that we can associate, either with confidence or tentatively, with the Roman state. Alongside them were in existence quite a number of coins struck according to the Roman monetary system by non-Roman issuers. This is true for example of the Iberian denarius coinage that circulated in what today is Spain during the second and early first centuries BC,²⁷ and the northern African Numidian denarii of the first century BC.²⁸ This coinage was issued by states that were usually in some form of dependence on the Roman Republic, as a rule, as a result of its involvement in a war waged in that region and the need to pay an army. A small quantity of these non-Roman denarii entered circulation in the Roman state; this is confirmed by the presence of Numidian coins in some denarii hoards from Italy.²⁹

Next to coins struck according to the Roman denominational standards, the monetary system of the Roman Republic at large may be said to have also included Greek coinage issued in eastern regions of the Mediterranean, incorporated by Rome as provinces, or coins struck by Hellenistic states subject to Rome.³⁰ Silver

²³ An analogous approach was presented by e.g., Ernest Babelon (Babelon 1885, p. XI) and Andrzej Kunisz (Kunisz 2001, p. 342)

²⁴ Sutherland 1984, p. 3 and f.

²⁵ Sutherland 1984, p. 3.

²⁶ Kunisz 1978, pp. 74-97; Sutherland 1984, p. 4-5.

²⁷ Crawford 1985, pp. 91-97.

²⁸ Crawford 1985, pp. 247-248.

²⁹ See e.g. Crawford 1969, p. 123 (the Contigliano hoard), 125 (the Avetrana hoard), 131 (the Cerriolo hoard).

³⁰ Crawford 1985, pp. 143-221.

coinage minted according to the Greek monetary system, usually based on the drachm and its multiples and fractions, remained in an official relationship with Roman denominations. One example are the drachms of the Greek colonies in Dalmatia: Dyrrachium and Apolonia, issued in large quantities starting from the late third century until the first century BC.³¹ Another example is the cistophoric coinage of Pergamum,³² issued even during the period of the Empire. Some elements of Greek coinage would linger within the Roman Empire until the end of the third century AD.

Next to the official coinage of the client states of Rome, there were also diverse imitative coins. Imitations are coins modelled on official coin types, e.g., Roman denarii, issued to fill a gap in the monetary circulation or some other area of coin use. Imitations were not intended – at least, in theory – to deceive the users, as was the case of counterfeit coins. However, in practice the dividing line between imitations and counterfeit coins is fluid. In this context more notable are so-called barbarian imitations of denarii that were minted by tribes living in the territory outside the reach of the Mediterranean culture but under its influence. A notable example are the very numerous and typologically diverse Dacian imitations³³ from the area of modern Romania, and coins of the Celtic tribe of the Eravisci³⁴ established in Pannonia, now in Hungary.

In principle imitation denarii were silver coins although, often, with a slightly lower weight and of an inferior quality of metal compared to the official Roman coins. Altogether different were the plated denarii, passed off as made of silver, but not actually made of this metal, or simply, forged coins. The plated denarii often had a relatively thick coating of silver over a core of base metal, mostly copper alloy (*nummi subaerati*) or containing iron (*nummi subferrati*). It is possible that some of the plated denarii in fact came from the official Roman mint, perhaps as a result of dishonest dealings of its workers.³⁵ Very likely, these underhand dealings may have been countered, although we are not in a position to prove it was actually so,³⁶ by the issue in the first century BC of denarii series with serrated edges (*nummi serrati*). During the same periods when the denarii *serrati* were issued, some denarii without serrated edges were minted as well. It is interesting that there were plated denarii *serrati* in circulation, which means if serration had been meant to deter the production of plated denarii, the measure was not entirely successful. Perhaps, the outbreak of denarii forgeries may have something to do also with the presence on the Republican denarii, and on denarii and aurei from the early years of the Empire, of small punch marks, so-called banker's marks. These were simple symbols (e.g., a crescent, a circle) or letters stamped on the coins already in

³¹ Crawford 1985, pp. 224-225.

³² Crawford 1985, pp. 158-160.

³³ Davies 2006, pp. 321-355; Lockyear 2008, pp. 155-172.

³⁴ Biró-Say 1980, pp. 339-341; Crawford 1985, p. 236.

³⁵ Sydenham 1952, pp. XLIII-XLIV.

³⁶ Crawford 1974, p. 581.

circulation. The purpose of these punch marks is not entirely clear, but it is very likely that they were stamped on the denarii by private individuals to confirm the integrity of the coins.³⁷

Before closing, we wish to recall an obvious point, often disregarded by numismatists whose focus is restricted to the Roman coinage. Looking from the perspective of the late Republic and the Imperial period, when Roman coins were ubiquitous in the Mediterranean Sea basin, we need to recollect that in during its early days the Roman coinage accounted for only a minor fraction of coins in circulation in Italy, and even more so, in other regions.³⁸ The circulation of currency in the region was dominated by Greek and Greek-style coins, for example those struck in large numbers by the Greek cities in southern Italy and Sicily. By the time Rome started to issue its first coins, the Greek coinage in the region already had a long history and tradition going back to the sixth century BC. Only with time, parallel to the political and economic development of the expanding Roman state, did Roman coinage assume an increasingly stronger position, which gradually led to a situation when from one century to the next it dominated circulation in the entire Mediterranean world until Late Antiquity. This is worth noting because, at least up to the time of the Second Punic War there is little sense in treating Roman coins selectively when studying the influx of coinage from the Mediterranean region to the territory north of the Sudetes and the Carpathians. It is absolutely necessary to take into account, in this case, the background – the non-Roman coins that were part of the monetary circulation within the Roman state and in the adjacent region.

Finally, we need to describe in brief the circulation of Republican coins within the Roman Empire. For the first decades of the first century AD Republican denarii account for a significant proportion of the silver coins in circulation, on a par with issues of the first Julio-Claudian emperors. This situation changed after the reforms of Nero in 64 AD. From this time, the new Roman coinage was of a quality inferior to the older, Republican denarii and issues of the first emperors. Formally speaking, pre-AD 64 denarii had been taken out from circulation by the decree of Trajan of AD 107 and soon after this date they practically, went out of use, although this did not happen at once and not all of them were withdrawn.³⁹ The decree sanctioned the phenomena operating in monetary circulation described by the Gresham-Copernicus law. Struck of good silver, the heavier denarii of the first Julio-Claudian emperors, pre-AD 64 issues, were the first to go out of use,

³⁷ Mattingly 1965, p. XXVIII. So far no convincing answers have been put forward as to who, where and when these coins were stamped with punch marks and what purpose they served. For a concise review of views presented to date see: Bufalini 2005, pp. 16-19. All the same, the fact that some of the punch marks have the shape of the letters of the Latin alphabet shows that they originated in the territory of the Roman state.

³⁸ Cf. Crawford 1984, pp. 1-51.

³⁹ Duncan-Jones 1994, pp. 195-196; Kunisz 2001, pp. 350-351.

before the end of the first century.⁴⁰ The next to disappear from circulation were the slightly inferior Republican denarii, with the exception of the legionary denarii of Mark Antony. These coins were minted according to a reduced weight and silver content, close to that of Imperial denarii issued after Nero's devaluation of AD 64.⁴¹ Older denarii from the period of the Republic continued in circulation until the reign of Trajan (AD 98-117), possibly even Hadrian (AD 117-138).⁴² The legionary denarii continued in use the longest, which finds reflection in the structure of the hoards.⁴³ As for the Republican bronze coinage, it remained in circulation also during the early days of the Empire,⁴⁴ like the denarii but not for as long. This is true especially of second century BC bronzes that had been struck in large quantities.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Duncan-Jones 1994, pp. 195-196.

⁴¹ Kunisz 1970, p. 119; Wielowiejski 1970, p. 132; Crawford 1978, p. 152; Duncan-Jones 1994, pp. 196-206; Gązdac 2010, pp. 130-135. Cf. also Bolin 1958, pp. 336-357.

⁴² Duncan-Jones 1994, p. 196.

⁴³ See e.g. Gązdac 2005, pp. 492-493; Gązdac 2010, pp. 130-135.

⁴⁴ Hollander 2007, p. 29.

⁴⁵ Ziółkowski 2001, p. 335.