



Jonathan Williams  
*The Republican identity of Roman  
imperial coinage. 1<sup>st</sup> to mid-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries  
AD.*

*Money and Identity. Lectures about History, Design and Museology  
of Money [Proceedings of the 11th Meeting of the International  
Committee of Money and Banking Museums (ICOMON), Seoul,  
2004] edited by Reiner Cunz*

*Hannover 2007. pp.57-72*

Downloaded from: [www.icomon.org](http://www.icomon.org)

# THE REPUBLICAN IDENTITY OF ROMAN IMPERIAL COINAGE

1<sup>st</sup> to mid-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD\*

Philological interpretations by JONATHAN WILLIAMS, London  
(United Kingdom)\*\*



Fig. 1.

I want to address the question of the Republican identity of the Roman coinage in the imperial period (**Fig. 1**). I am talking here about the coins in gold, silver or

---

\* Based on a presentation for: *Coins and an Archaeologist. A Symposium for Richard Reece*, organised at the University of Cardiff, The Cardiff School of History and Archaeology. An abstract can be found in the Internet at: [www.cf.ac.uk/hisar/conferences/archaeology/coins](http://www.cf.ac.uk/hisar/conferences/archaeology/coins).

\*\* From 1993 to 2005, Jonathan Williams was curator of Iron Age and Roman coins in the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum.

bronze produced mostly in the city of Rome until the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century AD and thereafter in a series of mints across the Empire. I will not be dealing with the large number of mostly base-metal coinages made in cities throughout the Roman Empire down to the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. These philological (or epigraphic) interpretations are also a contribution to a long-standing research problem: the S[ENATVS] C[ONSVLTO] inscription on early Roman imperial bronze coins.

In considering the question of the constitutional and legal identity status of the imperial coinage, I intend to begin by looking at the words and images that appeared on Roman coins and ask what significance the emperor's head on the imperial coinage really had. These are interesting questions in their own right, but I want to take my answers to them a stage further and ask whether or not they had any relevance to the production and circulation of coinage within the Roman Empire.



Fig. 2.

To begin – how are we to understand Roman imperial coin types? My answer, in brief, is that essentially they were conceived as commemorative monuments to the emperor. This, I would argue, is a development that has its roots in the period of the late Roman Republic in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC when Roman coins moved away from static (**Fig. 2**) to constantly changing types (**Fig. 3**).

I would argue that the coin types of the late Republic represent a competitive series of *monumental* images intended to bring to mind (*moneo*) either a person or an event from the past of the family to which the monetary magistrate in charge of the particular issue belonged, in the same way as other kinds of built monuments. They come onto the scene at the same time as other aspects of Roman aristocratic life, such as town houses and family tombs, start to become architecturally monumentalized, and as the oral history of Rome itself starts to be transformed into a series of literary monuments by historians in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.

This is a development unprecedented in the history of ancient Greek or Roman coinage. The use of historical and constantly changing monumental types is a Roman phenomenon beginning in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, which persisted right into the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. Many of what we conceive of as the most characteristic kinds of Roman coin types – building (**Fig. 4**), statue and trophy types (all of them thoroughly monumental) – have their origins in this crucial development in late Republican iconography.

The antiquarians of early modern Europe who classified coins along with other relics of antiquity as *monumenta* had it right, then. Roman coins were monuments, in that they both brought to mind events and personages from the past (in the Republic), while in the imperial period, they commemorated the *fama*, the *res gestae*, and the *virtutes* of the reigning emperor and his family.



Fig. 5.

Let us now look at some Roman imperial coin legends to test this hypothesis. It is going to involve a bit of Latin grammar, so bear with me. Perhaps the simplest, or the most familiar, form of **Roman coin legend** is:

- on the obverse, the names and titles of the emperor in question, **written in the nominative case (Fig. 5)** and,
- on the reverse, a figure of some god or goddess, either anonymous or with the name also in the nominative, often with the appendix AVG, standing either for AVGVSTA or AVGVSTI (**Fig. 6**). The formulation of legends of this type seems so bland and repetitive that it has attracted little attention.



Fig. 6.

But what do they actually mean? How should we translate the name of the imperial personage on the obverse of an imperial coin in this form? There seem to me to be two options. Either it is the subject of a sentence (the rest of which is to be understood as "made this" or "caused this to be made"), or it is a label identifying the person on the bust (meaning "this is so-and-so", like the name of the divinity on the reverse of the coin we saw earlier).

Which should we choose, how are we to decide, and what are the implications of our decision? I think we need to look at another, perhaps less familiar, class of Roman coin inscriptions to form a view.

The names of imperial personages are sometimes written in the dative case on Roman coins of the imperial period, meaning "to" or "for" the person concerned. This is of course the common case for dedicatory inscriptions of all kinds, on statues and buildings in particular.





Fig. 7.

Monuments and buildings appear frequently on Roman coins. It might be less widely appreciated that this is a peculiarity of Roman coinage. Building types are almost unknown on Greek coinage before the Roman period. In the Republic, buildings and other monuments were chosen to represent the family history of the moneyer. Under the reign of the first emperor, Augustus (reigned 27 BC–14 AD), it is buildings and monuments dedicated to him by the Senate and People of Rome that take pride of place on the coins (Fig. 7). These representations often have dedications inscribed upon them, imitating in abbreviated form the full-length versions appearing on the monuments themselves. In these coin legends, as on the stones, the name of the emperor often appears in the dative after *S P Q R*: “The Senate and People of Rome to the Emperor [...]”. These coin types are



Fig. 8.

second-hand commemorations of real monuments and of their dedicatory inscriptions.

There are, however, other instances of the use of the dative on coins of Augustus without the presence of a monumental or architectural type to explain its use. One such is this remarkable type showing a triumphal general's *toga picta*, legionary eagle, wreath, and the inscription S P Q R PARENTI CONS[ERVATORI] SVO (**Fig. 8**). It might be argued that this is an oblique reference to some built monument or other. But it seems to me that the lack of an image of one to stand as the object of the dedication implied in the legend, encourages us to read the legend as implying that the coin itself is the thing being dedicated by the Senate to its saviour in recognition of his triumphal victories and his saving deeds on behalf of the state. Just as Republican moneyers transformed the public coinage into visual monuments of their and their families' histories, so the imperial coinage is consequently transformed into a commemoration and celebration of Augustus' achievements.

The use of the name in the dative in imperial coin legends continued sporadically throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD. It occurs frequently on coins made in the name of deceased members of the imperial family – DIVO PIO – for instance, as on this coin (**Fig. 9**), or the more fulsome S P Q R MEMORIAE DOMITILLAE (Flavia Domitilla Maior, under Titus, reigned 79–81 AD, for his mother, **Fig. 10**). These coins are clearly dedicated to the memory of the deceased



imperial personage. But it also continued to be used for living individuals as well. Both Trajan's (reigned 98–117 AD) and Hadrian's (reigned 117–138 AD) coins in particular make frequent use of it on their obverse legends. S P Q R OPTIMO PRINCIPI is one of the most common of Trajan's reverse legends (**Fig. 11**), while Hadrian issued two series of coins that commemorated his visits to various provinces in the empire and his assistance to them, in which the legend is framed in the form of a dative, RESTITUTORI GALLIAE, as here (**Fig. 12**). The use of the dative case on obverse inscriptions is commonest in the 1<sup>st</sup> and early 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD and more common in some reigns than others. Those of Augustus, Trajan, and Hadrian stand out in this regard (**Fig. 13**). In other reigns, it is also, but not always, used for coins struck for imperial princes:

- Nero (\* 37, † 68 AD) under his adoptive father Claudius (reigned 41–54 AD, **Fig. 14**),
- Commodus (\* 161, † 192 AD) under his father Marcus Aurelius (reigned 161–180 AD), and later
- Hannibalian († 337 AD) as nephew, Constantine II (\* 317, † 340 AD) and Crispus (\* 305?, † 326 AD) as sons under Constantine the Great (reigned 306–337 AD).

It is also often used for imperial women, for example:

- Lucilla (\*148 or 149, † 181) under her father Marcus Aurelius and her husband Lucius Verus (common reign 161–169 AD, **Fig. 15**),
- Plautilla († 211) under her father Septimius Severus (reigned 193–211 AD).



Fig. 9.



Fig. 10.



Fig. 11.



Fig. 12.



Fig. 13.



Fig. 14.



Fig. 15.

Now it seems to me that we should take the meaning of these legends seriously, translate them as a group of dedicatory inscriptions, and that we should assume that the thing being dedicated is the coin itself, which honours the emperor and other members of the imperial family, by representing his image and celebrating their virtues and achievements.

If this is thought to be right, then it might have some relevance to the question with which I began: How to translate the nominative inscriptions on the obverse inscriptions of imperial coins and, more broadly, what the legal status of Roman coins was. Let me show you how.

Some dative coin legends suggest that at least sometimes the coins themselves were conceived as being dedicated *to* and made *for* the emperor. Now logically, coins cannot be made both for *and* by the emperor. So, let us return to the dilemma I presented earlier on in the paper, concerning the meaning of the nominative inscriptions on Roman coins as meaning either "Caesar made this" or "this is Caesar". The regular use of dedicatory coin legends, which suggests that Roman coins were offered *to* the emperor by someone or something else, leads me to conclude that **the nominative simply names the imperial person who appears on the coins** and does not mean that he or she made them.



**Fig. 16** (Reverse 90° tilted, to get an easy readable illustration).

Now, this may seem to be an obvious solution to a non-problem. But it seems to me that this conclusion has important implications for the ways in which we



conceive of the significance of imperial coin types and of the coins themselves. The head and name of an imperial personage appear either as a representation of, or dedication to the individual depicted on the coin, and *not* as the authority in whose name the coins were made. Contrast the coins of Hellenistic kings on which the reigning monarch usually appears on the obverse, with his name in the genitive on the reverse (**Fig. 16**), a combination that certainly identifies the king as the authority who caused the coinage to be made. The Roman emperor is *not* represented on the coinage as its issuing authority, nor as its owner. The emperor appears on Roman coins as a public tribute to a great individual, not because the coinage was made by him or in his name. In this, the Roman imperial coinage is actually no different from any number of provincial coinages on which the emperor's image appeared, but whose issuing authority remained the city communities in whose names they were struck (**Fig. 17**).



Fig. 17.

Who then was the **proper issuing authority of the imperial coinage**? The **Senate and People of Rome** is the only available answer. The coinage is made in their name, with their types, the *forma publica*, in the public mints. Throughout the imperial period, in the writings of Roman lawyers the coinage is again and again referred to as “public”, not as imperial. They presume that the coinage remained part of the *res publica*, the commonwealth of the Roman state, and that it did not in theory become a regalian right of emperors as it later did of medieval European kings – the *Münzrecht*.

Now you may say that that's all very well, but what about how things really worked out there in the empire? Didn't people think that the coinage was made in the name of and by the emperor? And anyway, so what? It may indeed have been

the case that the production of coins was still officially conceived as something done by the Senate and People rather than the emperor of Rome, but out there in the towns and cities of the empire, the reality was that people thought that the coins were made by the emperor. We may here recall the famous scene from the Gospel of St. Mark (12.15–17) involving the Pharisees who ask Jesus whether or not it is lawful to pay tax to Caesar, whereupon Jesus holds up a coin and asks them *Whose image and superscription is this?* to which they reply *Caesar's*; and Jesus rejoins *Then pay to God what is God's, and pay to Caesar what is Caesar's*. This exchange suggests that some inhabitants of the empire did think that Roman coins were made by, and belonged to, the emperor, and were understandably quite oblivious to the semantic niceties of Latin coin legends and Roman law and custom. So too, it seems, were the mint workers themselves in Rome, who during the reign of the emperor Trajan set up inscriptions referring to the *Moneta Caesaris Nostris*, Caesar's mint. Clearly everyone, including the people who worked there, thought the coinage was the emperor's business and cared little for the legal theory.

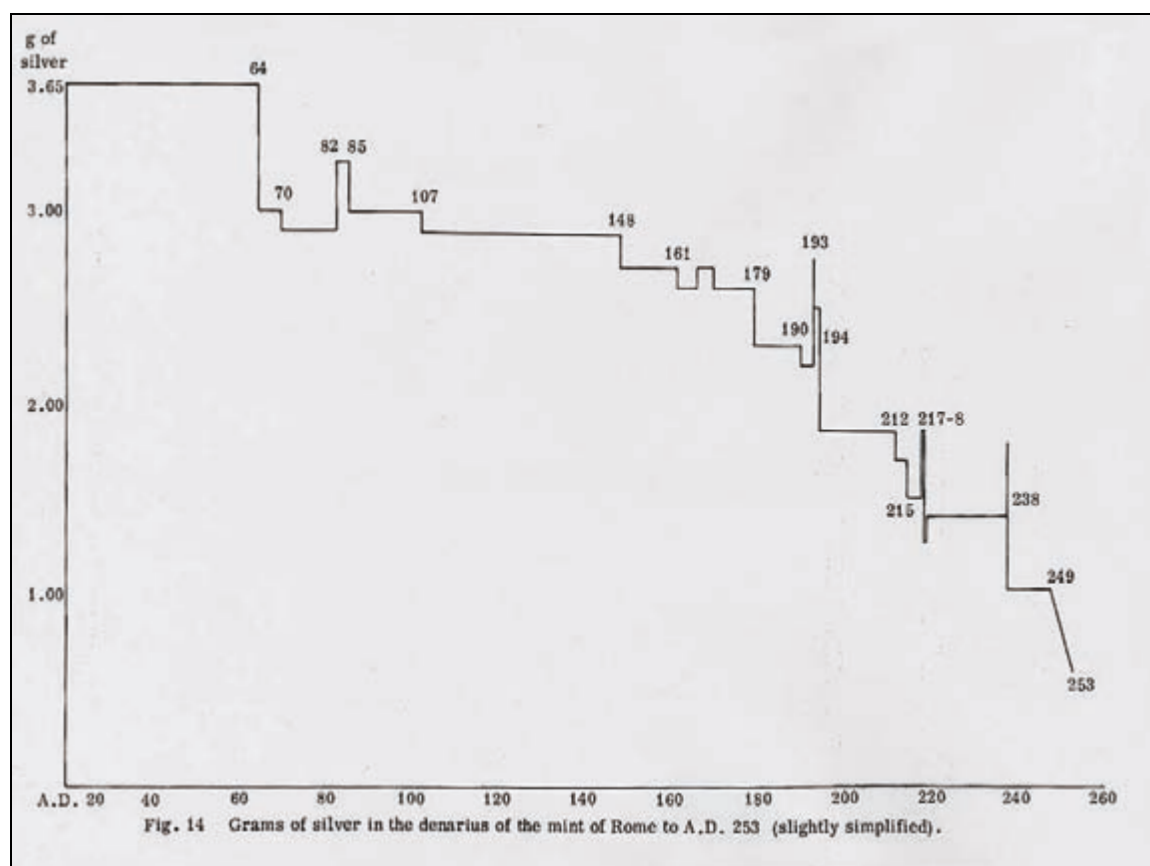


Fig. 18.

But the legal theory persisted right into the 4<sup>th</sup> century and, I suggest, it mattered. While the public reception of the emperor's image on the coin may indeed have readily confused "this is an image of Caesar on a coin" with "this coin belongs to Caesar", nevertheless those who chose the images and designed the coins were probably not so confused. The rhetoric of the coin legends testifies to the legal position, which was that the Roman coinage was not imperial in the sense that Hellenistic coinages were royal, but that it remained public. The dominance of the coinage by imperial imagery and associated language was a prerogative that, like the imperial position itself, remained something that was granted to successive emperors by the appropriate public authorities, the Senate and the People, and not theirs by right. There isn't time to go into this here, but I want to argue elsewhere that the Republican identity of the Roman imperial coinage had at least two significant effects on the way in which the coinage was treated by the emperors in whose hands real, though not absolute, power lay. First, because the tradition of coinage as a public rather than a royal institution remained so strong, emperors were rather reluctant to debase the coinage excessively (**Fig. 18**). Second, it

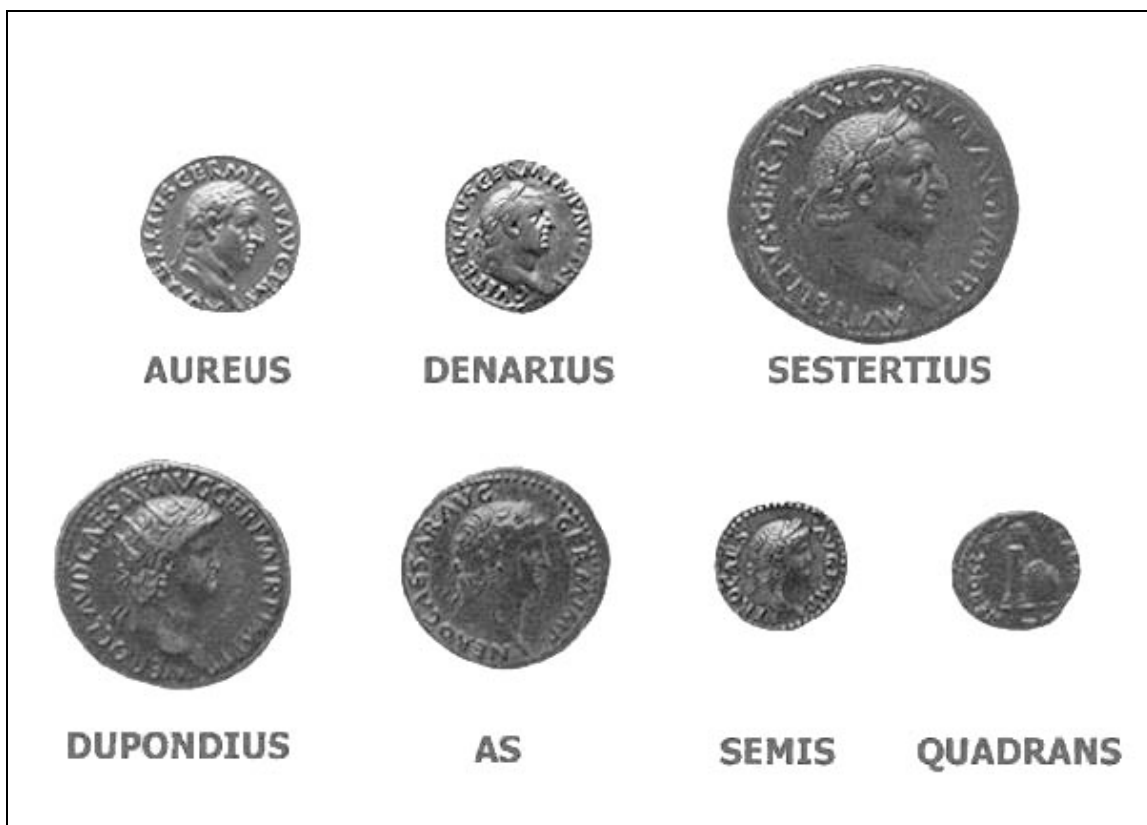


Fig. 19.

encouraged emperors to maintain in circulation a functioning bronze coinage for the benefit of the people (**Fig. 19**). Base metal coinages are notoriously difficult to supply in sufficient quantities in the pre-modern context with no access to automated production. It's costly and time consuming to produce enough of it. So many ancient and medieval states did not really bother. The Roman Empire did bother, partly, I would argue, because the provision of coinage had come to be regarded as an indispensable public duty of the Roman commonwealth, whether republic or monarchy.

It should not come as a surprise that the Roman imperial coinage maintained an essentially Republican identity. Because, after all, the Romans themselves could never quite bring themselves to admit that they were living under a monarchy, or at least that that monarchy did not entail the abandonment of their Republican traditions of the rule of law and constitutionality. As in so many other historical contexts, what happened to the coinage typified so much else about the state that produced it and the society that used it.