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the National Museum of Ravenna
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The Classense Coin Collection***

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Twenty-five years of experience of the National Museum of Ravenna in exposition and didactics: The Classense Coin Collection

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Ravenna is known worldwide for her monuments and mosaics, but this town so rich in history also owns a very important Museum, placed in the monastery of S. Vitale, containing consistent collections of icons, medieval arms, ivories, archaeological finds from the town and territory, which include wonderful mosaics from via d'Azeglio, recently discovered and frescoes from the Church of Santa Chiara, painted by Pietro da Rimini and his school in XIV Century.

In such a rich context, the coin collection risks having a lesser appeal for visitors due to the characteristics of coins and their difficulties of exposition, but thanks to their origin and composition coins are an important historical document and a very fascinating one too.

Classe is the harbour near Ravenna, built by Augustus for his fleet, Ravenna's importance till the end of the Byzantine period and the conquest by the Lombards was due mainly to this, but gradually the harbour and the coast changed together with the role of Ravenna.

In Classe, was placed a very important Benedictine monastery, founded at the end of VI Century, whose monks where forced to leave in 1512 after the battle of Ravenna, and to settle in town. Here Father Pietro Canneti, (1659-1730), began collecting ancient objects and coins, to illustrate the great library, the well known Biblioteca Classense, according to the humanist model.

After Napoleon's arrival and suppression of ecclesiastical orders, the Library and Collections became the property of the Communal Administration and so began the Museo Classense Municipale which, in 1885, became a State Museum and in 1913-14 was transferred to its current location. Only from 1897 onwards, is there record of coins coming from gifts and wills or bought to integrate series and of findings coming from the territory.¹²⁹

In 1924, after having been reordered by S.L.Cesano, Direttore del Medagliere del Museo Nazionale Romano, the Collection was put on display, but in 1970, it was decided to arrange the coins, because the old showcases were in bad condition and the whole Museum had to be restored anyway. In 1977, the scientific cataloguing began and in 1982,

Architetto Anna Maria Jannucci, then Director of the Museum and now Soprintendente, created a new system of showcases-containers (fig.1) which could keep and display the coins, thus making it simpler and safer to study and view them, without displacing them from the exhibition room, a unique wide room with a vaulted roof.

The showcases are perfectly designed to the conditions needed to keep and display objects of a very particular nature like coins: they are composed of a unique safe which in the upper part consists of four glass panels, which can be drawn out, whilst the lower part consists of a chest of drawers to keep non-displayed coins.

One can utilise all four glass panels or fewer, in general the idea is that a few significant coins can be more appreciated and more easily understood. In this way, coins are kept in order and in safe condition, but can be displayed in showcases which show them on both sides, with a cold internal illumination integrated by external beams. The safe provides also side panels for labels.

At the same period, began the scientific cataloguing of the collection, which has now reached more than six thousand pieces, on a whole of about ten thousand. One can presume that the bulk of the Classense Collection reflected finds from an Adriatic area, records about the collection after 1913 confirm this hypothesis which, for some periods, is supported also by coins coming from archaeological excavations.

The most ancient pieces are Greek coins, mostly from the mints of Sicily, Magna Graecia, Macedonia and Tracia, their geographical and chronological composition has suggested that they reflect coin diffusion on Adriatic maritime routes between the VI and I Century AD.¹³⁰

Roman coinage is very consistent, both for republican and for Imperial period. In this case also, the study of the distribution of pieces compared with finding reports and other collections, suggests a good correspondence to circulation in the territory.¹³¹

The programme for the coin collection comprised detailed analysis of specific groups, accompanied by their display.

In 1983, the anniversary of the emperor Justinianus, one of the most interesting sections was displayed in the exhibition «Imperi Romano e Bizantino, Regni Barbarici in Italia attraverso le monete del Museo Nazionale di Ravenna».

Juxtaposing coins in the collection with archaeological finds it was possible to reconstruct the circulation of the period and to define many specific problems of attribution and chronology.¹³²

The exhibition's aim was to describe the period of Ravenna's greatest splendour and historical importance, from the beginning of its role as capital for Honorius, at the beginning of the V century A.D. through the fall of the Western Empire and Ostrogothic occupation, the Byzantine domination and its end at the arrival of the Lombard Astolfo. Byzantine coins till the XII century were also included.

It was intended as an exhibition which could be appreciated by every visitor to the Museum and above all by the local public, in particular students of every age, so attention was devoted to colour enlargements and to didactic panels. Typological and economic aspects were illustrated, following major historical evolutions, depicting changes in the idea of the Empire, the emerging role of Christianity, the dissolution of administrative structures and the restriction of the settlement, and function of Ravenna as a door towards the eastern Empire. These themes were developed, together with specific analysis also in the introduction to the catalogue.

To make aspects of the monetary system and its typological significance more easily understandable, the exhibition's first section was dedicated to the evolution of the Roman monetary system from republican times to the end of the IV century AD. The exhibition was also accompanied by a booklet presenting the texts of the didactic panels and enlargements, that school teachers could utilise afterwards for observations and remarks.¹³³

Following the plan of displaying the whole collection, another section, chronologically consecutive was scientifically analysed and displayed in 1997. As one can immediately understand from the title: «Il gruzzolo di via Luca Longhi. Città, monete e mercanti nel medioevo», the central nucleus is a hoard found in Ravenna in 1957 consisting of 665 coins, coming from some principal Italian mints, whose production circulated in an area comprising the whole Emilia Romagna and part of the Marche.

The study of this hoard was the occasion to analyse medieval coins in the Collection, thus completing the preceding section and reconstructing a general picture of monetary circulation in Ravenna and her territories from the VIII to XV century.¹³⁴

Some innovations were introduced in the exhibiting system at the entrance of the room. Two work stations were installed for consulting a CD-ROM entitled «Coins from ancient times to the Medieval age», in which a brief text confronts the idea of «money» in modern times with that of ancient times and traces a history of coinage to Charles the Great's reforms, illustrating this with images of coins kept in the collection, accompanied by descriptions and short comments.

In front of the entrance has been placed the extant part of a sarcophagus of the II century A.D., found in Ravenna, representing an *argentarius* at his *mensa*, on which coins are partly visible. This will stay constantly there as an immediate identification of the numismatic exposition and as a reminder of the power of money and its function in defining aspects of an historical moment.

Some themes are treated by means of displayed coins and panels. First: what is a hoard and who could be the owner of this particular hoard? A well-known reproduction of a code depicting a man hiding two pots full of coins by the light of the moon, accompanies a reconstruction of the way in which the coins and the rest of a pot appeared in 1957 to the workers demolishing a wall.

An ancient map of Ravenna indicates the little road in which the finding took place. Until the end of the XIX century it was called «Via del Ghetto», and the reproduction of a page of a land register of the XIII century shows that at this period there was an *hortus in quo sepeliuntur Judaei*. Was the owner a Jew? Texts and images illustrate the work of money changers and the importance of Jews in the Middle Ages as money changers and money lenders. This kind of profession was forbidden to Christians, indeed, for the Christian religion, money lending at interest was a sin against nature, because, as the Bible said, man had to live off the work of his hands, money could not generate other money.

The reproduction of a document containing the confession of a certain Biondo, who admits having lent money at interest, and being ill, promises to give back the interest, shows that in Ravenna, as in other Italian towns, Christians nonetheless acted as money lenders. Other documents show the presence in Ravenna of money changers from many other Italian towns and the beginning of *Monti di Pietà*, or of *Monti Pubblici*, public Banks for lending to poor people.

The little coins scattered between the rest of the pot have suddenly opened a window onto the ancient town and the life of its inhabitants, but we can discover more by continuing to read them and the others coins kept in the Museum, together with documents and images.

At the beginning of the period, between the VIII and IX century, we can trace the scarce use of Carolingian *denarii*, in a territory where the great ecclesiastical possessions composed of marsh lands and woods were used for hunting and fishing and rented by *pensiones*. Gradually, as cities became more populated and commercial life was again diffused, little debased *denarii* from the imperial mints of Venice, Verona and, later, Lucca circulated and were requested in contracts in Bologna, Imola, Ravenna, Rimini, and Ancona.

In the second half of the XII century, the beginning of independent coinages on the base of mint privileges conceded by the emperors, accompanied the commercial expansion of cities and their growing autonomy. Ravenna had many mint concessions over time, the later one is reproduced, together with one of the first documents demanding payments in *denarii ravennates*, at the side of the showcases with related coins.

The coins in the hoard and the others in the museum speak of commercial life in Ravenna and other towns of the area. Bologna is the most important partner, as documents confirm, but later in the XV century, Venice and Florence have a strong presence too.

In different showcases, a short history of every mint is depicted. And again, as in the Roman world, coinage is not only the mark of an economic reality, but an important ideological and political document. Coin types are authority's seals. The first autonomous types reproducing the name of the emperor who had given the right of coinage and the name of the city are very similar to little official documents.

Finally, the exhibition deals with the reappearance of figurative typology between the XIII and XIV century, starting with Venice's matapan who borrowed his types – Christ enthroned and St. Mark with the Doge – from Byzantine coinage. In concurrence with Venice, Ancona coined grossi with her protector S. Quiriacus, a gravestone's reproduction from Ancona's Cathedral. A XII-century image of the Bishop with tiara and pastoral, shows that this was the prototype for the coin type. *Agontani*, as were called those *grossi* of the value of two *soldi*, were coined in many other cities, connected by commerce, but the adoption of this type had also an ideological meaning.

Reproductions of statues, paintings and prints, show that the monetary image of the Bishop who appears on *Agontani* coined in Bologna (S. Petronius), Rimini (S. Gaudencius), and Arezzo (S. Donatus), responds to the importance given in this period to a civic Saint identified in a Bishop, as a tentative expression of independence from papal power.

In Ravenna's *Agontani*, the Bishop's image recalls the power of this religious authority, which was at this moment much less than in the preceding centuries.

Despite their little dimensions and the great amount of specific knowledge that they require for understanding, coins can be a very rich and immediate historical source, the same is true for medals, whose reordering began in 1999.

As a first result, at the conclusion of *Jubilaeum* at the end of 2000, the exhibition «Il Giubileo e i suoi simboli: Le medaglie del Museo Nazionale di

Ravenna»¹³⁵ traced, by means of types of contemporary papal medals, the main themes of this celebration through the centuries. Medals are illustrated by panels reproducing prints, paintings, statues and texts that give a complete idea of the history and the significance of the celebration.

This exhibition together with other sections of the collection, specifically chosen to illustrate thematic aspects, is used in practical lessons for the students of the Faculty of Conservation of the Cultural Heritage of the University of Bologna, for students of lower and upper schools and in Refreshers Courses for teachers.

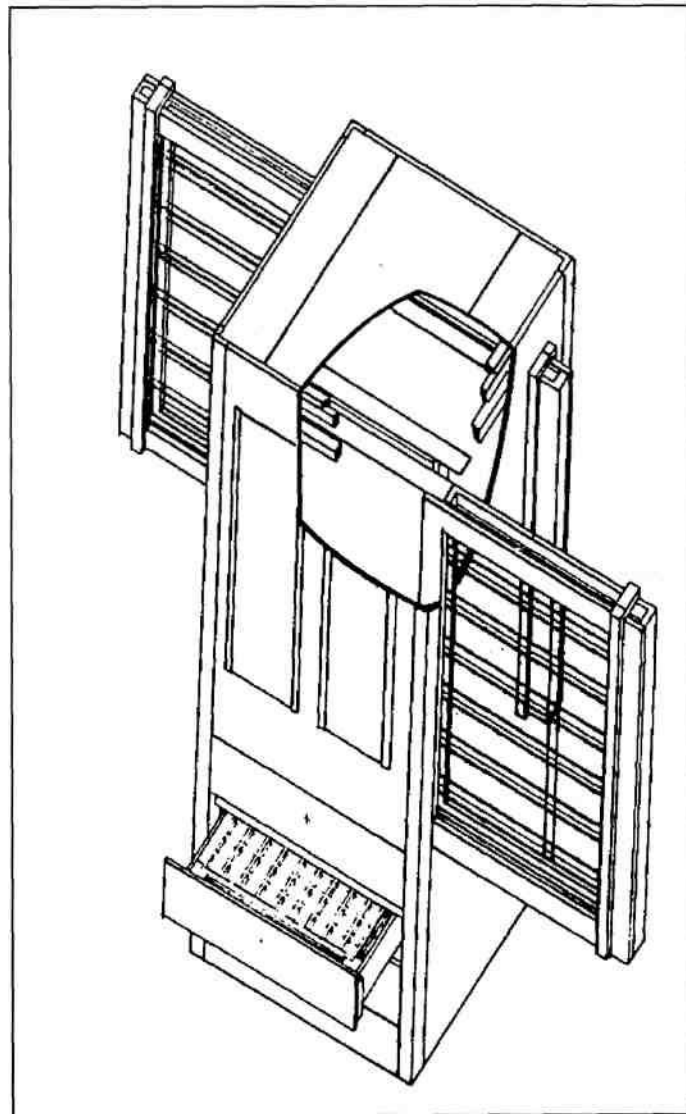


FIG. 1 A new system of showcases/containers
Photographic Archive, Soprintendenza per i beni architettonici e paesaggistici, Ravenna.

ENDNOTES

¹²⁹ A.M.Iannucci, Progetto: Museo. Fase: «Collezione Numismatica», in AA.VV. *Imperi Romano e Bizantino, Regni barbarici in Italia attraverso le monete del Museo Nazionale di Ravenna*. Faenza 1983, pp.13-15

¹³⁰ E.Ercolani Cocchi, «Presenze monetali in Adriatico fra VI e I secolo a.C: ipotesi dai materiali del Museo Nazionale di Ravenna», in *Congresso Internazionale di Numismatica*, Bruxelles 1991, Bruxelles 1994

¹³¹ E.Ercolani Cocchi, «La moneta come fonte per la storia del territorio ravennate», in *Storia di Ravenna, vol.1, L'evo antico, Venezia*, 1990, pp.363-373

¹³² E.Ercolani Cocchi, «Catalogo e saggio introduttivo», in AA. VV. *Imperi Romano e Bizantino, Regni barbarici in Italia attraverso le monete del Museo Nazionale di Ravenna*. Faenza 1983.

¹³³ La, M.T.Gulinelli, A.Morelli, *La monetazione romana, esempi dal Museo Nazionale di Ravenna*, Faenza, 1983

¹³⁴ E.Ercolani Cocchi, «Moneta ed economia a Ravenna dal periodo longobardo all'inizio della dominazione veneziana», in E. Ercolani Cocchi, a cura di, *Il gruzzolo di via Luca Longhi a Ravenna. Città, monete e mercanti nel Medioevo*, Ravenna 1997, pp.11-18; A.Morelli, «11 Gruzzolo di via Luca Longhi a Ravenna», *Introduzione e Catalogo*, Ibidem; E. Ercolani Cocchi, «Note di circolazione monetaria in area emiliano romagnola e marchigiana», in *Local coins, foreign coins: Italy and Europe 11th-15th centuries, The second Cambridge Numismatic Symposium*, Cambridge 1997, a cura di Lucia Travaini, Milano 1999, pp.343- 380

¹³⁵ A. Morelli, «La storia dei Giubilei attraverso le monete del Museo Nazionale di Ravenna» in E. Ercolani Cocchi, a cura di, *Il Giubileo e i suoi simboli. La fonte numismatica e le medaglie del Museo Nazionale di Ravenna*, Collana di Numismatica e scienze affini 3, Milano 2000, pp.45-123