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Portraits

500 Years of Roman Coin Portraits

Introduction

Andreas Pangerl

The portrait of politicians of the late Republic such as Julius Caesar, and of the Roman emperors in the centuries after him was distributed broadly to the Roman people through multiple media, such as sculpture, paintings, various objects of daily life, and especially coins (Figs. 1–7). This 'branding' of the image of the emperor included also portraits of their families, often linked to dynastic propaganda messages. Of all these media only coins survive in large quantity making them an ideal source for the study of Roman portrait types.

This book is addressed to researchers, numismatists and classical archaeologists, collectors, as well as the interested broader public. It is comprised of two parts:

The first part of this book is a comprehensive catalog of portrait types on Roman coins showing large size images of every member of the imperial family ever presented on Roman imperatorial and imperial coins. It covers thus the wide range of Roman portrait types from the late Republic to the end of Roman rule in the West. All coins in this catalog were chosen based on their portrait type, artistic quality and condition.

The second part of the book consists of 14 articles on Roman portraiture, covering individual emperors and their families from Augustus to the end of the Western Roman Empire.

Portrait Research on Coins

From the beginning of the Roman Empire, presenting the image of the emperor and his family was a core element in imperial propaganda. The stability of their rule depended heavily on their acceptance by the Roman military and the Roman people (in that order). The most critical phase of Roman rule was the transfer of power from one emperor to his successor; this could be his son, natural or adoptive, or one of their generals through a *coup d'etat*. All new emperors took great care in presenting their image to the empire immediately.

One of the key media channels used to transmit the image and political agenda of the emperor was Roman coinage. Traditionally one side was reserved for the image of the emperor or a family member, while the other side conveyed a specific official message; this could be a military victory, gods reflecting political agendas, buildings, major achievements, etc. Coins were an ideal medium, as new emissions were issued on a regular basis, minted in huge quantities, quickly distributed, broadly used even beyond the borders of the empire, and also stayed in circulation for long periods of time – allowing an emperor to 'coin' his image far beyond his reign for decades, and even centuries. Even today most of us would recognize the face of Nero!

When an emperor accessed the throne, or a new portrait type was needed, the central imperial administration likely created an archetype, maybe a painting or a sculpture, which was then transferred to and distributed via different media. As mentioned above one can assume that the key portrait media in Roman days were sculpture, paintings, objects of daily military and civilian life, and especially coins (Figs. 1–7). Despite limitations due to small size and mass production, coins are particularly valuable for the research of portrait types. They were issued in huge quantities, survived the centuries in large numbers, always show 'official' portraits, carry the name of the emperor, and are often dated. The same cannot be said for the other portrait media, where the common lack of context and the tendency of Romans to imitate imperial types for private portraits, as well as multiple parallel provincial styles make it often very challenging to confirm the attribution of a portrait to an emperor. The other media were perhaps also more affected than coins by the destruction of images of emperors who fell under the *damnatio memoriae* (this means the eradication of inscriptions as well as images). Coins of damned emperors remained in circulation at least in remote parts of the empire and can still be found in treasure hoards. This means that numismatic portraits of many more individuals are available on coins than in any other media. For instance for Geta we have hardly any surviving sculpture or painting, but an abundance of coins which allow us to analyze and define his portrait types.

Most Romans never saw the emperor in person, so recognition was best achieved by presenting the emperors name and a 'branded' portrait. Official portrait types will have had some resemblance to the emperor, although that was likely only of secondary importance. More important was the intended political message. Some typical examples of political messages expressed through imperial portraits are 1) to show the 'maturity' of a young emperor by adding a beard, 2) the 'energy' of an older emperor by using a young portrait, 3) 'dynastic continuity' presenting portraits of his heir and son,

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Nero (54–68), Sestertius, Av., 65, Lugdunum. RIC 436 (Katalog 118, s. Abb./Fig. 5).)