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Autor: Cheung, Ada
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The Political Significance of Roman Imperial Coin Types¹

Ada Cheung

AHM Jones' seminal article of 1956² delineated the fundamental paradox of Roman coin types, which numismatists and historians have been grappling with since. On the one hand, it is almost a truism to state that these coins contain a wealth of political information which can often be dated to a single year of issue, but on the other there is the unsettling paucity of independent proof that these messages effectively reached contemporary audiences.

The conclusion that coin types were not read by Romans as a source of political information is fundamentally unsatisfactory, since it does not adequately address the rationale behind the deliberate incorporation of political content into type designs. There is no monetary reason why Roman coinage did not simply follow the precedent of the Greek city states in developing distinctive, generic types which could remain relatively static; as demonstrated by Hellenistic coinage, the aspect of personal authority could easily be accommodated through portrait obverses, leaving no administrative reason for the expense of changing types to accommodate references to political events³. Jones appears largely to have ignored this issue; and Crawford's attempt to reconcile these aspects has resulted in the implausible and self-contradictory suggestion that while the 'intensely competitive oligarchy' induced those who could to display their 'private badges' on the coinage, 'questions about the reception of this coinage by those who saw it probably did not arise'⁴. Any form of competitive self-aggrandizement surely assumes an audience both of inferiors to be impressed, and rivals to be discomfited⁵.

The proposition that the political content of imperial types was due primarily to a rather reflexive process in which mint officials presented the princeps with a favourable representation of himself⁶, cannot stand alone, although it does suggest an appealing solution to the question of direct imperial influence. All of the types struck on imperial coinage were undoubtedly designed to be acceptable to the princeps, for only a suicidal mint official would have produced a personification of Paranoia Caesaris. The hypothesis, however, that coinage was thus primarily a medium of flattery is problematic, particularly because there were much more immediate and less logistically complex means for sycophantic expression, and also for the tacit assumption that the princeps personally inspected the products of all of the major mints.

That the Romans did at least notice the designs on their coinage seems by now beyond doubt. The passages of Arrian⁷, and the famous example in the New Testament⁸ are anecdotal evidence of attention paid to obverse types; in addition, passages of Suetonius⁹, Eusebius¹⁰, Socrates¹¹, and the archaeological discovery in the mast step of a ship of an aes with a Fortuna reverse¹², indicate that reverse types were not ignored. While the question of whether persons such as the superstitious shipwrights and sailors made the essentially political connection between the portrait of Domitian on the obverse and the personified Virtue on the reverse

- 1 This article owes much to Mr Saul Bastomsky, Dr Peter Bicknell, and Prof. John Melville-Jones; also to the generosity of Dr Barbara Levick and Dr Duncan Fishwick for providing the texts of their respective E. Togo Salmon Conference papers prior to publication. All opinion and error remain mine alone. A version of this paper was delivered at the Australian Society for Classical Studies 20th Conference, University of Sydney, 1997.
- 2 A.H.M. Jones, Numismatics and History, in *Essays in Roman Coinage Presented to Harold Mattingly* (1956, Aalen 1979), 13-33.
- 3 See C.H.V. Sutherland, The Intelligibility of Roman Imperial Coin Types, *JRS* 49, 1959, 50; M.H. Crawford, Roman Coin Types and Public Opinion, in *Studies in numismatic method presented to Philip Grierson* (Cambridge 1983), 59.
- 4 Crawford (note 3), 59.
- 5 See for example B. Levick, The Message of the Roman Coinage: Types and Inscriptions, paper delivered at the Second E. Togo Salmon Conference (MacMaster University 1995): *Fama, gloria*, and *τιμή* do involve an audience. In the Republic the prime audience for the élite was rival members and *invidia* was their reaction. It remained so under the Empire'. [Cited by kind permission of the author.]
- 6 B. Levick, Propaganda and the Imperial Coinage, *Antichthon* 16, 1982, 108.
- 7 Arrian, *Discourses of Epictetus* 3.3.3; 3.5.17.
- 8 Mark, 12:15.
- 9 Suetonius, Augustus 94; Nero 25.
- 10 Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 4.73.
- 11 Socrates, *History of the Church* 3.17; see also A. Burnett, *Coinage in the Roman World* (London 1987) 66-70.
- 12 Crawford (note 3), 50-1.

is a matter for conjecture, there is no doubting the political implications the (presumably private) *damnatio memoriae* inflicted on individual obverse portraits of Nero and Geta¹³. There are also various Rabbinic similes which equate coinage with power, most notably Levi's dictum that an impious man may be compared to one who minted his own coinage in the very palace of the king, whereupon the king orders the defacement of the effigy and the cancellation of the coinage¹⁴.

Indisputable proof that at least someone appreciated the political significance of coin types is provided by the uniquely Roman phenomenon of restoration issues. Crawford suggests that the reverses struck in 82-80 BCE are restorations of originals from 127 BCE, resurrected in honour of the original moneyers¹⁵; then there is the politically stunning restoration, struck during 68-9 CE, of Brutus' Ides of March type; and finally, the adoption of official restoration series by the Flavian mint. The basic question thus seems to be not the existence of the message, but its audience and reception.

Intelligibility

The first matter which arises is that of intelligibility. Imperial types continued the trend of the Late Republic against the esoteric designs of the Middle Republic, such as P. Cethegus' wholly inexplicable male figure in a Phrygian cap riding a goat¹⁶. Several layers of meaning, dependent on the individual viewer's degree of education and political sophistication, may be seen to exist concurrently in almost all imperial types. Toynbee has commented that the numismatic pictorial language was drawn from a wider vocabulary common to all forms of visual art, and would thus have consisted of familiar symbols and *topoi*¹⁷; imperial types thus appear to have been designed to be accessible to a wide audience, in marked contrast to the mysterious symbolism of pieces such as the Tazza Farnese and the Portland Vase.

The flexibility of interpretation is most easily demonstrated with reference to the appearance of various Virtues¹⁸ on coinage. Instead of being comprehensible solely as philosophical abstracts, these depictions could be understood on the very simple level as positive attributes of the principate as the governing power¹⁹; a marginally more politically complex view is of Virtues as benefits conferred specifically by the particular princeps depicted on the obverse²⁰. The degree to which the available gamut of political, philosophical, and historical connections and connotations may be read into a type is thus wholly dependent on the level of intellectual sophistication of the individual viewer, with the élite sections of the Roman community fully conversant with imperial Virtues through religious rites, as well as through Greek philosophy²¹. An apt example of this is the Claudian depiction of Spes Augusta on sestertii²². Spes associated with Claudius may variously be seen as celebrating the birth of Britannicus in 41 CE, or as an allusion to Claudius' birthday on the festival of Spes²³, or, more generally, as the princeps' self-advertisement of his own person as the hope of the Augustan empire after the reign of Gaius.

A similar breadth of accessibility may be seen with regard to anniversary coinage. Although the full associations²⁴ of such types are likely to have been

13 D. Salzmann, *Vespasian statt Nero – ein numismatischer Palimpsest*, *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 1984, 295-9; Crawford (note 3), 55-6. The first example of defacement is particularly problematic since the efforts to make the bust of Nero resemble Vespasian did not include any attempt to alter the inscription; and both are puzzling in that the coins involved are rendered useless as currency through the actual removal of metal, a result not found in cases official *damnatio memoriae* inflicted with disfiguring a chisel-blow.

14 Midrash Rabbah, Genesis (Noach), 36.7

15 RRC 187-8.

16 RRC 288.1.

17 J.M.C. Toynbee, *Picture-Language in Roman art and coinage*, in *Essays in Roman Coinage*, 205-26.

18 The current work follows J.R. Fears in using the term 'Virtues' to denote any personified concept.

19 See Fears, *The cult of Virtues and Roman imperial ideology*, *ANRW* 2.17.2, 841; A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Image and Authority in the Coinage of Augustus*, *JRS* 76, 1986, 69, 76-7. Even more simplistically, Virtues on coinage could be seen merely as the depiction of a tutelary deity.

20 See A. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Emperor and his Virtues*, *Historia* 30, 1981, 315-16; *idem* *Image and Authority* (note 19), 69-70, 76.

21 Wallace-Hadrill, *The Emperor and his Virtues* (note 20), 316-17.

22 RIC (1984) Claudius 99.

23 Burnett (note 11), 78.

24 Comprehensively documented by M. Grant in *Roman Anniversary Issues* (Cambridge 1950).

apparent only to an upper-class minority, all the designs produced on these occasions are perfectly comprehensible on a much simpler plane. While, for example, the awareness that the *aes* issues from the mint of Rome in 34-5 CE²⁵ mark the *vicennium* both of Tiberius' principate and the consecration of Divus Augustus²⁶ adds an additional layer of political significance, each of these types may fully be appreciated without the anniversary factor, as straightforward advertisements of the princeps as *pontifex maximus* and the holder of the *tribunicia potestas*.

This facet also seems to offer an interesting example of the ability of Octavian/Augustus to appear to be all things to all men. The projection of both pro-Caesar and Republican themes was not mutually exclusive with regard to the coinage of 43 and 42 BCE. Two of these types, one bearing a portrait of the Dictator²⁷ and the other his curule chair²⁸, appear initially to be pro-Caesarean. Ramage, though, has pointed out that a contrast may be drawn between Octavian's modestly bare head, and Caesar's crowned bust, which is reinforced by the inscription reminding the viewer of the latter's title of *Dictator Perpetuus*²⁹. On the other hand, the assassinated Caesar was already being treated as a god by the plebs at least³⁰, so the crown could instead be interpreted as a symbol of his impending official deification. A similar duality of interpretation may be seen in the reverse depicting the curule chair reserved in perpetuity for Caesar. To the *optimates* this represented yet more evidence of unacceptable regal aspirations³¹, but Caesareans could have equated this with Octavian's repeated attempts to display the chair as a cult object³². The ambiguity of Octavian's numismatic propaganda is thus highly sophisticated, allowing the interpretation to depend on the individual viewer's political inclinations.

Immediacy

The next question is that of immediacy. The notion of coin types acting as a medium of mass communication to disseminate political news, more often assumed than explicitly proposed, becomes untenable with a consideration of the interval between a politically significant event and the production and circulation of the associated coinage. The degree of apparent immediacy is surely relative to other ancient forms of concrete media such as monuments and statues.

That the imperial mints were capable of rapid production of specific types is undoubted. The best example is the numismatic output of Otho, since the very short duration of his entire principate removes all possibility that any of his coinage could have been retrospectively dated for cosmetic purposes. As both the fabric and the style of these coins are uniform and without the inconsistencies and errors which betray the hurried nature of Clodius Macer's coinage, it may be assumed that the three month term of this principate was ample time for the Roman mint to execute coinage of high quality. Even more specifically, the PONT MAX coinage³³ could only have been produced during the period from Otho's assumption of the pontificate, dated precisely by Sutherland to 9 March³⁴, to the Senate's recognition of Vitellius on 19 April. A die-link study of Otho's coinage would be very interesting indeed.

25 RIC (1984) Tiberius 52-7.

26 Grant (note 24), 43-5.

27 RRC 490.2.

28 RRC 497.2a-d.

29 E.S. Ramage, Augustus' treatment of Julius Caesar, *Historia* 34, 1985, 224-6.

30 See Suetonius, Caesar 85.

31 See S. Weinstock, *Divus Julius* (Oxford 1971), 281-2.

32 Appian, *Civil Wars* 3.4.28.

33 RIC (1984) Otho 18-24.

34 In RIC (1984) 261.

Circulation

The question of circulation remains. While it seems to have been possible to produce new types within a six-week period, it is unlikely that any of the coins in question could have circulated far beyond their initial recipients. Imperial types, however, unlike modern election slogans, seem never to have been intended solely for transient political purposes. While all of the designs were immediately topical, the few which are exclusively so to the point of risking obsolescence are clear anomalies. Regardless of the obscurity of some of the finer details, these designs were not produced with a definite life-span beyond which the fundamental point became incomprehensible or wholly irrelevant. Designs such as the Iudaea Capta type or the technically Republican Ides of March coin clearly have a commemorative status which extended far beyond their immediate political context. The same Iudaea Capta types were still being struck for Titus a full decade after the fall of Jerusalem, and the Ides of March design was revived a century later to celebrate the fall of the Dictator's great-great-grand-nephew. The timelessness of both examples is best illustrated by their continued intelligibility to modern viewers armed with a bare minimum of historical knowledge.

With very few exceptions, types struck to commemorate specific events and occasions bear clear legends. For example, the significance of the pictorial type struck for Nerva of two mules grazing before a cart³⁵ is explained by the accompanying inscription VEHICVLATIONE ITALIAE REMISSA SC. The legend seems to have served an immediate purpose in advertizing the benefit to those who were not directly affected, and, perhaps more important, the type is thus prevented from falling into obscurity once the tax remission itself ceased to be of current import.

A clue to the political purpose of Roman imperial types may lie in the role of coinage during the Middle and Late Republic. The claim that 'the educated classes had something better to read than two or three words on a denarius'³⁶ ignores the fact that Republican politicians had used coinage since roughly 170 BCE as a weapon in the self-aggrandizing activity of political competition, a process which must include the assumption that peers formed an audience for these numismatic displays³⁷. While the admittedly unsubstantiated hypothesis concerning the influence on Vespasian of his earlier career as a moneyer does seem far-fetched³⁸, the point remains that the moneyer's post of *triumvir a.a.f.f.* was part of the *cursus honorum* of the principate, and thus, a certain consciousness of coin types would have continued to be part of the aristocratic *Weltanschauung*.

Monuments in miniature

The Republican tradition of producing what may loosely be termed self-aggrandizing types leads towards the interpretation of Roman coins as monuments in miniature. Their relevance was similar to the possession of *imagines* in one's atrium – past achievements reflected glory on the living descendant. It has even been proposed that specimens of such coins may have found a place amongst the

35 BMCRE Nerva 119-21.

36 Jones (note 2), 15.

37 See for example N. Hannestad, *Roman Art and Imperial Policy* (Aarhus 1988), 21.

38 T.V. Buttrey, *Vespasian as Moneyer*, NC 132, 1972, 89-109.

ancestral busts³⁹, and it is only a small step from the evocation of past benefactions to the advertisement of contemporary achievements.

Arguably in the same fashion as monumental architecture, public art, and epigraphy, the contemporary impact of coinage may have been equalled, if not surpassed, by the commemorative aspect. Just as a triumphal arch was surely intended as much, if not more, for posterity as for contemporaries, so all imperial types seem deliberately to have been designed to remain comprehensible for an indefinite period. They may thus be seen as monuments in miniature, each coin being a small physical commemoration of an aspect of a particular principate. Tiberius' *Clementia* coinage, therefore, is no less a monument than the altar erected by the Senate to the same Virtue, and both allowed the princeps to be associated with *Clementia* long after the initial provocation – such as the Libo Drusus affair – had lapsed from the public mind.

Sutherland's statement that 'coin types could at least help to tell people if they were getting [ethical and efficient government], for they were statements of self-justification which could be judged against an independent knowledge of facts'⁴⁰ may be amended to the suggestion that numismatic messages were part of an exercise in self-glorification which told the public that it *was* getting specific aspects of good government, and also recorded this for posterity. While Sutherland does not himself make the distinction, the associated comment that the veracity of the numismatic messages could be 'judged against an independent knowledge of the facts'⁴¹ is more applicable to retrospective evaluation; the appearance of *Pax* on coinage struck during times of turmoil is an historical irony rather than the dissemination of deliberate untruth, since each princeps concerned must have hoped (along with the general population), that his reign would indeed herald the return of peace to the empire.

Given the relative speed and ease of striking new coinage as opposed to the construction of larger monuments, this also goes some way to explaining why all reigns, no matter how short, produced considerable amounts of coinage, independent of purely fiscal considerations. This view of coin types also renders much more intelligible Dio's comment that one of Vitellius' praiseworthy acts was to keep his immediate predecessors' coinage in circulation⁴². Mass withdrawal of coinage during continued civil upheaval would have been highly inadvisable on purely economic grounds, and numismatic denigration of Nero and Galba is inconsistent with Vitellius' policy as demonstrated in other areas. The destruction, however, of Otho's types in particular would have been tantamount to a comprehensive *damnatio memoriae* of a principate which had no time to produce any other monument beyond a simple tomb at Bedriacum.

The hypothesis that coins acted as monuments in miniature seems also to account for the phenomenon of the numismatic depiction of projected or wholly imaginary temples⁴³. Since the striking of a coin bearing the picture of a temple is clearly much quicker than the erection of the edifice itself, the production of these types may be seen as a half-way measure within the process of construction, which would have allowed the political benefits of the monument to be reaped considerably earlier. Less immediately, coinage bearing architectural types may also have been intended to advertize and commemorate existence of the structure depicted. The commemorative aspect seems to be emphasized by examples

39 Levick, *The Message of the Roman Coinage* (note 5).

40 C.H.V. Sutherland, *The Purpose of Roman Imperial Coin Types*, RN 25, 1983, 82.

41 *Ibid.*

42 Dio, *Histories* 65.6.1.

43 D. Fishwick, *Coins as Evidence: Some Phantom Temples*, EMC 27 (new series 3), 1984, 263-70; *idem*, *Coinage and Cult: The Provincial Monuments at Lugdunum, Tarraco and Emerita*, paper delivered at the Second E. Togo Salmon Conference, 1995.

such as the splendid sestertius reverse type bearing the aerial depiction of Nero's new harbour at Ostia; while the type is itself innovative and unique, the design is stylized to the extent that structural details are in fact inaccurate⁴⁴. The process of attempting to reconstruct ancient monuments from numismatic depictions is, as pointed out by Fishwick⁴⁵, hopeful at best, since photographic verisimilitude seems less important than the production of a type which was instantly recognizable as a generic representation of the monument concerned. Similarly, the numismatic depiction of a standard arch, topped with statuary, and clearly labelled DE BRITANN⁴⁶, could not have borne any resemblance to the real arch, since Claudius, in a rather ostentatiously pragmatic move, had had this arch built into the substructure of the Aqua Virgo⁴⁷.

It may therefore be suggested that the explanatory legends which invariably form part of event-specific types were primarily intended not for the edification of those contemporaries who did not understand the pictorial type, but for later generations. Much of the question of ancient literacy in relation to the intelligibility of coinage may be therefore something of a red herring. In close correlation particularly with official epigraphy, both the symbolism and the inscriptions on imperial types seem directed in the first instance towards the ruling classes, whether within the capital itself, or in the provinces. The intended audience of imperial coin types in general seems to be much the same as that for Augustus' *Res Gestae* as suggested in Yavetz's compelling evaluation⁴⁸. The main division in this audience is therefore not social, but temporal; numismatic propaganda is consistently aimed at the politically active upper echelons of society – the princeps depended on the co-operation of contemporary members for stability during his reign, and entrusted to their descendants his posthumous reputation.

The opinions of Charlesworth's 'farmer in Gaul, corn shipper in Africa, and shopkeeper in Syria'⁴⁹ were largely insignificant beyond the basic acknowledgement, made through their acceptance of imperial currency as legal tender, that the obverse portrait symbolized both economic and political power. The fact that coinage, like architecture, reached a relatively wide social range⁵⁰ does not necessarily mean that views of those in the bottom strata were worthy of official consideration.

Control of type design

In contrast to monumental architecture which was produced only on specific occasions, the Roman economy depended on a relatively constant supply of fresh coinage, which entailed frequent choice of types. Since it seems reasonably certain that the imperial moneyers retained, most probably under the wider supervision of an imperial freedman *a rationibus*⁵¹, the direct control over type designs⁵² which they had exercised during the Republic, the main question centres on their professional relationship with the princeps in design matters. Burnett has drawn a close connection between Republican moneyers and the consuls which clearly suggests that the moneyers were not elected, but personally appointed by consuls who made their choice primarily on the basis of nepotism⁵³. The nature

44 R. Reece, *Coins and Medals*, in *A Handbook of Roman Art* (London 1983), 176-7.

45 Fishwick, *Coins as Evidence* (note 43).

46 RIC (1984) Claudius 30, 44-5.

47 See B. Levick, *Claudius* (Yale 1990), 108.

48 Z. Yavetz, *The Res Gestae and Augustus' Public Image*, in *Caesar Augustus. Seven Aspects* (Oxford 1984), 1-36. It is not necessary, however, also to accept his statement that the short numismatic slogans are intrinsically populist (*ibid.* 13).

49 M.P. Charlesworth, *The Virtues of a Roman Emperor: Propaganda and the creation of Belief*, *Proc. Brit. Ac.* 23, 1937, 108. See also Wallace-Hadrill, *The Emperor and his Virtues* (note 20), 299, 317.

50 Wallace-Hadrill, *ibid.* 316-17.

51 Statius, *Silvae* 3.3.85-9; 103-6.

52 *Ibid.* 3.3.86-105; Levick, *Propaganda and the Imperial Coinage* (note 6), 107-8. The present view accepts Wallace-Hadrill's hypothesis concerning the directly proportional increase of moneyers' anonymity and the growth of Augustan autocracy (*Image and Authority* [note 19], 77-83), and that the retention of SC on bronze coinage was 'a symbol of the way the new monarchy not only allowed republican institutions to survive, but recreated them for its own purpose' (*ibid.* 83).

53 A.M. Burnett, *The Authority to Coin in the Late Republic and Early Empire*, *NC* 137, 1977, 40-2; see also T.P. Wiseman, *New Men in the Roman Senate* (Oxford 1971), 148-9.

of political patronage being intrinsically reciprocal, a moneyer thus appointed was obliged to advance the cause of his *patronus*, and there are clear examples of this consideration having a direct influence on the choice of type⁵⁴.

As with many Republican offices, this process also seems to have been subsumed into the imperial system, with the princeps himself taking the consuls' role in appointing *monetales*⁵⁵, and expecting the production of suitable types in return. Moreover, an imperial moneyer seems to have had political incentive beyond simple gratitude to the imperial *patronus* who appointed him; the link between the consulship and the *triumviri a.a.a.f.f.* seems to have been retained in a more direct form, with many *monetales* rising to the consulship roughly a decade later⁵⁶. If, therefore, appointment to the triumvirate had been an early sign of imperial favour⁵⁷, then the relationship between moneyer and princeps may also have been seen as test of suitability for future promotion. The imperial *monetalis*, although still at the lowest level of the *cursus honorum*, may well have been aware that his appointment was a sign of a higher political destiny, should he prove reliable⁵⁸.

Men in this position, although unlikely to have formed part of the *consilium principis*, would have been highly sensitive to the political climate and the particular inclinations of their *patronus*⁵⁹. This, then, seems to be the key to the apparently reflexive nature of imperial types⁶⁰; young, ambitious *monetales* are sure to have struck types calculated to please the princeps, almost regardless of whether or not their political master is likely to have noticed their efforts. While propaganda necessarily entails an audience, sycophancy, particularly when underscored by a desire not to offend, is comparatively independent of its reception⁶¹; the moneyers seem to have been concerned to project and commemorate an image of the regime which they sensed that the princeps would have approved, virtually heedless of whether he actually paid any particular attention to it. The messages of these types thus simultaneously serves two purposes: the general public – both contemporary and future – is given a rosy image of government which also flattered those who actually did the governing.

Exceptional designs

Nevertheless, there are some designs, outside the usual vocabulary of types, which cannot be attributed to the instincts of the moneyers. Suetonius specifically records that Augustus and Nero personally ordered their respective Capricorn⁶² and Apollo Citharoedus⁶³ types, to which may be added the depiction of Gaius' three sisters⁶⁴, the IMPER RECEP⁶⁵ and PRAETOR RECEP⁶⁶ reverses struck amongst Claudius' earliest issues, and the Agrippina/Nero coins⁶⁷. The political ramifications of these types are clearly proportional to the risk involved in unauthorized production; it would have been a brave man indeed who chose so overtly to advertize the true nature of Claudius' accession without specific instruction from the new princeps. It is therefore likely that all of these types were struck, if not on the express word of the princeps himself, then at least on the suggestion of someone from the centre of the imperial circle, most probably the freedman *a rationibus*.

54 Burnett, *ibid.* 44.

55 Wiseman (note 53), 151.

56 Burnett, *The Authority to Coin* (note 53), 48-9; Wallace-Hadrill, *Image and Authority in the Coinage of Augustus* (note 19), 86-7.

57 See Buttrey (note 38), 108.

58 Sutherland's objection that the forced anonymity and accountability of *monetales* argued against any real influence over type designs (Compliment or Complement: Dr Levick on Imperial Coin Types, NC 146, 1986, 87-9; Variability in Julio-Claudian obverse legends, NAC 11, 1982, 177-89) fails to take into account the willingness of senators, particularly the young, to participate in the new system for the sake of its still considerable rewards.

59 See Wallace-Hadrill, *Image and Authority in the Coinage of Augustus* (note 19), 84.

60 See Levick, *Propaganda and the Imperial Coinage* (note 6), 104-16; *idem* *Messages on the Roman Coinage*.

61 As clearly exemplified by the Senate's relationship with Tiberius (see Tacitus, *Annals* 2.87; 3.65; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 27).

62 Suetonius, *Augustus* 94.

63 Suetonius, *Nero* 25.

64 RIC (1984) *Gaius* 33, 41.

65 RIC (1984) *Claudius* 7-8; 19-20; 25-6; 36-7.

66 RIC (1984) *Claudius* 11-12; 23-4; 29.

67 RIC (1984) *Nero* 1-3 (*Agrippina* ob); 6-7 (*jugate* ob).

The circumstances surrounding the Agrippina/Nero issues may provide a glimpse of the mechanics of these exceptional commissioned designs. Part of the early undermining of Agrippina's position included the forced retirement in 55 CE of her old ally Pallas⁶⁸ from the post *a rationibus* which he had held since at least 48 CE⁶⁹, and which significantly included supervision of imperial coin production. It therefore seems telling that the types which depicted Agrippina on the obverse (and her titles in the nominative case while Nero's are in the dative) were struck only in 54 CE⁷⁰; on the issue of the following year her profile is beneath Nero's, and her titles are relegated to the reverse. While the earlier types were most probably the product of direct instructions from Pallas, his removal from office and Agrippina's relocation from the palace deprived of her bodyguard⁷¹ would have constituted sufficient indication to the (understandably hypersensitive) moneyers of the shift in power within the *domus augusta*. Their corporate discretion is evident from the fact that Agrippina's position on the coinage of 55 CE is in no way derogatory, only of less remarkable honour.

It may therefore be assumed that a princeps' personal influence over the designs on his coinage was, the commissioned issues excepted, filtered through the moneyers' perception of what was his wish, with the degree of accuracy determined their proximity to the centre of power. Given the established vocabulary of types and the stock occasions such as victories and anniversaries for their issue, the effect of an individual princeps is very much confined to a varying of emphasis⁷². Thus, in much the same manner as the sculptors, or the authors of panegyric literature⁷³, the *triumviri monetales* intuitively divined the princeps' wish regarding the standard representations.

Literary sources

It remains to discuss the major obstacle to the view of ancient coin types as a medium of political propaganda: the dearth of literary confirmation to indicate that these numismatic messages were actually received. Compounding the silence of the historians, all other literary genres, including even the sycophantic poets, are similarly uncooperative⁷⁴.

Possibly the only surviving ancient historical record of the political message on a coin is that preserved by Dio⁷⁵. Whether this description is based on autoscapy by Dio himself or by one of his sources seems to be immaterial; while it is rather romantically satisfying to imagine that these rare coins were extant as collector's items in the third century CE⁷⁶, it is even more impressive from a propagandistic point of view if so accurate a description of the type had entered the historical record, independent of the coins' physical fate⁷⁷. The assumption that this Ides of March type had become an historical topos by the time of Dio is a possible explanation for the silence of Plutarch and Suetonius, since, a full century earlier, enough specimens still could have been in circulation to make a literary description unnecessary.

The two specific references to types made by Suetonius, while at the very least indicative of some form of attention paid to numismatic designs, are not strictly

68 See Tacitus, Annals 12.2.

69 Tacitus Annals 4.14. See also Suetonius, Claudius 28; S.I. Oost, The Career of M. Antonius Pallas, AJPh 79, 1958, 126-33; P.R.C. Weaver, Familia Caesaris (Cambridge 1971), 259-60.

70 It is interesting, though ultimately fruitless, to entertain the possibility that these issues may in fact have formed the catalyst for Pallas' demotion, since it would clearly have been intolerable for the princeps to cede the obverse to another, regardless (or perhaps specifically because) of his youth and her position as dowager empress. See Oost (note 69), 133: 'Nero, or Seneca, chose Pallas as a victim to show Agrippina the dangers of *excessive presumption*, and that her influence and power existed solely at the Emperor's pleasure' [my italics]. Oost's dating of Pallas' dismissal specifically to January of 55 CE (*ibid.* note 47) fits perfectly the numismatic evidence.

71 Tacitus, Annals 13.18.

72 See Sutherland, The Emperor and the Coinage. Julio-Claudian Studies (London 1976), 120.

73 See Wallace-Hadrill, Image and Authority in the Coinage of Augustus (note 19), 67-8.

74 The dismissal of this objection as an unprofitable *argument ex silentio* (Sutherland, The Emperor and the Coinage [note 72], 99), while convenient, does not deal fully with the issue.

75 Dio, Histories 47.25.3: Βροῦτος μὲν ταῦτά τε ἔπρασεν, καὶ ἐς τὰ νομίσματα ἃ ἐκόπτετο εἰκόνα τε αὐτοῦ καὶ πύλιν ξιφιδία τε δύο ἐνετύπυ, δηλῶν ἐκ τε τούτου καὶ διὰ τῶν γραμμάτων ὅτι τὴν πατρίδα μετὰ τοῦ Κασίου ἠλευθερωκῶς εἶη.

76 As C.T.H.R. Ehrhardt intimates, in Roman Coin Types and the Roman Public, JNG 34, 1984, 41-2, 51.

77 See Burnett, Coinage in the Roman World (note 11), 68.

political in context; in neither instance is the coin type itself the focus of the passage. The record of the Capricorn types is used by the biographer primarily as an illustration of Augustus' faith in his horoscope⁷⁸, and Nero's Apollo Citharoedus coinage is mentioned only in connection with statues of the princeps in similar guise⁷⁹.

This consistent failure of the literary sources to record the political significance of imperial types may perhaps be explained through an examination of the conventions of ancient historiography. The intellectual progeny of orators and poets⁸⁰, the historians of antiquity did not share the descriptive ethos of journalists, nor did they feel the modern burden to provide evidence – the identification even of literary sources is a rarity, rather than a standard feature.

The view of coins as monuments in miniature may explain the reticence of the ancient historians. It seems largely escaped numismatists' notice that the literary sources are similarly quiet concerning the statues, reliefs, inscriptions, and monumental architecture which were so much a part of the physical world⁸¹. Although there are considerably more references to these than to coins, they occur generally in exceptional or unusual circumstances such as destruction or restoration, and likewise without mention of the political overtones. The erection of a temple or the striking of coins, given the physical result of these actions, did not seem to require an independent record for posterity.

Coin types thus seem to have been viewed by ancient authors as even more superfluous to their material than monumental architecture. Just as public readings held in fora, porticoes or theatres⁸² rendered unnecessary any description of buildings which were in plain view, it may likewise have been assumed that the nature of coins as part of the general physical environment similarly precluded comment except in highly exceptional circumstances⁸³.

In conclusion, it may be said that a view of Roman imperial types as monuments in miniature seems to provide a theoretical framework which can accommodate many of the paradoxes of Roman coinage. As with monumental art and architecture, imperial types were comprehensible on various levels to almost all strata of society, while being politically relevant only to the elite. Also similar is the timeless nature of the commemorative aspect, and the relative lack of literary record. The advantages of coinage over the larger monuments lay in the relative speed of production and the geographic range of circulation. Moreover, coins on the whole may be said to have enjoyed a higher rate of survival than their counterparts, and are thus arguably the most successful monuments of empire.

Ada Cheung
Department of Classics & Archaeology
Monash University
Clayton, Victoria 3168
Australia

78 Suetonius, *Augustus* 94.12.

79 Suetonius, *Nero* 25.3.

80 See R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford 1958), 132-3; 143.

81 See Sutherland, *The Emperor and the Coinage* (note 72), 100; D. Shotter, *Roman Historians and the Roman Coinage*, *G&R* 25, 1978, 156. It is interesting that the political and historical significance of epigraphic records such as those compiled by the *Fratres Arvales* or various *Fasti* has not been questioned, despite the similar lack of contemporary literary reference.

82 T.P. Wiseman, *Practice and Theory in Roman Historiography*, in *Roman Studies Literary and Historical* (London 1987), 254-5.

83 It seems telling that Wiseman has been able to document cases of the deliberate misrepresentation of earlier monuments by Republican historians who had political ulterior motives (T.P. Wiseman, *Monuments and the Roman Annalists*, in *Historiography and Imagination* [Exeter 1994], 19, 37-48).