

The myth of the denarius communis

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Schweizer Münzblätter = Gazette numismatique suisse = Gazzetta numismatica svizzera**

Band (Jahr): **67 (2017)**

Heft 267

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-727390>

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The Myth of the *denarius communis*

For many years modern writers (particularly those whose first language is English) have employed this phrase to describe the unit in which prices were expressed in Diocletian's Edict on Maximum Prices of A.D. 301, an edict that attempted to halt the price inflation that had taken place in recent years because of the increasingly poor quality of the 'silver' coinage that was being issued.

The edict was published in the eastern Roman Empire, over which Diocletian had control, and many inscriptions containing fragments of it have survived. This has made it possible to create a more or less complete text of it¹. In the surviving fragments of this edict all prices are expressed simply in *denarii*. These *denarii* are not described as *denarii communes*, and no ancient writer, no ancient inscription and no papyrus document uses this phrase. The only examples of its use that I have been able to discover are in mediaeval or early modern documents, in which the words *denarii communes* appear from the context to be describing money that belongs to a community rather than to a private individual. This meaning would not be appropriate for Diocletian's Edict on Maximum Prices.

So when was this expression born? It is mentioned three times in Harold Mattingly's *Roman Coins*, and because this author was so highly respected, others have repeated what he wrote without attempting to establish the truth of it². In the first of these pages we read:

'When we come to Diocletian's reform of A.D. 296, we find that he issues a new coin of about 150 gr. (9.72 gm) to represent twenty of his units of account, the "denarii communes", which represent about 1/50,000th part of the pound of gold, but incorporates the "Antoninanus" of Aurelian in his system as a subdivision of the larger coin.'

This is a difficult sentence to understand. It is also now outdated in several respects, but this is not relevant to the present topic of discussion.

In the second of these pages, Mattingly wrote, 'In the Edict of Maximum Prices of A.D. 301 the reckoning is in "denarii communes", 50,000 to the pound of gold.' This repeats what he had previously written, and again is outdated,

1 The text, as much of it as was known then, was first published in the nineteenth century in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (Vol. III pp. 801–41 and Supplementum III, pp. 1909–53) by THEODOR MOMMSEN, with a later separate publication, *Der Maximaltarif des Diocletian* (Berlin 1893, reprinted 1953). In 1959 it was republished, with the inclusion of some additional

fragments that had been discovered, by TENNEY FRANK in pp. 307–421 of Volume V (*Rome and Italy of the Empire*) of his work *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome*. Since that time it has been published twice more (with additional fragments) by S. LAUFFER (*Diokletians Preisedikt*, Berlin 1971) and M. GIACCHERO (*Edictum Diocletiani et Collegarum de pretiis rerum venalium*,

Genova 1974). These later publications, together with special studies by Crawford, Erim, Reynolds and others, based on discoveries of other fragments of the Edict at Aezani and Aphrodisias, have made their predecessors less valuable now. However, for the purpose of the present study, even the earliest of these publications is adequate.

2 London 1928, pp. 129, 219 and 225. The words *denarius communis* appear on pp. 127 and 217 of the 1960 reprint of this work, and are not found after that. Following Mattingly, C.H.V. SUTHERLAND, in his article 'Denarius and Sestertius in Diocletian's Coinage Reform,' (*Journal of Roman Studies* 1961, 94–7), refers four times on pp. 95–7 to the *denarius communis*, and on p. 95 attempted to explain the term by saying that it meant that 'the adjective incidentally suggests the degree of debasement which separated this unit from its earlier silver predecessor.'

because now that more copies of the inscription has been discovered, it is clear that the number of *denarii* to a pound of gold had been incorrectly stated in the text of the inscription that was current at that time.

The third page includes a mention of *denarii communes* as if the expression is an established fact, but does not discuss it. The index to the book lists a fourth reference on p. 261, but this page mentions only ‘the new unit of reckoning, the denarius’.

Although, as has already been stated, Mattingly’s prestige as a numismatist may have discouraged later writers on Roman coinage from investigating the correctness of what he had written³, it is hard to believe that he was responsible for inventing a new phrase that had never been used before. In fact, there is evidence which suggests that the expression *denarius communis* had entered numismatic vocabulary at least a decade before *Roman Coins* was written. Albert Frey’s *Dictionary of Numismatic Names*, published in 1917⁴, contains an entry ‘Denarius Communis’. No explanation is given at this point in the book, but the reader is referred to the article ‘Follis’. This is a dead end, because the later article contains no reference to the *denarius communis*. However, the first entry shows that some numismatists had begun to believe in the existence of this name by that year⁵.

I employed the resources of modern technology with all the skill that I could muster, searching for earlier occurrences of the phrase, but with no success, and the answer came to me only after I reverted to a more traditional method. Starting from 1916, I worked backward through a number of printed copies of numismatic journals, and eventually found what I was looking for. The *Revue Numismatique* for 1888 and 1889 contained a long article on Roman coinage in the later Roman empire, published in two parts over two years⁶. In the first part (on p. 398) the author wrote of the rapid decline in metallic quality of Roman ‘silver’ coinage during the third century of the Christian era, and said in a footnote, ‘... this *denarius* changed to such an extent that it became no more than a copper coin, although its generic name was always preserved for it. When we reach this point, I will call the latter the *denarius communis*.’⁷

The wording of the second sentence suggests that this was a phrase that the author had invented. After this, in the second part of this article, published in the following year, he keeps his promise, and the term *denier commun* appears a number of times (the first time on p. 118), with no indication that it was not an established name for a coin.

He did not explain what he meant by the ‘common denarius’ at any point in this publication. But other numismatists must have begun using this expression without realising that it had been invented only recently, and by the time that Mattingly wrote his book on Roman coins, it seems that it had become generally accepted. The most remarkable example of this may be found in an article written some years later by a very respected Roman historian, who composed a

3 A notable example may be found in KENNETH W. HARL, *Coinage in the Roman Economy 300 B.C. to A.D. 700*, Baltimore and London 1996. On p. 6 the author writes ‘Romans employed as their principal coin a modest-sized silver denomination, the *denarius* (measuring 22–20 mm in diameter), for nearly five centuries (264 B.C. (sic) – A.D. 238)... Various billon coins, reckoned in notational *denarii* (*denarii communes* or d.c.), followed for a century (A.D. 251–367), but they yielded primacy again to fine silver coins that recalled the *denarius* and inspired the pennies and deniers of medieval Europe and the *dirhems* of the Caliphate.’ On p. 477, an entry in the *Glossary* with which this book is equipped reads as follows: ‘*Denarius communis* (abbreviated d.c.) was the depreciated *denarius* employed as an accounting unit between 250 and 435. Prices and wages in the Edict of Maximum Prices (301) are quoted in *denarii communes*. The small laureate denomination struck by Aurelian in 274 and Diocletian in 293 was probably tariffed at 1 d.c.’

4 New York, American Numismatic Society.

5 I am grateful to Professor Walter Scheidel for drawing my attention to this entry.

6 E. LÉPAULLE, ‘La monnaie romaine à la fin du haut empire,’ *Revue Numismatique* 1888, 396–416 and 1889, 115–43.

7 ... ce denier s’altère au point de ne devenir qu’une monnaie de cuivre, bien qu’on lui conserve toujours son nom générique. Lorsque nous arriverons là, je nommerai ce dernier *denier commun*.

sentence and footnote that claimed that the *denarius communis* was used in the preamble to Diocletian's Edict on Maximum Prices to describe the coinage in which Roman soldiers were paid at that time⁸. This is simply not true.

There is a lesson that should be learned from this: scholars should always check the original sources for every statement whenever they can, because a myth can be born, and can live and be believed by later recipients, when it has never been true.

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8 A.H.M. JONES, 'Inflation under the Roman Empire', in *Economic History Review* 1952/3, pp. 293-318; see pp. 298, 299, 312. In the last of these pages the author states that Diocletian's soldiers received their pay in *denarii communes*, and in a footnote on this page claims that the source for this statement is the preamble to Diocletian's Edict on Maximum Prices. It is true that soldiers' regular pay and the occasional donative are mentioned in this preamble, but the phrase *denarius communis* does not appear there. In this author's subsequent major three-volume work, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602. A Social Economic and Administrative Survey* (Oxford 1964), there are several references to Diocletian's Edict, but in each of them only the word *denarius* is used. This leads one to suspect that during the preceding decade he had perhaps realised that there was no such thing as a *denarius communis*.