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The meaning of *bigati* in Livy's history of Rome

John Melville Jones

Bigati are mentioned in nine passages in Livy's history which record the booty displayed to the Roman public when triumphal processions or ovations were being conducted in the early second century between 197 and 191 B.C.¹, mostly celebrating victories in Italy, with one in Spain, and, in a different context, reporting the amount of a bribe paid to someone in 216 B.C.

It is generally assumed that the word *bigatus* refers to the reverse type of *denarii* that began to be issued from about 150 B.C. until the middle of the 130s, a *biga* being a two-horse chariot, just as the name *quadrigatus* (perhaps prefacing *nummus*) described a coin, probably a didrachm designed for circulation in areas outside Rome, that was issued for a few years before the beginning of the Second Punic War bearing the reverse type of a four-horse chariot, and slightly heavier than the *denarius*, that began to be minted for the first time a few years before 211 B.C.

This interpretation is supported by an entry in the dictionary compiled by the grammarian Sextus Pompeius Festus, writing in the late second century A.D.², "... *nummi quadrigati* and *bigati* were so called because of the form of the engraving." However, there are difficulties in accepting this, with regard to the entries in Livy's work. In the first place, *denarii* with a *biga* as their reverse type did not begin to be minted until about 157/156 B.C.³, and although it is not completely impossible to believe that the word was mistakenly applied to *denarii*, and that these might have been minted as early as 216 B.C., although this is at least two years earlier than most numismatists would assume that these coins began to be issued, this is enough to inspire reasonable doubt about whether this explanation applies to what Livy wrote⁴.

Most early numismatists have found it impossible to suggest any other way of approaching the problem, and have simply assumed that Livy was mistaken, and was using *bigati* as a synonym for *denarii*. Such, at any rate, was the opinion expressed by Michael Crawford⁵, who supported his opinion by referring to a Greek version of the earliest mention of these coins that was reported by Livy, the bribe given to Bantius of Nola in 216 B.C. to encourage him to support the Roman general Marcus Claudius Marcellus, who did not want the city to surrender to Hannibal. Livy tells us that this payment was made in *bigati*. Plutarch tells us that it was paid in drachmas, this being the normal way of describing *denarii* in Greek historical writing, because although drachmas from different Greek mints might have different weights, the most common one was the Attic drachma, which weighed approximately the same as a *denarius*. Crawford therefore assumed that the coins would have been *denarii*, although 216 B.C. is a little early for us to think that they were being produced then.

However, another solution to this problem, which has been largely ignored, and never accepted, is worth considering. In 1951 Leslie Neatby⁶ published an article which suggested that the coins to which Livy was referring were in fact ones called *victoriati*⁷, which began to be minted at various mints in the last years of the third century B.C. after *quadrigati* were discontinued, and continued to be minted until about 170 B.C. This might seem odd, because, as the name

- 1 Livy 23.15.35 (216 B.C., the payment to Bantius mentioned below), 33.23.7 (197 B.C.), 33.23.9 (197 B.C.), 33.37.11 (196 B.C.), 34.10.4 (195 B.C.), 34.10.7 (195 B.C.), 34.46.2–3 (194 B.C.), 36.21.1–2 (191 B.C.), 40.34.7–8 (191 B.C.).
- 2 Festus, De Verborum Significatione, s. v. *Aes grave*: ... *nummi quadrigati et bigati a figura caelaturae dicti*.
- 3 So dated by CRAWFORD, RRC Vol. 1, 197/1a.
- 4 The *communis opinio* now, as the few persons who supported other dates have mostly passed away, is that these coins began to be issued shortly after the beginning of the Second Punic War, and a few years before the capture of Morgantina in Sicily.
- 5 RRC Vol. II p. 630.
- 6 L. H. NEATBY, *The Bigatus*, *American Journal of Archaeology*, 1951, pp. 241–244. Some references to earlier opinions on this question are given here.
- 7 For an introduction (now slightly outdated) to the history of this coin, see E. A. SYDENHAM, *The Victoriates*, in NC, 1932, pp. 73–95.

John Melville Jones:
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SM 72, 2022, S. 3–4.

suggests, their reverse type showed Victory crowning a trophy, not a chariot. Because of this, Michael Crawford, in a footnote to what he had written in *RRC*, scornfully dismissed this suggestion, describing it as not requiring refutation, a judgement which has perhaps intimidated anyone else who might have thought about considering it.

Neatby's reason for saying that *bigatus* referred to the *victoriatus* was that the dates in which *bigati* were mentioned by Livy matched the time when *victoriati* were being produced and the victories that were celebrated were in Cisalpine Gaul where they circulated. Also, the first reference to *denarii* being carried in Roman triumphal processions that he records was in 196 B.C., which suggests that he did not think that *denarii* and *bigati* were the same⁸. Because of this, Neatby suggested that this word might have been used to describe the *victoriati* because they were approximately half the weight of the *quadrigatus* with its four-horse chariot.

In the passages in which the word *bigati* occurs it is either treated simply as the name of a coin or as an adjective describing *argentum*, with a number. These passages, as has already been stated, refer to events between 216 (the gift to Bantius) and 191 B.C. Coin hoards that contain *victoriati* fit into this period very satisfactorily.

With the exception of the first, all of the reports of *bigati* being displayed in celebratory processions have the air of having been copied from official documents. For this reason it seems to me that to suggest that Livy (or rather, the persons who composed these documents) did not understand the meaning of *bigatus* and *denarius* is wrong. Also, it is possible that the name *victoriati* might have been avoided when referring to these coins, because a number of Greek coins showed figures of Victory on their reverses.

Neatby supported his suggestion by pointing out that one hoard (the Suessa Aurunca hoard, found near Sessa in Campania) contained five *quadrigati* that had been cut in two, and another sixteen that could not be joined together again. This supports the idea that smaller silver coins would have been more popular among some groups which might not use bronze coinage.

This was a bold suggestion, but should not be rejected entirely, particularly if some more halved *quadrigati* turn up in later hoards. In my opinion, although we cannot be certain 'beyond reasonable doubt' that Neatby was right, if we use legal language referring to a criminal prosecution, 'on the balance of probabilities', as would be sufficient in a civil trial, he probably was. And when we remember that Livy was a historian who had an excellent record, if not always perfect, this supports this conclusion.

8 Livy 33.27.2, reporting on booty displayed when Gaius Cornelius Blasius received an ovation after returning from Spain, which included thirty-four thousand five hundred *denarii* of stamped (silver). Again, this looks like an extract from an official document. In this case, it is not likely that all the coinage that came from Spain was in Roman *denarii*, so we must suppose that the use of the term here may be the result of a calculation of the weight of all the silver coinage received, expressed in terms of the Roman *denarius*.

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