

The coinage of Quintus Labienus Parthicus

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THE COINAGE OF QUINTUS LABIENUS PARTHICUS

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1. The historical background

The silver and gold struck by Quintus Labienus form one of the rarest and most interesting issues coined during the last years of the Roman Republic. Following the disastrous defeat of the Liberators at Philippi in 42 B.C., the coinages that had been minted by these forces soon ceased. The very last of these issues was that of Labienus.

Labienus undoubtedly regarded himself as the legitimate inheritor of the Republican tradition which Brutus and Cassius had represented in their struggle against what they considered the illegalities of the Caesarian forces controlled and led by Antony and Octavian. Although Labienus must have considered that his alliance with the Parthians, traditional enemies of Rome, was another instance where the end was justified by the means, in the eyes of most Roman citizens he was undoubtedly regarded as a renegade and a tool of the Parthians.

The Labieni were an equestrian family, originally of Etruscan origin, from Cingulum in Picenum. Quintus was the son of Titus Labienus, a soldier of great distinction. The senior Labienus had served as a *legatus* under Caesar in Transalpine Gaul in 58 B.C. and in this and subsequent campaigns he proved to be an able and active officer, with an especial talent as a leader of cavalry. By 52 B.C. he had become Caesar's second-in-command in Gaul. Suddenly in 49 B.C. he broke with Caesar and joined the Senatorial faction. When war broke out between the two parties, he became a *legatus* of Pompey and at Pharsalus in 48 B.C. Labienus commanded the Senatorial cavalry. He continued the fight against Caesar and his forces in Africa in 46 B.C. as second-in-command to Q. Caecilius Metellus Scipio Pius; he had been welcomed there by the Senatorial party and in the end proved to be their best general. Labienus headed the cavalry during the campaign which terminated with the defeat of Scipio at Thapsus. After that battle he went to Spain with Gnaeus Pompey, as his second-in-command. In 45 B.C. Labienus commanded the right wing of the Pompeian army at Munda. In his third major battle against Caesar he lost again, but this time he

died on the field. Titus Labienus never was given the command position that his talents deserved, as the Senatorial party always regarded him as somewhat of a turncoat.

Quintus Labienus, his son, joined the party of the Liberators after the murder of Caesar. In 43 B.C. he was sent to Parthia as envoy to the court of Orodes I by Brutus and Cassius, to seek the king's aid against the Caesarians, as Pompey had done a few years earlier. He was in Ctesiphon at the time of the battle of Philippi in 42 B.C., still negotiating with the Parthians for their help. After learning of the proscriptions undertaken at Rome by Antony and Octavian and realizing that the Triumvirs would not spare or pardon any of their opponents as Caesar had done, Labienus remained there. In 41 B.C., while Octavian was occupied with the Perusine War in Italy and Antony was in Alexandria with Cleopatra, Labienus persuaded Orodes that it was a favorable opportunity to invade the Roman provinces in the East, which were relatively unprotected. Early in 40 B.C. a large army jointly led by Labienus and Pacorus, a son of Orodes, crossed the Euphrates River and attacked the Roman province of Syria. That province was garrisoned by only two legions, primarily made up of former soldiers of Brutus and Cassius, who had joined the army of the Triumvirs after Philippi. The invading force met little organized resistance and it was joined by many of the veterans formerly in the army of the Liberators. The governor of Syria, L. Decidius Saxa, who was loyal to Antony, gave battle, but he was defeated and his eagles were captured. Saxa retreated into Asia Minor and the major Syrian cities of Apameia and Antioch were taken. The invaders now split their forces; Pacorus remained in Syria to complete the subjugation of the province and then moved southward into Palestine, while Labienus with the Parthian light cavalry and the Roman troops that had come over to his side moved northward across the Taurus Mountains in pursuit of Saxa.

Most of Rome's client kings in the area were either disloyal or incompetent and Antony's neglect to reorganize the region following Philippi now caused problems for the governmental forces defending the province of Asia and Cilicia, which was part of the province of Syria at this time. Antiochus I of Commagene and Ariarathes X of Cappadocia were pro-Parthian and aided Labienus, while Castor of Galatia was neutral, but permitted the invading army to enroll men from the Taurus tribes. It was not that these rulers and their peoples had any love for Cassius and his defeated party, it was most probably a general disgust for the government at Rome and its heavy-handed policies in the region.

In Cilicia, Saxa was overtaken and slain. Labienus swept westward into Asia Minor along the Southern Highway through Cilicia and Pamphylia and then seized much of Phrygia, Lycia and Caria. He received the submission of most of the cities along his route, many of them unprotected, but there was some opposition, first at Laodicea in Phrygia and later in Caria, especially at Stratonicea, Alabanda and Mylasa, the latter two of which cities at least were taken by force. L. Munatius Plancus, who had been consul in 42 B.C. and as proconsul was governor of the province of Asia in 40 B.C.,

withdrew to the Aegean Islands. It was most probably at this time that Labienus was hailed as Imperator by his troops and struck his silver and gold coinage to pay the Roman legionaries in his army, having adopted the cognomen Parthicus to indicate the nation which was his ally and backer.

The invasion of Labienus only was possible because Asia Minor had been left so lightly guarded and it forced Antony and Octavian into action. Their reconciliation at Brundisium in October of 40 B.C. gave Antony command of Macedonia, Greece and the East and in the spring of 39 B.C. he sent his general P. Ventidius Bassus, consul for the closing months of 43 B.C., across the Aegean with an army of eleven legions, along with a strong force of cavalry and slingers, to destroy the invading forces in Asia. The landing in force took Labienus by surprise and, realizing that he was not strong enough to fight such a formidable enemy, he retreated eastward from Caria hastily without a battle and sent to Pacorus and the main Parthian army for help. Ventidius pursued Labienus into Cilicia. There, on the slopes of Mount Taurus near the Cilician Gates, Labienus fortified a camp to await his reinforcements; Ventidius camped nearby to wait for his entire army to arrive. The Roman legions got there first, but the Parthian forces reached the area soon afterwards and attacked the hill camp of Ventidius without even waiting to link up with Labienus and his troops. The Romans successfully repulsed the attack of the heavy armored cavalry and the Parthians retreated in great disorder. Labienus also withdrew following an attack on his camp, but his army was ambushed and he lost much of his force in the fighting and through ensuing desertions. He fled in disguise, but was captured in Cilicia by Demetrios, a freedman of Caesar, and put to death. Ventidius subsequently defeated the main Parthian army again at the Amanic Gates and Roman Asia was cleared as quickly as it had been overrun.

2. The Coins

Description

Obverse: Bare head of Quintus Labienus right, around ☉
Q · LABIENVVS · PARTHICVS · IMP.
Border of dots.

Reverse: Parthian light cavalry horse right, with a bridle and saddle, to which are attached a bow-case and quiver. No legend. Border of dots.

Denarii

Catalogue

Curly Tail

	Obv.	Rev.		Weight	
1	A	1	a	3.64	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale (d'Ailly 4850).
			b	3.80	Levis 171 (Naville XI, 18. 6. 1925) = Sydenham 401 (Glendining, 24. 11. 1948) = Baldwin 10 (Glendining, 20. 11. 1969) = Private Collection (Ticino).
			c		Trau 39 (Hess, Gilhofer and Ranschburg, 22. 5. 1935).
			d	3.59	Mazzini Collection 1 (Ratto, 1957).
			e	3.73	Collection N 857 (Bank Leu 17, 3. 5. 1977).
2	A	2	a	3.73	Berlin, Staatliche Museen (Sandes Coll.).
			b	3.64	Vierordt 508 (Schulman, 5. 3. 1923) = Laughlin 256 (Hess, 18. 12. 1933) = Sevki Alhan 513 (Münzen und Medaillen VII, 3. 12. 1948) = Niggeler 966 (Münzen und Medaillen / Bank Leu, 21. 10. 1966) = Spink / Galerie des Monnaies No. 464 (15. 2. 1977).
			c	3.83	Naville X No. 1744 (15. 6. 1925) = Münzen und Medaillen XIX No. 153 (5. 6. 1959).
3	A	3	a	3.77	Berlin, Staatliche Museen 28456.
			b	3.71	De Quelen 505 (Rollin et Feuarent, 7. 5. 1888 = Haeberlin 2900 (Cahn/Hess, 17. 7. 1933).
			c		Gotha.
4	A	4	a	4.00	Vienna, Bundessammlung 856.
5	B	5	a	3.73	Strauss Collection.
6	B	6	a	3.73	Glasgow, Hunterian 1560.
			b	3.79	Numismatic Fine Arts No. 362 (25. 3. 1976).
7	C	7	a		Wayte Raymond No. 438 (21. 3. 1939).

Straight Tail

	Obv.	Rev.		Weight	
8	C	8	a	3.30	Vienna, Bundessammlung 857.
9	C	9	a	3.67	Bonazzi 1346 (Ratto, 23. 1. 1924) = Milan, Civico Museo Archeologico 2242.

	Obv.	Rev.		Weight	
10	D	9	a	3.87	Evans 1117 (Neville XVII, 3. 10. 1934) = Magnaguti 348 (Santamaria, 14. 10. 1949).
11	E	10	a		Ramon 707 (Bourgey, 4. 11. 1913).
			b	3.88	Münzen und Medaillen 43 No. 243 (12. 12. 1970) = Sternberg No. 15 (1. 12. 1973).
12	E	11	a	3.75	Vatican.
13	E	12	a		Naples.
14	E	13	a	3.68	Spink (in commerce).
15	F	13	a	3.78	London, British Museum (East) 132 (Nott Coll.)
16	F	14	a	3.75	London, British Museum (East) post 132. Double struck.
17	F	15	a	3.76	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale (AF 2947).
			b	3.57	Munich.
18	F	16	a	3.84	Bank Leu / Hess I No. 220 (14. 4. 1954) = Private Collection G.
19	F	17	a		Egger No. 612 (15. 1. 1912).
20	G	17	a	3.60	Consul Weber 743 (Hirsch XXIV, 10. 5. 1909) = Hess No. 406 (20. 5. 1912) = Ryan 1902 (Glendining, 2. 4. 1952) = Private Collection M.
21	G	18	a	3.66	New York, American Numismatic Society (Newell Coll.).
22	G	19	a	3.74	Prowe 2172 (Egger, 28. 11. 1904) = Nordheim 95 (Glendining, 9. 3. 1931) = Platt Hall 657 (Glendining, 19. 7. 1950) = Author's Collection.
23	H	20	a	3.82	Rome, Museo Nazionale (acquired 1903/04).

Total of denarii: 34.

Aurei

Curly Tail

	Obv.	Rev.	Weight	
1	C	21	7.93	London, British Museum (East) 131 (Blacas Coll.) (Holed).
2	F	22	8.04	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale 85 (1898).
3	F	23	8.05	Münzen und Medaillen 43, No. 242 (12. 12. 1970).

Total of aurei: 3.

Forgeries in Silver

Group 1

Perhaps contemporary

Obv.	Rev.		Weight	Plated?	
F a	F i	a		yes	Merzbacher No. 334 (2. 11. 1909) = Vierordt 130 (Schulman, 5. 3. 1923).
		b	2.77	yes	The Hague (Six Collection).

Group 2

F b	F ii	a	3.57	?	Leningrad, Hermitage 22237.
		b	2.96	yes	Leningrad, Hermitage 1 - 690.
		c	2.81	yes	Glasgow, Hunterian 1561.

Group 3 (Tardani)

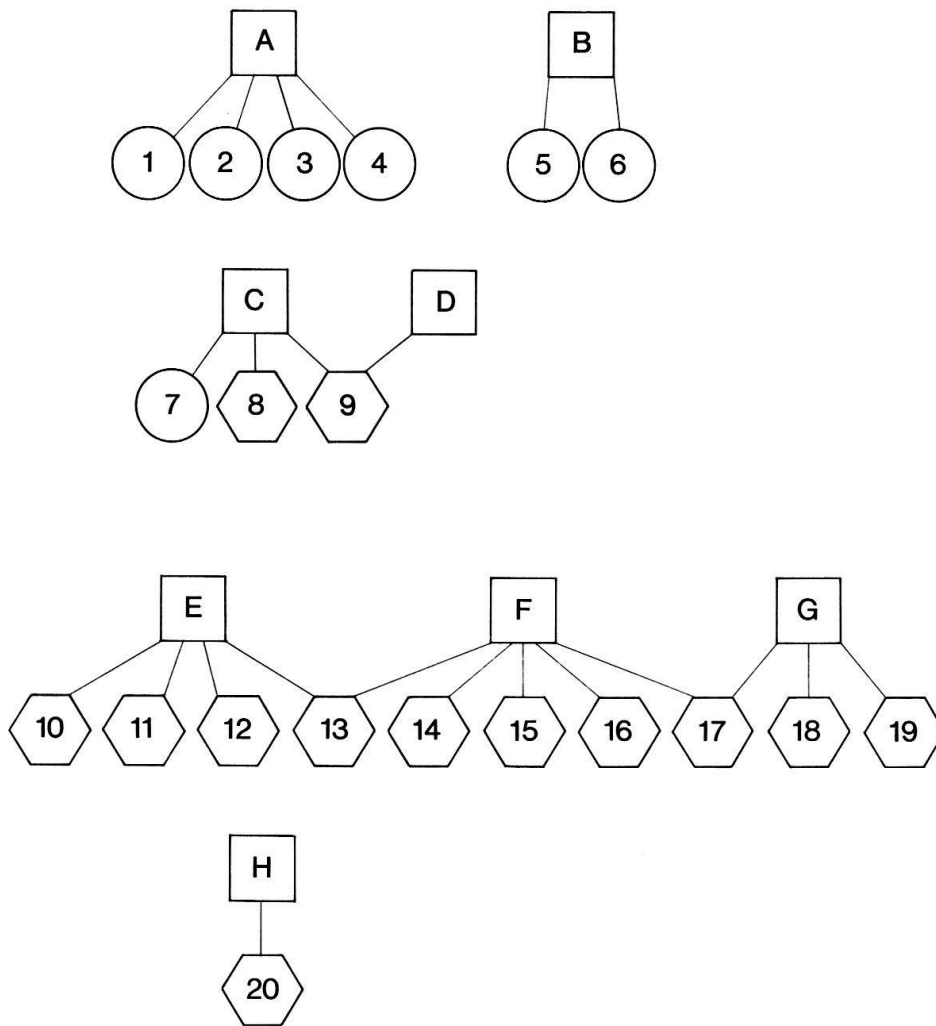
F c 1	F iii	a	3.98	no	Lawrence 338 (Glendining, 7. 12. 1950).
F c 2		b	3.75	no	Rome, Museo Nazionale (Gnecchi Coll.).
		c	3.60	no	Forli (Piancastelli Collection 175).

Forgeries in Gold

Group 4

F d	F iv	a	7.98	no	Woodward 408 (Glendining, 27. 9. 1962).
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Die links of the denarii



3. Commentary

Although in modern times the denarii of Labienus are very rare and his aurei exceedingly so, the original issue itself does not appear to have been an extremely small one. At least eight obverse and twenty-three reverse dies were used to strike the overall coinage. As only thirty-odd denarii and but three aurei have survived, perhaps there was some suppression or melting down of the issue after the defeat and death of Labienus, due to its fundamentally anti-Roman character. Certainly it was an illegal coinage as far as the Roman Establishment was concerned, without a shred of legitimacy. Labienus was a renegade and was clearly so regarded by the officials representing Rome in Asia Minor, both civil and military.

All of the dies for the issue were carefully and skillfully engraved, especially the obverses. The portraits of Labienus on the obverse dies were meant to be realistic and true to life and they succeed admirably. They all appear to be the work of one

talented die-cutter. The reverses depict the light cavalry horse of the Parthians which was so famous in antiquity, with its small head, thick and strong neck, short legs and long tail. This is a living animal depicted, not a statue as on many Roman issues of the period. These horses were well-known to the Romans of that time, having been a principal cause of the disastrous defeat of M. Licinius Crassus at Carrhae in 53 B.C.

As was normal, a much greater amount of silver than of gold was struck. We know that a minimum of eight obverse and twenty reverse dies were utilized to make the denarii, while at least two obverse and three reverse dies were employed in the manufacture of the aurei. Both of the obverse dies used to strike the gold were also used to produce silver denarii, however, the three reverse dies used to mint gold aurei are not known to have been used to make silver coins. All three of these were very carefully engraved.

There is a definite cohesiveness and similarity of style throughout this issue, especially among the obverses. Nevertheless, a study of the reverse dies appears to show that two separate workshops were utilized to mint the denarii. Reverse dies 1-7 depict a horse with a curly tail, while dies 8-20 show animals with a straight and generally longer one. Each group of reverse dies was employed with separate obverse dies, but, in at least one case, obverse die C was used with both of the reverse die types. The horse on all three of the reverse dies which were used to manufacture the aurei had curly tails; in striking the gold they were paired with obverse dies C and F, the latter having otherwise only been known to have been used in the silver series in conjunction with horses with straight tails.

The total of reverse dies employed to strike the Labienus denarii seems very large, when compared to the number of obverse dies. Perhaps the conditions under which the reverses were made or used might have been responsible for this apparent abnormality.

Labienus certainly struck his silver and gold pieces primarily to pay the Roman soldiers that had joined his forces in Syria and Asia Minor after his invasion of the former Roman province. The need for coin to remunerate these troops most likely arose in Asia Minor in 40 B.C. after he had seized Cilicia and much of the southern part of the Roman province of Asia. Bullion sufficient to strike his coinage undoubtedly was acquired along with the cities and territory that he captured. Labienus also had available mint cities like Apamea and possibly Laodicea in Phrygia, both of which had struck sizeable quantities of silver cistophori for the Romans as recently as 48 B.C. Of course there was in addition the likelihood of a small travelling mint moving along with his army.

The coinage of Labienus was surely struck in Asia Minor, as I have noted, and a number of pieces have recently been found in Turkey. These include aureus 3 (F/23) and denarii 5 (B/5/a) and 11 b (E/10/b), which definitely came from Asia Minor.

The Forgeries

The rarity and desirability of the Labienus issues has led forgers to attempt to make copies of the genuine coins which could pass for and be sold as authentic pieces. There are four groups of reproductions that are known to me, only one of which is extremely dangerous.

Group 1 is perhaps contemporary; both known specimens are obviously plated. The obverse die has a reasonably good style.

Group 2 is an old forgery, probably from either the Seventeenth or Eighteenth Century. F b/F ii/a appears to be of good silver, but the other two specimens from the same dies are clearly plated. The style and treatment of the obverse die is completely incorrect.

Group 3 is from the late Nineteenth Century and the dies were cut by the elder Tardani, a noted Italian forger (see plate 5). All three of the specimens are of good silver and both the weights of the coins and the style of the obverse die (which is copied from genuine die F) are excellent. The pieces in the Gnechi Collection in the Museo Nazionale in Rome and the Piancastelli Collection in Forli are still catalogued as genuine. Both a Swiss professional numismatist, whom I consider pre-eminent in this field for this period, and myself were unconvinced that F c/F iii/ a was a forgery until we saw the photographs of the dies.

Group 4 is a copy of the Paris aureus (F/22). The weight is good; both sides are somewhat tooled.

PLATE 4

Obverse dies



A



B



C



D



E



F



G

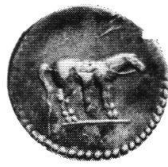


H

Reverse dies silver



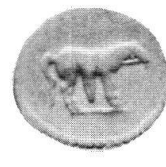
1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9



10



11



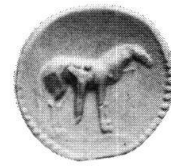
12



13



14



15



16



17



18



19



20

PLATE 5

Reverse dies gold



21



22



23

Forgeries



F a



F b



Tardani die (positive)



F c 1



F c 2



A/ F d



F i



F ii



Tardani die (positive)



F iii 1



F iii 2



A/ F iv