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and Maryse Blet-Lemarquand

*Roman Provincial Coinage. Volume III. Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian (AD 96–138)*

London: British Museum and Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2015,  
xvii + 971 pp., 6 maps, 340 plates. ISBN 978-0714118277

This, the third volume in the Roman Provincial Coinage series, covers the reigns of three Roman emperors (Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian) and is the fourth volume to appear in print (excluding printed versions of the supplements). With the publication of RPC III we now have a conspectus of Roman provincial issues from the middle of the first century BC to the second quarter of the second century AD. It is a substantial piece of work; larger, in fact, than RPC I, and it is impossible to do anything more than select a few themes here.

The format will be familiar to users of RPC I, II and VII.1. The main difference is that the introductory material for the volume is to be found in Part II rather than Part I. The preface, written by Chris Howgego, explains how the RPC project is developing, with more integration of traditional hard copy and the online catalogues provided through the RPC Online web site (<http://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk>).

The introductory chapters in Part II provide a historical background with bibliographies (which interestingly includes Marguerite Yourcenar's 1951 novel about Hadrian, quoted on pp. 119–120). It includes notes on the Panhellenion, an institution created under Hadrian that assumes an obvious importance when studying the coin issues of Greek cities during this period. This brief historical survey is followed by a more substantial chapter on production and denominations. The silver coinage is considered first. The study of weights and fineness of silver coins includes new analyses undertaken by Maryse Blet-Lemarquand of the IRAMAT Centre Ernest-Babelon, Orléans, supplementing those that were already available at the time of writing and providing valuable data on the fineness of various issues. There are also some useful summaries of weight standards (e.g. p. 809). The pattern of minting under Trajan (p. 805) consists of two main phases: one during Trajan's second and third consulships (AD 98–100) and a second in the fifth and sixth consulships (AD 103–117). As RPC notes, this maps on to periods of heightened military expenditure only in a very general sense, and the authors are wary of drawing a link between production and military finance. The pattern of «centralised» or «co-operative» minting of silver witnessed under Trajan, using the mints at Rome, Antioch and Alexandria to produce a variety of provincial coins, was reversed under Hadrian: «in his reign local solutions were preferred» (p. 808). One of the most notable local solutions of the reign was the overstriking, in Asia, of old cistophori of Mark Antony and Augustus, utilising facilities in at least nineteen cities (pp. 808–810).

The weights of the base metal coinages are likewise tabulated and discussed, though it is still quite difficult to see regional patterns in the material. Few coins of the period carry value marks, but some hint at an integrated system. A group of «pseudo-autonomous» coins of Chios, assigned to the period, bear values in obols, chalcoi and assaria (nos. 1892–1893, 1895–1913), showing that the two systems were interchangeable at a rate of 1 obol = 2 assaria, so that the drachm in this system is worth 12 assaria, as it is in the Salutaris inscription from Ephesus (RPC I, p. 369), or the silver cistophori of Asia, or the 12 Italian as silver drachms attributed to Caesarea in Cappadocia under Nero (RPC I, nos. 3635–3636, 3643). From neighbouring Cyme there is a unique type marked AC Γ, three assaria (no. 1927), which is roughly the same size as the three assaria coins of Chios, and presumably intended to serve as a quarter-drachm. A different system appears to have existed at Rhodes, where there are large coins inscribed «didrachmon». These do not fit with the weight system in use at Chios. Whether these Rhodian didrachms belong to a system of bronze drachms separate from the silver ones is unclear; but it is worth noting that Rhodes continued to produce a silver coinage alongside these bronze issues: the unique silver coin of Nerva (no. 2176) seems to represent the latest silver issued by the island state. On p. 269 it is suggested this is a hemidrachm; whether it represents a quarter of the large didrachms, or belongs to a separate system of drachms of silver, is uncertain.

Other coins bearing potential value marks are small pieces of Egypt, issued under Hadrian, which bear the mark «I» (= 10) in front of the emperor's bust (p. 552). It looks like a mark of value, but it appears on coins that are of different sizes and weights. As RPC concludes, this is a subject that probably needs to be revisited (see below).

One extraordinary feature of the period is the coinage issued under Hadrian by numerous cities for the deceased Antinous. Many of these are large, «medallic» objects, and their relationship to normal civic coinages issued by the same cities is uncertain. A high proportion of the Antinous coins are made of brass, whereas the normal civic coins analysed appear to be made of bronze, although further studies are necessary to determine whether the coinage of Antinous was exceptional (pp. 829–830). Antinous' coinage has long attracted the attention of forgers and creators of fantasy pieces, and, because a number of them have become muddled with genuine types in the scholarship, significant forgeries are catalogued alongside the genuine issues for comparison (e.g. «Corinth», pp. 40–41, nos. F265–F270).

The designs and inscriptions on provincial coins (Chapter 3) are of considerable interest to historians, although the enormous variety is difficult to summarise. In RPC III a thematic approach is adopted, which includes variants in spelling, portraits and titles of emperors and members of their families (which incorporates a further discussion of Antinous' coins and their possible functions), «pseudo-autonomous» coins lacking any imperial portrait, and notable reverse inscriptions and types. A developing trend towards a greater variety of reverse types than in the first century AD is noted (pp. 861–862), although the pattern varies from region

to region, with some regions continuing to issue coins with the same restricted repertoire of designs as before.

The final introductory chapter, «The Emperors and the Coinage», considers the evidence for the authorities behind issues of coins. It reviews some of the vocabulary used on the coins in association with personal names, adding new evidence, together with a survey of magistrate's titles. It also notes (p. 865) the earliest-known die links between civic bronze coins (Metropolis-Colophon and Dardanus-Ilium). The position has shifted from the tentative conclusions about imperial involvement in the authorising of civic coinage, introduced in RPC I, p. 3 («permission [to mint] was a requirement»): «Despite all this evidence, we have no definite indication from the designs and inscriptions that the production of provincial coinages involved anyone beyond those in the internal structure of city governance» (p. 867).

Possible indications of a broader system of control can be seen in the silver coinage, where there was some kind of arrangement for major silver mints in one region to mint coins for another region (the «centralised» or «co-operative» minting noted above). The mints at Rome, Alexandria and Antioch produced a variety of provincial silver coinages (and, in the case of Rome, some provincial coinages in base metal as well). The «system» (if that is what it can be called) seems to begin under Nero, reach its zenith under Trajan, and then disappears under Hadrian (p. 867). The pattern parallels a concerted, empire-wide effort to recycle old denarii, which began with Nero's reform c. AD 64 and came to an end under Trajan (see K. Butcher and M. Ponting, *The Metallurgy of Roman Silver Coinage*, Cambridge, 2014). Perhaps what we see here are provincial authorities at some level recycling old coinage into new ones using the main mints of the empire.

Various reasons for the production of provincial bronze coinages are explored. This includes military finance, concluding that in some cases a possible connection between periods of warfare and coin production can be advanced, but in other cases not. There is the case of base metal coins made at Rome for circulation in the east, particularly for Syria (pp. 870–871), a phenomenon that parallels the «centralised» minting of silver coinages. In recent years, thanks to more detailed consideration of the find spots, it has become apparent that the picture is more complex than was once thought. The coins in question are certainly found in the eastern provinces, but there are also finds of the same coins from the central Mediterranean and the western provinces that cannot be ignored. Potentially, then, this phenomenon is not quite the same as the «centralised» minting of silver coins, but, as RPC concludes, «the subject would benefit from further investigation» (p. 871). Imperial visits have sometimes been adduced as the occasion for an issue of coins, and RPC draws the conclusion that sometimes imperial visits prompted an issue of coins, but they appear «to have had no general effect on the coinage of most cities» (p. 872). Likewise imperial accessions and anniversaries (p. 873).

The structure of the catalogue, which occupies the whole of Part I, is more or less the same as for previous volumes, arranged by province from roughly west to east,

and with Asia divided according to conventus. Each section is provided with a general introduction and individual cities have introductions discussing the likely sequence of issues, the denominational structure, and previous studies dealing with the city's coinage. The coinage of Egypt occupies a substantial portion of the work (pp. 541–784). Even so, the authors confess that it is «extremely difficult to establish a definitive corpus» (p. 541). The introductory chapter to this section is an important study of Egyptian coinage in its own right. This was a period when the Egyptian coinage became much more complex, with the production of a variety of denominations, and output was much less episodic than before. A wide variety of types appears, particularly on the bronze coinage. From Trajan's year 11 (AD 107/8) regular production of large bronze coins (conventionally called drachms) began and continued every year thereafter, and for all but one year of Hadrian's reign. From Hadrian's year 11 (AD 126/7) these were normally accompanied by a suite of smaller bronze denominations. There is a valuable synthesis of finds that shows how the smaller denominations tend to be common among the excavated material, with a bias in favour of denominations with diameters between 12 and 25 mm. It is shown (p. 552) that there was a weight ratio for the bronze coins from larger to smaller of 1 : 2 : 3 : 6, which makes a system based on drachms and obols a likely interpretation of the system. The very smallest denominations are more difficult to place, though the suggested twelfths and twenty-fourths are plausible; however, as already pointed out above, some of the smaller coins of Hadrian have an iota (I = 10) before the bust, which is presumably a denominational mark. It is suggested that this system of marking might be a continuation of the system of bronze drachms found on earlier bronze coins of Cleopatra VII and Augustus. The final section of the introduction section on Egypt considers output and whether it can be linked to a wider picture of coin production. There is no link between production and warfare (p. 554). Nor does there appear to be a link between building projects in Alexandria and high output of coin. Possible relationships between reforms at Rome and the Egyptian coinage are explored, but it is concluded that this is perhaps unlikely.

After the catalogue of regular Alexandrian issues comes the section on the nome coins, with an essay written by Laurent Bricault. It is surprising how many specimens survive of many of these curious types. This is an enlightening study, showing how the coins do not deserve to be treated as a category separate from the regular coinage of Egypt minted at Alexandria (with which the nome coins share obverse dies). Indeed, the term «nome» is misleading, since not all of the coins refer to nomes: some refer to other entities in Egypt, including the Chora of the Alexandrians (p. 754). It is proposed that we should see the types (Egyptian deities) as primary, and the accompanying inscriptions as secondary. Bricault then draws a comparison with earlier Egyptian coinage of the first century, on which Graeco-Roman deities appear and are often named, and the very Egyptian deities represented on the «nome» coins: «On these coins we would then see represented some of the divinities of the chora whose names could not be spelled out because these were profoundly Egyptian» (p. 753). Thus the «nome» coins are not issues representing the nomes of Egypt, but coins representing Egyptian deities that had no Greek counterparts.

The final section of the catalogue deals with uncertain coins, including those issues that do not give an indication of the community that issued them, and which cannot yet be assigned with confidence to any mint; and coins that are too poorly preserved to be certain of the mint. The latter will no doubt be resolved given time; the former will probably require provenances. In the case of the group of coins of Trajan with Latin legends, nos. 6537–6545, the few find spots point to the upper Euphrates region; where the strange silver coins of Hadrian (nos. 6560–6562) come from is anybody's guess; and the Latin coins of Hadrian with the reverse ADVENTVS AVGVSTI COS III P P (nos. 6567–6568) are stylistically linked with Asia (pp. 787, 868). Could the coin of Antinous, no. 6569, be of Hadrianotherae, an intermediate denomination between nos 1631–1632 and 1633?

Preparation of the catalogue was clearly an enormous task. Typographical errors are very rare (e.g. «Neron» instead of «Nero», Comana, p. 369, or what appears to be the unnecessary heading «Publius» twice at Julia Gordus on p. 317). Some unique coins appear to be the product of misreadings, e.g. no. 1682 (Trajan, Mytilene) looks very like no. 1915 (Myrina, reading MYPI instead of MYTI), and no. 1562 (Trajan, Dardanus) seems to be from the same obverse die as no. 2678, and is presumably the same mint (Pamphylian Attalea). There is some overlap with the online version of RPC IV (e.g. Cyme, RPC III, no. 1938 is the same as RPC IV, temporary number 211; and RPC III, no. 1939 is the same as RPC IV, temporary number 212). In a project of this size and complexity it is perhaps inevitable that some minor errors of this sort will be found.

A surprisingly large number of the types catalogued are rare or even unique, suggesting that, for some cities at least, we may as yet have only a palimpsest of the full variety. But the bulk of the work has clearly been done, and any new discoveries are likely merely to finesse, rather than challenge, the schemes presented here. Thanks to RPC III, the «shape» of provincial coinage in the late first and early second centuries emerges: showing considerable continuity from the Flavian period, and not yet possessing the «self-conscious antiquarianism» that develops from the Antonine period onwards (p. 873). As with previous RPC volumes, this is a major achievement, and it will no doubt take its place alongside the other volumes as a standard reference.

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