

From aes signare to aes signatum

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FROM *AES SIGNARE* TO *AES SIGNATUM*

The term *aes signatum* seems to be taking an unconscionable time dying.¹ Used since the nineteenth century to describe two quite different phenomena, it is a term that is appropriate to neither, one of those comforting pseudo-antique terms, like the *constitutor* of a *municipium*, which the ancients never used. In the case of *aes signatum*, its existence has generated confusion the world could have lived without. Perhaps an exposition of the actual usages of the verb *signare*, in memory of Silvia Hurter, rigorous guardian of standards of exposition in this journal, may help to lay the ghost to rest.

First the two phenomena. One is a group of ferrous bronze bars, probably Etruscan in origin, but with outlying finds from Sicily to the Alps, datable to the sixth to fifth centuries BC. They mostly bear on one or both sides a design known as ‘ramo secco’ or ‘spina di pesce’, that can, however, hardly be taken as indicating any kind of authority behind their production. These bars could not have been used as metal without further refining, and were presumably intended to be money as bullion. The second is a group of bronze bars with recognisable types, some of them identifiably Roman, and with in two cases a legend designating them as Roman. The group has always been taken as Roman; and there are isolated examples of similar bars from communities close to Rome.²

J.H. Eckhel knew that some people thought that the former were coins, but he did not describe them as *aes signatum*: in talking generically of *numi ex aere gravi*, he referred to them thus, ‘ex iis, qui spinae typum habent et a nonnullis in moneta putantur, sunt qui pondere libras hodiernas V aequunt’.³ A. Gennarelli, in *La moneta primitiva* (Rome 1843), p. 76, talks of ‘frammenti di moneta quadrata’. H. Cohen, in *Médailles consulaires* (Paris 1857), pp. 349–50, talks of ‘des lingots ... ou des poids’, and in pls. 73–4 subsumes them under ‘as coulés’.

It seems to have been Th. Mommsen who made the fatal mistake of combining the physical evidence of the two types of currency bars with the textual evidence

¹ It is alive and well in A. ROMANO, *Economia naturale ed economia monetaria nella storia della condanna arcaica* (Milan 1986), who thinks that Livy I, 43, 3, shows that the legions were then paid; and that Dion. Hal. IX, 27, 3–4, talks of *aes signatum*; and in E. ERCOLANI COCCHI, in: A. MAGGIANI (ed.), *Pondera* (Modena 2001) pp. 113–41, ‘Misurare e valutare ... nel mondo romano’, at p. 131, fig. 72.

² A.M. BURNETT – P. CRADDOCK, in: J. SWADDLING (ed.), *Italian Iron Age Artefacts in the British Museum* (London 1986) pp. 127–30, ‘Italian currency bars’. The only find slightly to modify the pattern in M.H. CRAWFORD, *Coinage and Money under the Roman Republic* (London 1985) pp. 3–6 is from Lavello in Apulia (AIIN 43 (1996) p. 269).

³ *Doctrina numorum veterum* I (Vienna 1792) p. 86.

of Pliny, inventing the term *aes signatum*;⁴ even here, however, consistency was not maintained, with the illustrations in the French translation being described, as a sub-group of *Aes Grave*, as ‘lingots carrés’.⁵ But L. Sambon in 1870 already refers casually to *aes signatum*.⁶ And by the time we get to E. Babelon’s account of the Republican coinage in 1885, the terminology of *aes signatum* is well established, used indifferently for both types of bars mentioned above. Only *BMC Italy*, of 1873, with typical Anglo-Saxon insouciance about anything written in German, or even in French, continues (pp. 36-8) to talk of ‘ingots’. But maybe the insouciance was justified.

The modern muddle arises from two notorious passages of Pliny’s *Naturalis Historia*: XVIII, 12, ‘*Seruius rex ouium boumque effigie primum aes signauit*’; and XXXIII, 43, ‘*Seruius rex primus signauit aes; Romae antea rudi usos Timaeus tradit; signatum est nota pecudum*’.

Despite the fact that the ferrous bronze bars have no known association with Rome and do not bear anything that anyone would want to call a type, let alone sheep or oxen, people have been tempted to wonder whether a memory of the bars – which no-one in antiquity could conceivably have dated, had they seen one – created the tradition on *Seruius*.⁷

It is a temptation that should be firmly resisted, not least because when Pliny wrote of *Seruius* and *signare*, he meant coinage just like that of his own day, although he also knew, as did other parts of the Roman tradition, of the early form of Roman bronze coinage that is quite properly called *aes graue*, heavy (cast) bronze.

This emerges clearly from the other cases where Pliny uses the verb:⁸ XXXIII, 42, ‘*proximum scelus fuit eius qui primus ex auro denarium signauit ... populus Romanus ne argento quidem signato ante Pyrrhum regem deuictum usus est*’; 44, ‘*argentum signatum anno urbis CCCCLXXV Q. Ogulnio C. Fabio cos.*’; 46, ‘*(uictoriatum) ... est autem signatus Victoria*’; 47, ‘*postea placuit (aureos denarios) XXXX signari ex auri libris*’; 132, ‘*cum sit iustum LXXXIII (denarios) e libris signari*’; XXXIV, 1, ‘*docuimus quamdiu populus Romanus aere tantum signato usus est*’.

⁴ Geschichte des römischen Münzwesens (Berlin 1860) pp. 172–3 = Histoire de la monnaie romaine I (Paris 1865) pp. 176–7.

⁵ IV (1875) pp. 3–4.

⁶ Recherches sur les monnaies de la presqu’île italique (Naples 1870) p. 2.

⁷ C. AMPOLO, La Parola del Passato 29 (1974) pp. 382–8, ‘*Seruius rex primus signauit aes*’.

⁸ The fact eluded the examination ‘in dettaglio’ of F. Panvini Rosati, in: *Aes signatum. Un aspetto dell’economia dell’Emilia preromana* (Reggio Emilia 1988) pp. 19–24 = *Monete e medaglie I* (BdN, Supp. 37, 1, Rome 2004) pp. 79–84, idiosyncratically restricting *aes signatum* to the ferrous bronze bars.

Although the official name of the magistrates in charge of producing coinage at Rome under the Republic was ‘Illuiri aere argento auro flando feriundo’, and continued to be so, the verb *signare* seems to have become generalised by the late Republic to describe what they did, as in Cicero, *de legibus* III, 6, ‘aes argentum aurumue publice signanto’; evidently what was distinctive was the process of ‘signare forma publica p.R.’, as in the Lex de Gallia Cisalpina.⁹ So, although *signare* meant ‘to mark distinctively’, the word was used simply to describe the process of striking, because that had been for getting on for a couple of centuries the only process; and the single word *signare* clearly underlies the word χαράσσειν in line 61 of the Greek translation of the Lex portorii Asiae.¹⁰ To any Roman of the late Republic or early Empire, *aes signatum* was normal struck bronze coinage, not some funny cast bronze bar.

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Zusammenfassung

Der Begriff *aes signatum* ist eine neuzeitliche Wortschöpfung der Wissenschaft und sollte für gezeichnete Gussbarren nicht mehr verwendet werden. Er geht auf Theodor Mommsen zurück, der den Terminus prägte, nachdem er fälschlicherweise die Barren mit verschiedenen Stellen in Plinius’ *Naturalis Historia* in Verbindung gebracht hatte.

⁹ See M.H. CRAWFORD (ed.), *Roman Statutes* (London 1996), no. 28, Ch. XXII, line 25.

¹⁰ M. COTTIER – C. CROWTHER et al. (edd.), *The Customs Law of Asia* (Oxford 2008).

