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Haim Gitler and Matthew Ponting

*The Silver Coinage of Septimius Severus and his Family (193-211 AD)*

A Study of the Chemical Composition of the Roman and Eastern Issues

Glaux 16. Milan: Edizioni ennerre S.r.l., 2003. 157pp. 17 plates  
ISBN 88-87235-33-3, ISSN 1121-7472

This monograph centers on the analysis of 173 pieces of ancient silver. These include denarii of Rome and elsewhere, «Syrian» tetradrachms, and drachms of Caesarea in Cappadocia, as well as cast imitations and offal from an assemblage published by the same authors some time ago.

The focus on analysis is welcome. Soon after David Walker's huge series of analyses began to appear, it was evident that his methods produced peculiar results: high standard deviations within samples and what proved to be very high values for silver content. Both of these phenomena could be attributed to surface enrichment. Walker's streaks had permitted examination of only the surface of the coin, which was subject to leeching of baser metals and thus enhanced apparent silver content. There is a useful account of this recognition, along with the phenomenon of depletion silvering recognized by Cope, on pp. 11-13.

While the problem was recognized, little was done about it until Ponting himself, first in collaboration with Butcher and then with Gitler, used micro-drilling to penetrate to the core of coins; the samples thus retrieved were then analyzed by atomic absorption photospectrometry (AAS). Here the method is further advanced to include optical microscopy and scanning electron microscopy with energy dispersive analysis.

Ch. III («Analysis») presents the technical details, which will be of interest to anyone attempting to replicate the work. The principal conclusion here is the remarkable degree of consistency between results achieved by inductively-coupled plasma atomic emission spectrometry (ICP-AES) and those achieved by AAS, which are noted in Figs. 11 and 12. This is not only comforting in itself, but satisfies the authors that the techniques can be amalgamated and used together, which I take to mean that results obtained by one method are directly comparable with those obtained by the other. This in itself is a great advance, since heretofore data obtained by different methods could only be compared intuitively. Here data obtained by both methods are interdigitated: the results seem directly comparable with the exception that AAS data do not include results for arsenic and ICP-AES data do not include results for bismuth.

As the method of distinguishing coins from the various mints is not succinctly summarized here, it may be useful to tabulate it as follows:

	Lead	Tin	Nickel	Bismuth	Antimony	Arsenic
Rome	1.08%	< 1%	0.07%	higher	0.16% (AAS), > 0.15% (ICP-AES)	< 0.2%
“Emesa”	1,40%	> 1%	not given	spread	0.27% (AAS), < 0.1% (ICP-AES)	> 0.1%
“Laodicea”	0.66%	> 1%	0.23%	lower	0.03% (AAS), < 0.1% (ICP-AES)	> 0.1%

In Ch. IV («The material analysed») the authors acknowledge that the impetus for the study was the group of cast Severan denarii obtained by the Israel Museum in 1993 and later published. This acquisition made it desirable to obtain a basis for comparison, which was done on the basis of available material. Herein lies a problem, specifically that a surprisingly small number of Severan denarii come from appropriate archaeological contexts.

The authors offer a historical rationale for this as it applies to Middle Eastern hoards, but in fact the phenomenon can be observed elsewhere - though admittedly «elsewhere» includes a great number of hoards from outside the *limes*. Still, it is broadly true that hoards with heavy representation of second-century coins have very thin representation of Severan and later coins, while those of the Severan and later periods tend to exclude earlier denarii. If relative fineness is arguably at issue here, it would have been useful to have analyses of some coins of Commodus, so that there would be a reliable basis of comparison of the fineness of his coins against those of Septimius.

The authors recognize that their data can be used to help sort out the morass of early Severan denarii, and propose the following reattributions on the basis of their analyses (p. 24): cat. nos. 39, 41, 48, 51, 61, 62, 67, 77 from Rome to Laodicea; and of coins whose obverse/reverse type combinations were struck at both Rome and Laodicea, cat. nos. 21, 34, 44, 45, 58, 71-74, 80 and 81 to Rome, 35 47, 66, and 82 to Laodicea. The argument applies, of course, only to these specimens, but if correct it would confirm what has long been suspected, that the conventional attributions enshrined in BMC and RIC are not wholly authoritative.

The conclusion that certain coins attributed to Rome belong in the east, and vice-versa, is more significant than, perhaps, the authors realize. The early Severan period was the first manifestation of long-term, substantial denarius production in the east, and our (apparent) ability to assign varieties to western or eastern origin has been the basis of considerable argument regarding mobility of coin: the appearance of eastern denarii in the west, and vice-versa, is good evidence for velocity of movement.<sup>1</sup> The questions raised here undercut the ground on which such arguments stand.

Whether the Ponting-Gitler reattributions will withstand scrutiny is not yet determinable. It would be desirable to use the results obtained here as a kind of

<sup>1</sup> See most recently C. HOWGEGO, *The Denarii of Septimius Severus and the Mobility of Roman Coin: a reply*, NC 162, 2002, pp. 339-345, commenting on R.P. DUNCAN-JONES, *The Denarii of Septimius Severus and the Mobility of Roman Coin*, NC 161, 2001, pp. 75-89 with earlier bibliography.

survey, pinpointing those emissions that deserve further analyses, in an effort to establish whether results from single coins can be generalized to larger samples.

\* \* \*

The book has certain problems as a presentation. The illustrative figures are jumbled: they are not presented consecutively, apparently because it was deemed desirable to group black-and-white figures in one place and color ones in another; as the pages on which they appear are numbered, page references might have been included. There are occasional anomalies in the English, and the number of typographical errors in the text is not liable to inspire confidence in the tables of data. On the other hand the plates are remarkably clear and useful.

More substantially, the authors have used the terms «Laodicea» and «Emesa» throughout to identify Septimius' eastern mints. It is time to admit that, convenient as these labels may be, there is no more evidence for «Laodicea» and «Emesa» than for the Man in the Moon. The intellectual genesis of these attributions is the famous «demotion» of Antioch after it supported Pescennius Niger, but there is no implication in the surviving texts that this included loss of minting privileges; and Emesa is just another large city. The best purely numismatic evidence is, of course, for Antioch (a successor mint to that of Pescennius Niger) and Caesarea in Cappadocia. At the one, stylistic and epigraphic similarities, as well as sharing of types, point to a direct continuation of striking, employing the same engravers, after Septimius seized the city from Pescennius.<sup>2</sup> At the other, the Greek-Latin die links reported by various scholars and summarized by Buttrey seem decisive, at least for Pescennius. This accounts for the beginnings; where the mints may have gone after that, if indeed they moved at all, is anybody's guess, but it ought to be recognized as no more than a guess.

The question may seem only tangentially relevant to the authors' purpose, but it is soluble by the methods they use. Surely the continuity between groups of Pescennian and Severan denarii ought to be measurable analytically; given the relative rarity of Niger's denarii, the accumulation of a sample may pose problems, but in the abstract this is exactly the kind of application to which the authors' methods lend themselves.

I want to close with what may seem a semantic quibble: this has to do with the authors' distinction between attributions made on analytical grounds and those made on «numismatic» grounds. They have a clear preference for the former. Now the authors do not define what they mean by the latter; it seems to

<sup>2</sup> *Pace* R. BICKFORD-SMITH, *The Imperial Mints in the East for Septimius Severus*: it is time to begin a thorough reconsideration, *RIN* 96, 1994/5, pp. 53-71 at p. 59: «Some scholars see identity of style between Pescennius Niger's Antioch denarii and Severan coins [with COS III] and hope to find die-links between them, but I find this expectation unpersuasive.» But by limiting the case to die links he understates it, even though he cites (n. 21) T.V. BUTTREY, *The Denarii of Pescennius Niger*, *NC* 152, 1992, pp. iv-xxii.

refer to those criteria of type and style, or sometimes just style, that distinguish eastern coins from those that emanated from the capital.

But the verbiage is flawed, if not the thinking. There is no independent «analytical» classification of the coins: it would be impossible to take any single coin, even against this background of new, (presumably) precise and accurate analyses, and attribute it to one mint or another solely on the basis of metal content. As the authors have here demonstrated, this fundamental constituent of a coin's identity and provenance has been inadequately considered in the past; but we are now in a position to employ it, *in the context of all other aspects*, in securing a coin's attribution. Ideally the term «numismatic» should be taken to embrace analysis as well, and we may hope that this work has advanced that principle. Would it be too much to ask that others attempt to apply it?

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