Money matters: coin finds and ancient coin use


**Review by**

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[Authors and titles are listed at the end of this review.]

The papers collected in this volume originated in a conference on money and ritual in the Greco-Roman world held in 2015. It also serves as a festschrift of sorts for Hans-Christoph Noeske, the doktorvater of both editors and a scholar of coin finds in Roman Egypt. Coin finds — though catalogued meticulously in many of the articles, with pictures — are not the focus of most of the articles in this collection. Instead, the broad theme of the volume is coin finds: the sites and contexts in which archaeologists find ancient coins, and what they might learn from them about how the coins were used. The articles are mostly in English with some in German (4), French (3) and Italian (3).

Coins were produced in large numbers and meant to circulate. People sometimes while trying to put them somewhere safe. They are thus useful for dating lay and buildings, for reconstructing economic histories, and for understanding how ancient states used them for propaganda purposes, not to mention their importance in reconstructing chronologies. Scholars of the ancient world are reliant upon them in many ways. This is why thinking about the contexts in which coins are found and which they were used in the ancient world, is so important.

The articles are divided into four sections. In the first, Method and...
innovative approaches to dating coin finds, especially hoards. Hoards are accumulation of coins found buried in the ground, or deposited in and under buildings. Hoards are mysterious: someone must have put them there after collecting them, and then neglected to recover them. The origins of each hoard are an unsolved mystery. Wolf offers a new typology of hoards, thinking about how they were all at once? for what reason?), and not only why and how they were created. Jean-Marc Doyen and Fabien Pilon study new methods for dating coins not by the date of their creation, but by their wear and use, which better indicates their age. Kevin Butcher discusses coin distribution in the Roman empire and offers an intriguing parallel from the Ottoman empire, in which small change was a commodity traded locally.

Most papers in the collection deal with finds of small change. Thus Site Finds, Komnick discusses a bronze coin from Apulia, presently located in Bonn, in the context of ancient coin finds in the Northwest provinces of the Roman empire offers a survey of coins of Nerva with the image of Neptune on them, from where they were minted, and explains this in terms of Nerva’s Glevum (modern Gloucester), rather than as a deliberate decision to supply the provinciae Britanniae with coins bearing propaganda about games played in the Circus Maximus. Pierre-Marie Guihard documents the production and circulation of early fourth century Egypt against the backdrop of the crisis of the third century. Bruno Callegher surveys nummi and false nummi from the North-African provinces.

Staying on false coinage, in a subsequent section of the book, Jérémie Chameroy shows, using XRF analysis, that the consecration coins of Claudius Gothicus were first produced at the official mint, then also by professionals outside of the mint in Rome, and finally in the provinces as well. He connects this phenomenon to testimony about mint workers in 270-271, and to the broader scene of the monetary crisis of the third century. Fraudulent coinage, says Chameroy, is a sign of weakness that was not able to produce sufficient coinage to meet the needs of the state. It was exploited by “speculators, merchants, or maritime conveyors” as a cultural phenomenon that requires further scholarly attention: Do users of fabricated coinage conceive of it as a fraudulent object? Do they believe that they are engaging in criminal or immoral activity, or that perhaps they are stepping in to do the work the state cannot do?

The essays in the sections on Hoards and on Ritual Depositions discuss various contexts in which coins are found and grouped together, as well as the reasons for that grouping. The focus of these sections on ritual reflects the topic of the conference on money matters: coin finds and ancient coin use – Bryn Mawr Classical Review.
and ritual out of which this edited volume grew. Adam Rogers’ study of coin hoards with buildings, often not considered hoards at all, suggests we should think beyond the visible world and consider notions of protection and sacrifice as explanations for secreted cash. Richard Reece notes that “small change is not hoarded” (155); but it is found in large quantities in many situations, including ritual deposits in temples. This broad cross-section of evidence requires a re-thinking of what hoarding means: is it just a functional secreting of coins for safe-keeping, or is something else going on? How “pagan” uses of coins were re-employed as Christian practices? Joachim Gorecky’s paper discusses coins intentionally deposited in buildings, often not considered hoards at all, suggests we should think beyond the visible world and consider notions of protection and sacrifice as explanations for secreted cash. Richard Reece notes that “small change is not hoarded” (155); but it is found in large quantities in many situations, including ritual deposits in temples. This broad cross-section of evidence requires a re-thinking of what hoarding means: is it just a functional secreting of coins for safe-keeping, or is something else going on? How “pagan” uses of coins were re-employed as Christian practices?

Sophia Zoumbaki’s article on Greek thesauroi from the classical period down to the first centuries of the common era is a remarkable study of hoards that collection boxes are evidence that coins were deposited. Zoumbaki’s corpus (or, should we say, a hoard) of such boxes, or evidence for their existence (198-203). She also offers some discussion on what the religious meaning of gifts might have been, and which deities preferred receiving gifts of small coins. Joachim Gorecky’s paper discusses coins intentionally deposited in buildings, often not considered hoards at all, suggests we should think beyond the visible world and consider notions of protection and sacrifice as explanations for secreted cash. Richard Reece notes that “small change is not hoarded” (155); but it is found in large quantities in many situations, including ritual deposits in temples. This broad cross-section of evidence requires a re-thinking of what hoarding means: is it just a functional secreting of coins for safe-keeping, or is something else going on? How “pagan” uses of coins were re-employed as Christian practices?

I noticed with some sadness that Jewish studies are absent from the book on the findings, even in cases when Jews are known to have deposited the coins at a site (e.g., Leatherbury’s discussion of Mamre on p. 257). Similarly absent is the coinage of the two Jewish revolts, which overstruck Roman coins Ancient Hebrew legends and aniconic images. Coin finds in Jewish synagogues in the Roman empire, are absent from the section on ritual deposits. This is part the result of the festschrift format, but also the result of departmental and institutional fences. Bringing these matters into dialogue with the findings of this book would be an important contribution.

The book is handsomely produced and beautifully bound and printed.
photographs are sharp, detailed and numerous. The folio format at times is cumbersome but understandable given need for tables and maps. A good part of the book consists of tables, diagrams, maps and sketches. Scientific analyses of ceramics and metalwork are utilized and cited. Individual coins are described in detail, and All this offers specialists — archaeologists and numismatists — a wealth of information. We wish the pictures were larger, perhaps in color, but they are professionally executed and generally sharp. But the potential of this information is much greater. Students of religious studies, for instance, should examine this material to try to define “ritual” and “the mundane.” Scholars of written sources might wish to corroborate or challenge the evidence through an examination of literary sources on hoarding of money. Scholars of other traditions, including but not limited to Jewish and Early Christian studies, should examine this material and see how it informs their own work. If coins were ritual objects in the Roman empire, does this impact our understanding of the temple tax, gifts to the poor, or the idea that coins given to charity can buy “treasure in heaven?” If coins can protect a building, we should not be surprised to see them in the walls and floors of synagogues. Scholars of the ancient economy need to assess these data and see how money was used and abused in the ancient world. The economic significance of hoarding and ritual depositing, and its costs to the broader economy, does impact our understanding of these practices. Thus, this book is important not only for the archaeologists and numismatists for whom it is intended (p. 6), but for any student of the ancient world who has an interest in the nexus of the ancients and their coins. It is rich soil on which modern studies can and should grow.

Authors and Titles


Method and Theory
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https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2020/2020.10.33/
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