

# Holding history – coins of the late Roman Republic

by David Hall

It is with some trepidation that I start writing this article for the august audience who read the *ARA News*. I am neither an archaeologist nor an historian, but a retired IT consultant who has had a lifelong interest in Roman coinage. The interest started when I bought a coin from a local bookshop at the age of thirteen, and after some research I discovered that it was a sestertius of the Emperor Severus Alexander (reigned AD222–235). That sparked an interest in coins in general, and over the next few years I became most interested in the study and collection of Roman coins. Many collectors seek out coins in pristine condition, struck perfectly centrally and with little or no wear. I am, however, happy with coins that look a little more 'lived in', because to me that gives a stronger connection to those who made and used the coins in ancient times – and they are a good deal cheaper to buy!

One of my main areas of interest now is in the coinage of the late Roman Republic – roughly from the death of Pompey the Great to the supremacy of Octavian. It is a constant source of wonder to me that I can handle coins that are directly associated with major historical characters and events (hence the title of this article, *Holding history*).

In this article I would like to give you a few examples of coins that have strong connections with historical events in the late Roman Republic. Please note that the coins shown are not superb rarities from major national collections, but from my own private collection.

The first coin is a silver denarius of Julius Caesar minted in 49–48BC (Fig. 1). The coin shows on the obverse (the 'head' side) an elephant trampling on a dragon or serpent, above the name CAESAR, and on the reverse (the 'tail' side) is shown a set of priestly implements (Julius Caesar was Pontifex Maximus). The coin was struck around the time that Caesar crossed the Rubicon into Italy on 10 January 49BC, thus initiating a civil war by returning to Italian soil while still holding his proconsular military command in Gaul. This coin is quite common today, and was presumably struck in vast quantities to finance Caesar's military operations. It was probably struck by a military mint moving with Caesar.

You will have noticed that this coin is off-struck on both sides, but especially on the obverse. These ancient coins were hand struck, using two dies with the disc of blank metal between them, then hit with a heavy hammer. Many ancient coins are found with striking problems, either off-struck or with areas of weakness. This reduces their attraction to many collectors, but to me this is all part of the character of the coin.

The next coin was probably issued in 48BC in the name of the moneyer Lucius Hostilius Saserna (whose career is otherwise unknown), named on the reverse L HOSTILIVS SASERN (Fig. 2). The coin focusses on Caesar's recent conquests in Gaul and shows on the obverse the head of a Gallic warrior with long flowing hair (presumably limed), and on the reverse a Gallic warrior in a two-horse chariot driven by a charioteer.

The head of the Gallic warrior has been imagined to be that of Vercingetorix (the chieftain of the Arveni) but this is rather fanciful. However, the coin does give a wonderful image of a



Fig. 1. Denarius of Julius Caesar. Weight 4.0gms, diameter 18mm. Photo: © David Hall.



Fig. 2. Coin of Lucius Hostilius Saserna. Weight 3.6gms, diameter 18mm.

Photo: © David Hall.



Fig. 3. Coin of Cnaeus Pompey Junior. Weight 3.8gms, diameter 18mm.

Photo: © David Hall.



Fig. 4. Coin of Mark Antony and Lepidus. Weight 1.9gms, diameter 13mm.

Photo: © David Hall.

Gallic warrior, and a rare representation of how the Gallic aristocracy used chariots in battle.

Figure 3 shows one of the principal coins struck for Cnaeus Pompey Junior (son of Pompey the Great) in 46–45BC in Spain, after the defeat of the Pompeian forces by Caesar at *Pharsalus* and the further defeat of the regrouped forces at *Munda* in North Africa. The coin shows on the obverse a head of Roma with the legend M P OBLICIVS LEG PRO (*Marcus Poblivius Legatus Pro Praetore*), and the reverse shows Hispania presenting a palm branch to a Pompeian soldier with the legend CN MAGNVS IMP (*Cnaeus Magnus Imperator*).



Fig. 5. Denarius of Cassius. Weight 4.0gms, diameter 19mm. Photo: © David Hall.



Fig. 6. Denarius of Lucius Livineius. Weight 3.6gms, diameter 18mm. Photo: © David Hall.

Jumping forward a few years, the next coin is a tiny silver quinarius (a half denarius) struck in 43BC in the names of Mark Antony and Lepidus. It was struck in Gaul after an alliance had been reached between Antony and Lepidus, but before the triumvirate was formed with Octavian. The coin shows the priestly offices held by the two men – Antony was an augur, and Lepidus had been elected as Pontifex Maximus after the death of Julius Caesar. The obverse legend is M ANT IMP (*Marcus Antonius Imperator*) and the reverse legend is LEP IMP (*Lepidus Imperator*).

You will notice in this case that the flan (the disc of silver) is too small for the dies so we are missing some of the design and legend on each side. This is not uncommon with the coins of this period, possibly because of hurried manufacture in less than ideal conditions.

The next coin is a silver denarius struck in the name of Cassius (one of the principal assassins of Julius Caesar) by his lieutenant Lentulus Spinther (Fig. 5). It is thought to have been struck early in 42BC when Brutus and Cassius met at *Smyrna* in the build up of the military campaign that saw them defeated by Mark Antony and Octavian at *Philippi* in October 42BC. The obverse shows a bust of Liberty with the legend LEIBERTAS and C. CASII IMP. The reverse shows a jug and *lituus* (symbolic of Cassius' membership of the priestly order of augurs) with the legend LENTVLVS SPINT.

Figure 6 shows a silver denarius struck under Lucius Livineius Regulus, showing a fine portrait of Julius Caesar. The reverse type is of a bull charging right (although the significance of the type eludes me), with the legend L LIVINEIVS REGVLVS. The coin is thought to have been struck in 42BC, about two years after the murder of Julius Caesar. A wide range of coins were struck with posthumous portraits of Caesar, showing support for the Caesarian cause.

The next coin, a large silver cistophorus (three denarius piece), was struck in *Ephesus* in mid-39BC and shows an attempted reconciliation between Mark Antony and Octavian (Fig. 7). The obverse shows Antony (with the legend M ANTONIVS IMP

COS DESIG ITER ET TERT), while the reverse shows Octavia, the sister of Octavian (with the legend III VIR R P C). A treaty was signed between Antony and Octavian in *Brundisium* in 40BC, and the new accord was supported by the marriage between Antony and Octavia. Octavia was a loyal and faithful wife to Antony, and they had two daughters, but Antony returned to Cleopatra in 36BC.

The following coin is Egyptian rather than Roman – it is included because it shows a portrait of Cleopatra VII, the lover of Julius Caesar and Mark Antony (Fig. 8).

Figure 9 shows a silver denarius, part of the well-known 'legionary' series struck for Mark Antony between autumn 32BC and spring 31BC, prior to his defeat at *Actium*. The obverse of these coins show a galley sailing right, with rowers. The legend is ANT AVG III VIR R P C. The reverse of these coins shows a legionary eagle between two standards, and each coin honours a specific legion (the Fifteenth Legion in this case) – in total, twenty-three legions are so honoured. After the Battle of *Actium* the Fifteenth Legion was either disbanded or at least lost its separate identity.

The final coin in this short article is a silver denarius minted for Octavian in autumn 31BC to summer 30BC, after the Battle of *Actium* and before the suicides of Antony and Cleopatra in Egypt (Fig. 10). On the obverse the coin shows a very fine portrait of Octavian, while the reverse shows victory standing on a globe holding a wreath and palm branch. The reverse legend is simply CAESAR DIVI F, 'Son of the Divine Caesar'. An interesting aspect of this coin is the pronounced dent just before the nose of Octavian. This is not accidental damage, but a deliberate banker's mark made by a punch. This was done to establish that the coin was solid silver, and not silver plated over a base metal core. There seems to have been an epidemic of coin forgery in the Roman Republic (and continuing into the Imperial period) and many high-quality silver plated coins entered circulation.

I hope that I have been successful in this article in giving you some insight into the fascinating world of Roman coins, and



Fig. 7. Cistophorus of Mark Antony and Octavian. Weight 11.5gms, diameter 28mm. Photo: © David Hall.



Fig. 8. Coin of Cleopatra VII. Weight 18.0gms, diameter 25mm. Photo: © David Hall.



Fig. 9. Denarius of Mark Antony. Weight 3.5gms, diameter 18mm.

Photo: © David Hall.



Fig. 10. Denarius of Octavian. Weight 3.7gms, diameter 22mm. Photo: © David Hall.

the strong connections that they make with major historical characters. You will also have seen that the coins are not uniform like modern coins, but have many manufacturing and other defects (like the banker's mark shown above) that give you some insights into how the coins were made and used. Perhaps when you have the opportunity to handle some ancient coins (or just look at them in a museum) you will understand a little more and ask yourself questions about why the coins were made, who used them and how the coins survived through the millennia to be available for us to study today.

### References

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