

PROPAGANDA AND SPIN: the introduction of coins

THE ADOPTION OF COINAGE

When the Romans arrived in the north of England they brought with them a major innovation – coinage. Prior to this coins had only been used in the south and east of Britain and even in these regions it is a subject of debate whether or not tribal leaders were using coins as currency or as means of legitimizing their own position and reaffirming their distinctive identities.

The Roman monetary economy had existed before the collapse of the Republic and been a corner stone of reforms made by Augustus in 27 BC.

The payment of tributes in goods and services was a common feature of inter-tribal relationships prior to the arrival of the Romans but a new form of taxation necessitated the introduction of coinage into the north of Britain.

The Roman authorities collected taxes from their provinces; the need to feed Rome and maintain its institutions was after all a prime motive for conquest. Some of this was collected in kind to service the demands of the army but other parts were collected in coin further monetarising the local economy.

An additional and important incentive for the adoption of coinage by local populations was the increased market for goods provided by the army. Three times a year soldiers were paid in coin and after deductions for food, kit and the pension fund the men were still left with enough to buy extra items, providing a boost to the local economy.

A SINGLE CURRENCY

The use of a single currency imposed on the countries it conquered was a key to the success of the Roman Empire. Trade transactions between regions were simplified, taxation was easier to collect and distribute further binding the indigenous populations to the authority of Rome and regular payment of the army, crucial to the stability of government, was easier.

Equally important was the propaganda role the coins themselves could play in enshrining a major change of policy, Constantine's adoption of Christianity as the state religion for example, or promoting government.

COINS AS PROPAGANDA

Imperial Portraits

All coins showed the emperor's head on the obverse side leaving the populations in no doubt as to who was in control. Consequently the first thing an emperor did when he came to power, even if he only ruled for a few months, was to mint coins showing his portrait.

During the Year of the Four Emperors, the civil war that ended with Vespasian becoming emperor, each claimant issued coins with slogans reinforcing their right to be ruler. These ranged from appeals to the people from Galba, who claimed to be 'the saviour of the citizens', to the overt 'Victory to Otho'. Vitellius and Vespasian used the office of emperor to further their cause. Vitellius talked of 'harmony' and Vespasian, 'victory'. The fact that each man was in power for only a few months didn't matter, the important thing was to get the message across. When he finally became emperor, Vespasian issued coins with the slogan 'Rome rises again'.

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The emperor's image portrayed was not an idealised one but a recognisable portrait of the person. This reflected the notion that the Emperor was the First Citizen of the Republic rather than a king. Since the expulsion of their king in c 508 BC by the Roman nobles the people of Rome did not want to be considered as anything other than republicans.

The images on the reverse side were used to show the Empire or emperor in a positive light. Some celebrated the victories of the Roman army, others, particularly after a civil war, were used to show that peace had returned.

Images & Symbols of Empire

The use of coins throughout the Empire helped create cohesion and unity amongst the provinces and the images on the reverse side frequently promoted the superiority of the Roman state. All of the symbols and imagery used reflected Roman and the Mediterranean culture rather than that of the Northern provinces such as Britain. The language used was Latin. At the time of the conquest neither of these would have been familiar to the majority of local Britons and certainly not to those inhabiting the area that was to become the Empire's most northerly frontier.

The eagle, symbol of the god Jupiter, clutching the globe in his talons on the reverse of the *dupondius* of Vespasian is a powerful image of Rome as ruler of the world. Other images on coins refer to Roman customs or depict mythical animals that would have been familiar to classical audiences.

Alongside the images are slogans such as *Fortunae Reduci* (the return of good fortune) and *Salus Publica* (public safety).

Foreign Victories & Defeated Enemies

Coins minted to celebrate the victories of the Empire over their enemies often depict the defeated people as a sad figure on the reverse of the coin. They might be accompanied by a triumphant Roman or a patriotic slogan. For example, after the sack of Jerusalem in 71 AD and the successful repression of the Jewish Revolt by Vespasian's elder son, Titus, a gold *aureus* was issued inscribed *IMP VESPA CAESAR AVGVS / IVSTITIA IMP* (Emperor Vespasian Caesar Augustus / The Justice of the Imperator, in this context meaning The Justice of Titus). It is highly likely that the gold for the coins came from the melted down treasures from the Temple in Jerusalem, a hugely potent symbol of repression and the exercise of power.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- ♦ Queen Victoria issued coins as Empress of India after the British had removed the last Mughal emperor in 1857. The title was used until 1947 when India gained independence
- ♦ The single European currency introduced in 1993 brings with it many of the benefits of the Roman system but also highlights the pitfalls to individual countries when the economy of one region fails.
- ♦ The presence of the Army training grounds at Otterburn in Northumberland significantly contributes to the local economy.