

HISTORY, ARCHEOLOGY AND NUMISMATICS: REPRESENTATIONS IN THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE

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Abstract

The article begins with a description of the iconography as document history. The image in Antiquity had a specific function: to present a particular social group, mostly illiterate, something that represented the edge of power. She not only legitimized an emperor or king, was a kind of propaganda. As a main corpus, we will present the numismatic collection of the National Museum of History, Rio de Janeiro, important archaeological collection Brazilian yet understudied

Keywords

Money; power; Rome; iconography.

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Resumo

O artigo começa com uma descrição da iconografia como documento histórico. A imagem na Antiguidade tinha uma função específica: apresentar a um determinado grupo social, em sua grande maioria analfabeto, algo que representasse a orla do poder. Ela não apenas legitimava um imperador ou rei, funcionava como uma espécie de propaganda política. Como *corpus* principal, apresentaremos a coleção numismática do Museu Histórico Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, importante acervo arqueológico brasileiro, ainda pouco estudado.

Palavras-Chaves

Moeda; poder; Roma; iconografia.

Introduction

The use of coins as a source is nothing new. We do not intend here to explore all those who have followed this path, but we will cite some authors who have worked with such documentation. As for us, we will analyze the political propaganda represented by iconography, through a simple content analysis, trying to identify both historical and aesthetic connotations.

Man, during his passage through the planet, developed several symbolic forms, both artistic and linguistic, expressed by his consciousness. In this sense, the imagery representation, present on the obverses and reverses of currency, sought to be universal, legitimizing various political regimes.

The currency, as a document, can inform about the most varied aspects of a society. Both political and state, as juridical, religious, mythological, aesthetic.

The iconographic impression of the monetary pieces, leaving aside the inscriptions, reveals different figures: animals, plants, coats of arms, objects, buildings and more or less stylized emblems.

Contemporary society can hardly link currency to a means of communication between distant peoples. To the possessor of a certain foreign currency, it spoke to him by the noble metal or not in which it was minted, by the type and by the legend.

The first informed him of the wealth of a kingdom and the other two elements told him something about art, that is, the greater or lesser technical improvement used in the manufacture of circulating currency, about the issuing power and, above all, about the ideology. political-religious that gave him the body. It is within this last aspect that we intend to explore the numismatic source.

Generally, these figures refer to the place of minting and the respective authority, clearly designated for their contemporaries by a figure, an attitude, or attributes whose meanings today often escape us.

Coins and the study of Late Antiquity

Although there are no notable creations in the period known as Late Antiquity, about numismatic representations, we should mention that many reverses display the theme of city gates, a way for the emperors to

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demonstrate their interest in keeping the population safe from “barbaric” attacks. The only two exceptions, according to Gomes Marques, are the doors of Trèves, in a solid of Constantine; and a medallion representing the gates of London, by Constâncio II (Marques, 1982: 133).

There is controversy regarding this statement by Gomes Marques. Sears agrees with him, identifying the obverse as the gates of London. Cohen claims to be a military camp or stronghold. Sixteen of the eighteen pieces in the MHN collection feature this representation, a star that, according to RIC (Roman Imperial Coinage) and Cohen himself (Cohen, 1892: 437), identifies coins minted in the East. When analyzing the respective exerges or land line, finding ARLQ (Arles), R□Q (Rome), SAMNTH (Antioch), SMHA (Heraclea), SMNE (Nicomedia), SMK□ (Sisico) among others, we agree with the authors above.

From the 3rd century onwards, there began to be a variation of coins that brought buildings or military constructions as a theme. In this case, we must highlight a certain originality of the coinage, as no other similar representations were found in the collections referring to the 4th century, both in the MHN and in the oldest catalogs researched by us.



Image 01: photo by Cláudio Umpierre Carlan, National Historical Museum, Rio de Janeiro, 1998.

Coin of Emperor Constantius II, son and political heir of Constantine I the Great. Bronze piece, called AE3, minted between the years 324 and 337, in Nicomedia (exergo or land line SMNE, second currency house). Excellent visualization of both obverse and reverse. On the obverse, the legend FL IVL CONSTANCIVS NOB C (Flávio Júlio Constâncio Nobilíssimo Cêsar, the title most noble was intended for members of the imperial family). The details of the hair, robe and diadem are very well represented. On the reverse, a representation of a building, fortress or cathedral appears, with two circular towers and a star just above. According to Cohen it would be part of an open military camp. Gomes Marques adds that both the pieces by Constâncio II and that of his father, Constantino, are the ones that best represent the themes that involve the constructions.

State of conservation in good condition (BC), diameter 1.01mm, weight 2.17g, high reverse 11 hours.

Many of these generals/rulers allowed the entry of Germanic peoples, commonly called barbarians, to the imperial borders. However, they had to cultivate the land, serve in the Roman army, commanded by their chiefs, and guard the borders. Even so, Aureliano, concerned with the number of peoples that entered the empire, ordered the construction of a network of fortifications, which will serve as a model for future peoples. As we can analyze in the following representation:



Image 02: photo by Cláudio Umpierre Carlan, August 2007.

Saint Paul's Gate, Wall of Aurelian, Rome, Italy. Wall built by Emperor Aurelian (214 or 215 - 275), to prevent the invasions of barbarian peoples. Of the original 19 km, approximately 12 km have survived. The walls were 3.5 m thick by 8 m high. During the government of Emperor Honorius (384 - 423), circular towers were built (characteristic of Late Antiquity) and the height of the walls was increased to 16 m. Initially the gate was named Ostiense, because it was the trade route to the port of Ostia (amphoras of wine and oil), via the Tiber River. It was later renamed São Paulo. The front of the gate is in the same direction as St. Paul's Basilica, on the same avenue. Today, located next to Ostiense Station, in the Testaccio district, built by Mussolini to house the working class.

According to the Dictionary of Semiotics, the meaning of the term "construction" appears as a synonym for "artificial" as opposed to "natural", a reference to the action of man that transforms nature (Greimas; Courtés, 1979: 80). In an imperial policy in which currency has a great power of circulation, the inhabitants of the vast Roman Empire would become aware of the work carried out by their ruler. In addition, there is still the meaning of security represented by the fortification itself.

These captions were Latin abbreviations, relating to the obverse and reverse images. Thus, the written/image union occurs. The receiver of that piece would know how to identify its ruler, its symbolic messages. There were all kinds of signs, geometric figures, punctuation signs, stars, animals, plants, coats of arms, which carried a ruling/ruled message to the vast Roman world.

In political representations, the iconographic richness is more prominent in the period of the tetrarchy, but we will not neglect the other periods of Roman History. As an example, PROVIDENTIA DEORVM, IOVI / HERCVLES (Diocletian and Maximian together), VIRTVTI AVGG, PAX (female figure), PRINCI A INVENTVTIS, BEATA (Altar with vows on the coins of Crispus), PROVIDENTIA CAESS (military camp or fortress, Constantine I and II, Constantius II, Gallus, Constant, Valentinian I), the she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus (no caption, Constantine), PROVIDENTIA AVGG (military camp, Licinius), IOVI / CAESAR, VIRTVS (Licinius the son), CASTOR / POLVX (Maxêncio); temple with a round dome, without legend, minted after the death of Maxentius' son Romulus, still a child (allusion to Caesar's appointment on the obverse).

The coin proves to be an excellent source, because from its analysis we find several aspects that cover the series in its entirety. That is, political, state, legal, religious, economic, mythological, aesthetic aspects. Being able to inform about the most varied retrospect of a society. It bears witness to certain cultural relationships important to the historian. But we cannot forget that currency as a document is not a reflection of a simple economic warming, but it is another parallel event. A materiality, constituted by sedimentary layers of interpretations: “the document, is thus, archeologically thought as a monument (Jenkins, 2001: 11).

Unfortunately, in some Brazilian academic centers they remain stuck to the positivist and historicist model of the 19th century: “without textual documentation, there is no history”. This thought impairs both the work on the Ancient World and studies in Colonial Brazil, periods in which written documentation is rarer and more complex. Thus, many young and promising researchers are removed from Antiquity, being forced to adapt to another line of research, preferably History of Brazil, 19th and 20th centuries.

We often forget the expansion of the notion of document, defended by the Annales School in 1930, described in the book *Combate pela História* Lucien Febvre:

...History is made with written documents, without a doubt. When they exist. But it can be done, it must be done without written documents, if there are none. With all that the historian's ingenuity can allow him to use to make his honey, in the absence of the usual flowers. So with words. With signs. With landscapes and tiles. With ways of cultivation and weeds. With moon eclipses and oxen yokes. With stone examinations by geologists and analysis of metal swords by chemists. In a word, with everything that belongs to man, depends on man, serves man, expresses man, signifies the presence, activity, tastes and ways of being of man... (Febvre, 1985: 249).

On the other hand, we have in Brazil a large amount of documentation, iconographic or not, referring to Classical Antiquity. There is an immense range of action for young researchers who want to follow this path. Many times we teachers discourage or teach the wrong way to our students. We choose the most practical and easiest for them, or for us. We recommend a website rather than a museum collection. I have observed in many congresses, students presenting images of unreliable sites, without properly identifying them. While the collection of the National Historical Museum, for example, remains closed, little known by the academic world.

Considerations

Power cannot be apprehended through the study of conflict, struggle and resistance, except in its most restricted manifestations. Power is not characteristic of a ruling class or elite, nor can it be attributed to one of them. For Foucault, power is a strategy assigned to functions. Power originates neither in politics nor in the economy, and that is not where its bases are found. It exists as an infinitely complex network of micropowers, of power relations that permeate all social aspects. Power is not repressed, it also creates. Among all these aspects, the most controversial of all is the realization that power creates the truth and, therefore, its own legitimation. It is up to historians to identify this production of truth as a function of power (Hunt, 1995: 46).

The coinage associated with portraiture and propaganda configured two closely linked aspects in Rome. Coins, in turn, were associated with one and the other, also in a very intimate way. They are not only important tools for establishing the dating of documents and events that have come down to us without their original context, but they are also of great value in our understanding of the images they contain.

In this case, numismatics preserves a fragment of human history and, according to Frère:

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...it stands today as a scientific discipline through which many aspects of a given society can be studied...It is a science that draws great historical subsidies from the aridity of its study (Frère, 1984: 11).

In Brazil, the study of Ancient History has always been left in the background. A place of little importance driven only by romanticism and curiosity about exotic civilizations to long “disappeared”. The cinema tried to reinforce this exacerbated romanticism on the subject. Love and adventure in a perfect world, without poverty, misery, hunger. Just muscular men and curvy women (Carlan, 2008: 23).

In Universities, the emphasis and the greatest emphasis (mainly funds) are directed to the exact sciences. Humanities, only related to Brazil. Why study Antiquity in a country that did not have direct contact with oriental and classical civilizations? There are no documents, ie primary sources, in our country that portray these peoples? What student and researcher in antiquity has never heard these criticisms.

They forget the great influence of these civilizations in our contemporary society. Many customs, whose origin we no longer remember, are directly linked to these peoples. The language (Latin), the laws (Roman Law), in the arts, in popular sayings (taste is not discussed / translation of the Latin proverb *de gustibus non est disputandum*) (Funari, 2003: 96), the groom who carries the bride in the arms (alluding to the kidnapping of the Sabine women by Rômulo). In short, a civilization that left a series of legacies, rooted in us and in our society.

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Responsibility for ideas rests with the author.

Numismatic Fonts

Numismatic Collection of the National Historical Museum, Rio de Janeiro. Collection referring to Emperors, Augustus and Caesars, Empresses and

Usurpers of the 3rd and 4th centuries. Emperor Constantius II coins. Number 3 Medallion; Lots Numbers: 11 to 37, giving total of 1828 pieces.

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