

# LATE ANTIQUITY: IMAGE AND DOCUMENT<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The article begins with a description of iconography as historical document. Image in Antiquity had a specific function: to present to a particular social group, mostly illiterate, something that represented the edge of power. It not only legitimized an emperor or king, but was also a type of advertising.

## 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, maioria analfabeta, algo que representasse a orla do poder. Ela não apenas legitimava um imperador ou rei, funcionava como uma espécie de propaganda política.

## **Palavras-Chaves**

Moeda; poder; Roma; iconografia.

## Introduction

Image in Antiquity had a specific function: to present to a particular social group something that represented the edge of power. It not only legitimized an emperor or king, but also worked as a type of political advertising.

Currency has been studied by historians under the prism of merchandise, object of trade. It was sought to insert it in social history, that is, with the reflexes monetary mutation produced in society, wage's level, cost of life and consequent collective behavior towards these. The scholar of currency has been more worried with the economic and social body it served than with the metal from which it was produced and informed. Structurally, the metal surpassed the geographical boundaries of the power that issued it and defined ideologically not only a people, but also the civilization to which it belonged.

The contemporary man can hardly connect a coin to a way of communication between distant peoples. To the possessor of a particular species of strange currency, it spoke to him through the noble or non-precious metal in which it was coined, by type and inscription. The first element informed him about the wealth of a kingdom and the other two told him something about the art, that is, the greater or lesser technical improvement used in the manufacture of current cash, about the power of the issuer and, above all, about the political-religious ideology that gave body to it. It is within this last aspect that we seek to explore the numismatic source.

### **Numismatics<sup>3</sup> as source: Reading the “coin”**

Numismatics connected itself traditionally to the study of History, especially Political History, helping to establish the chronology of reigns and to date important facts of politics; to Economy, informing about the value of coins within different monetary systems; to Archaeology, contributing to aid in dating archaeological layers and sites; and to Art History, enabling, through its types, an analysis of the evolution of styles

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<sup>3</sup> All the numismatic sources analyzed here belong to the collection of the National Historical Museum, based in Rio de Janeiro. The museum holds the largest coin collection in Latin America.

and the recognition of missing works or those only known through literary texts (Vieira: 1995, 94)<sup>4</sup>.

In this sense, Numismatics is not only restricted to museums, despite being during decades “stuck” on catalogs and closely guarded collections. It departs from a wider interest, collaborating with several disciplines, assisting in the most varied research, both archaeological and related to Classical Antiquity or other historical periods. It is a propagandistic vehicle, with messages, art, religion (magic and superstition), ideology and politics.

Coin usage as a source is not a novelty. We do not intend here to explore all those who took that path, but we will quote some authors that worked with such documentation. As for us, we will analyze the political advertising represented by iconography, through a simple content analysis, trying to identify both historical and aesthetic connotations.

With previous identification of available documentation in catalog, we established a documental *corpus*. For that, we followed the categorization known as “The Lasswell Formula”, pioneer, since 1927, of content analysis applied to politics and propaganda. We related the *corpus* with: the nature of the issuer; to whom such representations were destined; and their meaning.

**1. First stage of content analysis: previous analysis of available documentation and establishment of a documental *corpus* to which that method will be applied<sup>5</sup>.**

Even having already decided – function of characteristics perceived in available documentation pertinent to the formulated hypothesis and from which one intends to obtain comparison (or refutation) – to apply some modality of content analysis, the position of the historian before his sources is, about that, imprecise and intuitive at the start. He knows which direction and questions he will use to guide himself, but yet ignores in what will consist the support of his content analysis – at least, does not necessarily know it, unless he is more or less repeating, for another case and *corpus*, some kind of well-known and elsewhere tested application.

Certain criteria must be satisfied so that the content analysis can be successfully applied. It will be necessary to renounce to certain sources: those which do not form a

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<sup>4</sup> Rejane Maria Lobo Vieira was, during many years, in charge of the Numismatic Session. She conducted pioneering work about the coins of D. Fernando de Portugal, the last ruler of the Burgundy Dynasty.

<sup>5</sup> Class notes of Professor Ciro Flamarion Cardoso.

complete series for application purposes; and/or present an unsuited nature to the method; and/or are not homogenous. Indeed, the choice of a documental *corpus* to which apply some form of content analysis goes through these three main criteria: 1) the *corpus* concerned must be complete in the sense demanded by the nature of the theme and hypothesis; 2) should be a documentation that, in its contents and dimensions, justifies the use of content analysis as pertinent; 3) it must be homogenous according to principles that define themselves. In this pre-analytic phase, the researcher often hesitates between several documental sets, makes partial attempts to apply the method in order to evaluate the results thus obtained and those obtained through detailed or total application.

By the end of this first stage, the researcher will have a documental *corpus* consisting of only one document or, what is more likely, of several: but, in the second case, it is necessary to justify the fact of considering them as a type of "supertext", homogeneous enough formed by individual texts. In certain cases, it is possible and necessary to distinguish between the total *corpus* and the pertinent *corpus*: that is, between the documents that integrate the *corpus* in question, seen as a whole, and, on the other side, the partial cut of it to which, due to the contours of the research (theme limitation, objectives, hypothesis), is in fact useful for applying the content analysis.

## **2. Second stage of analysis: categorization.**

Before going through this stage, it is necessary to apply the operation known as "The Lasswell Formula" to the chosen *corpus*, as we explained in the previous page.

There is, in content analysis of any kind, a postulate (or basic theoretical hypothesis) not always explained by researchers: the statement that there is, in the questioned texts by this method, some not immediately given, evident or visible meanings that only analysis will reveal. Furthermore, it is necessary to worry about the need of not denaturing, not falsifying the contents inserted in the texts when applying the analysis method. In short, there are two demands at first: treating the texts originally, in a way that answers questions or non-formulated problems before and regarding them; and being faithful to the effectively present contents in the *corpus*.

The central operation, in this stage, is the establishment of a grid or network of categories. From a previous reading of the complete *corpus*, with attention aimed constantly to what is useful to the research (object delimitation, objectives, formulated problem, hypothesis), the pertinent elements observed in it are registered, and distinguished in themes or thematic categories that might, eventually, be computed and, above all, allow significant comparisons between the different texts, members of the *corpus* (or, if it is only one document of wide extension, between different parts of this document). Actually, a content analysis will be worth what the categories according to which it was realized are worth – as to what they effectively bring to the

ongoing research, as well as the degree of faithfulness they observe before the documental contents.

A good categorization has as precondition *sine qua non*, an adequate comprehension of the semantic contents of the *corpus'* texts; and such comprehension will only occur if the researcher possesses familiarity and enough information regarding the time of the study and its mental universe. The formation that represents, for example, the content analysis is a second reading based on another: a first reading or decoding, or simpler and more basic, that depends on knowing the language and culture of the time the texts were generated. Without this first reading done properly, the chosen categories will hardly be pertinent and useful. Such categories are higher level concepts (secondary, supra ordered), while concepts obtained in the first reading or decoding are of primary level: the first ones depend necessarily on these, although they can reunite them in wider schemes.

Selected thematic categories for analysis, established by the researcher at the end of a sometimes long process of trial and error, corrections and renounce, must answer four main criteria: pertinence, exhaustiveness, exclusivity and objectivity.

Pertinence is given by the measure to which the chosen categories have the capacity of reflecting scrupulously the contents of the *corpus* and, at the same time, of expressing the problematic of the research process according to which the content analysis is applied.

The exhaustiveness of the categories is given when, taken together, they allow interrogating the whole *corpus* (or part of the same, pertinent to the research). In certain cases, complete exhaustiveness is not achieved, and some categories remain to accommodate "unclassifiable" portions of the referred *corpus*: but these should be residual, have reduced dimensions in relation to the part of the *corpus* that they are in.

Exclusivity means that elements of identical content should not appear in more than one category: the relationship category/content must be discrete or exclusionary. Again: if it is not possible to have full exclusivity, for the work to function properly, it is necessary to get at least close to it.

Objectivity is only tendential, since different researchers may arrive to different categories regarding a same *corpus*, each of them defending theirs as the most faithful to the effective contents of the same. At least, it would be necessary that an informed reader, even if he preferred a whole or partially different category grid than what the researcher elaborated, accepted that the analyst properly registered each content unity in the categories he formulated. It is expected, naturally, that the author establishes and defends his objectiveness by an always active critical spirit before his own work, by clearly setting out the routing and the justification of the established categories.

Especially, it is up to the researcher to specify some indicators that inform the reader of the reasons of his choices regarding categorization. According to Berelson, “the hypothesis must express the problem as adequately as possible; the categories must do the same with respect to the hypothesis; and the indicators, in relation to the categories (Berelson: 1952, 78)”.

### **3. Third stage of content analysis: coding and calculation of units.**

In order to enable the application of the categories to the *corpus*, it is necessary to delimitate the units that will determine the cuts to be done in it. Generally, the units of context register are distinguished.

Register unit is the content segment that the researcher chose to take as the smallest unit of his reading and analysis grid: one word, a group of words, a paragraph, a week, etc. Its dimension can, therefore, vary according to the cut criteria that were introduced in nature's and content analysis objects' dependencies.

Context unit is the one directly above the register unit, in terms of dimensions. Its goal is to allow choosing a particular category where a certain register unit will be classified, in case of doubt.

### **4. Fourth stage of content analysis: interpreting the results.**

In this stage the fecundity of the operated method choices and the pertinence of the work hypothesis will be apparent – if it is the case. “Interpretation”, in the sense of the term of interest here, is a new (original) and objective reading of the *corpus*, supported in the second and third stages described previously and, also, in the researcher's knowledge regarding the studied period, the subject covered and the context in which it is inserted. According to Lasswell, we would have here another question to propose: with what results the texts were formulated and circulate? (Laswell: 1965, 95). However, this is not always the intention: one may try, simply, to “read” a particular ideology, representation, *corpus* imaginary, even when it comes, possibly, to documents that had no important circulation in order to better understand a certain theme.

To interpret is to infer: a logical operation through which, from one or more propositions – in the present case, the data established when finishing the content analysis process applied to the *corpus* – one or more consequences, that result from those propositions, are withdrawn. It is about coming back to the hypothesis in order to, through this inference, evaluate until which point they were proven. In case one or more hypothesis were, on the contrary, refuted by the content analysis results, it will be necessary to verify the reason for it and, according to the circumstances, to

complete, partially modify or substitute the hypothesis in the matter; and, next, to restart the analysis or, at least, to introduce in it the consequences of such operations.

We made a significant comparison between the different images contained on the back of each coin, making a first reading or decoding of the existing symbols. Thus, it was possible to find and identify certain elements that represented the political, military or religious ideology of the time.

In such representations, politics and aesthetics were deeply connected in Rome. Coins were associated both with ideological advertising and politics. The pieces were not only important instruments to establish the dating of documents that arrived to us without their original context, but also have great value in themselves, through our comprehension of these “portraits” of ancient reality. Frequently, the back of the monetary type shows certain artistic reproduction. While its meaning, in some cases pointed by the inscriptions that accompany it or by the kind of obverse, can appear as an original interpretation in relation to the model, monetary types and model often have the same sense.

These power practices – and their symbolisms – act, in a direct or indirect way, through ideological questions and, throughout a society, they predominate by the ideas of the dominating class, orally or written. Cardoso states that “... it is of special interest and enlightening the study of the mechanisms that assure and reproduce the ideological hegemony...” (Cardoso: 1979, 397).

We can verify a tenacious resistance of ancient forms of administration and communication. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century England, despite the progress regarding reading and writing mastery, the heard word and the seen gesture remained the essential expression of command power and justice. (Chartier: 1990, 218).

We cannot forget that history must always seek to explore its object based on the analysis of the different elements that intervene in it, open to a new language, to new interrogations each time makes to its past:

*To engage in the present, to listen to all its rumors – in a word, to live – demands the historian to be kept informed about what is discovered and transformed in the field of neighbor sciences. History would weaken in isolation. (Duby: 1986, 190)*

Umberto Eco, in his work *General Treaty of Semiotics*, explains that it is within code structure, where Semiotics proposes the study of the syntactic configuration of the rising code problem as sign information (Eco: 1980, 194). These objects sets, in the case the coins and their symbols, produced by the action of man and by the order of someone, the *emitter*, should be understood by the receiver, the *receptor*, as an



expression of a particular content. It can be through a previously coded correlation, in other pieces called *variants*, or because of a possible correlation directly by this *receptor*.

Such *emitter/receptor* relation is clearly identified in the coinages made during the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Diocletian, Galerius, Constantius Chlorus, Maximian, Severus Augustus and Maximinus Daja coined coins with similar types: *GENIO AVGVSTI*, *GENIO POPVLI ROMANI*, *VIRTVTI EXERCITVS*, *CONCORDIA MILITVM*, *SAC MON VRB AVGG ET CAESS NN*, *VOT XX E*; among others. They defended the empire's salvation through a return to the past and its deities, imposing such ideology by the means of an advertising vehicle with which all the population would have contact: the coin itself. These external signs corresponding to those hierarchies were used to differentiate one governor from another. Let us remember that a simple fabric band around one's head was the emblem that distinguished Alexander's generals, who divided his dominions and ruled as real monarchs.





PHOTO: CLÁUDIO UMPIERRE CARLAN. NUMISMATIC COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL HISTORICAL MUSEUM, RIO DE JANEIRO, JUNE 2000.

### **Coin Description**

OBVERSE: *DN CONSTAN-TIVS PF AVG* - bust of Constantius II, crowned at the right. In these coinages, *centenional*, the emperor is represented with mantle, globe in the right hand. The globe, symbol of perfection and imperial power, carried in one hand represents dominance or the territory over which extends the sovereign's authority (Chevalier; Ghernrant; 1997, 472). *Centenionalis* were bronze coins coined by Constantinus I, the great, Constantius II's father, from the year 330, weighing approximately 4 grams. This denomination was given in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The original name of this coinage is still unknown.

REVERSE: *FEL TEMP REPARATIO* - Emperor, with combat armor, dominating two Germanic prisoners. On his right hand, labarum with the sign of Constantinus, X (chi) and P (rho), present in other coinages of the period. Constantius, bigger than the two prisoners, for being the center of royal power, steps on the knee of one of the captives. The other looks at the standard as a sign of submission, both to Rome and Christianity. Cristian symbols became common in coinages of the 4<sup>th</sup> century from the year 317 on.

In the exergue or land line, SNN Γ referred to the monetary house of Nicomedia. Weight: 3,78 g; diameter 2,02 mm; high reverse or land line 6 hours.

For Pastoureau, the “circular writing” is little studied. The monetary inscriptions were seen and handled by individuals of the most varied social conditions (Pastoureau: 1988, 125). But it does not mean that the text touched by people was read. The author intends to give a bigger importance to the inscriptions rather than the coin type, presented in the reverse, where more information would be located.

These inscriptions were abbreviations in Latin, related to the images in the obverse and reverse, thus occurring a writing/image union. 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, vegetables, coats of arms, who led a message governor/governed to the vast Roman world.

In political representations, iconographic wealth is highlighted in the tetrarchy period, but we will not neglect other periods of Roman History. For example: *PROVIDENTIA DEORVM*, *IOVI / HERCVLES* (Diocletian and Maximinian together), *VIRTVTI AVGG*, *PAX* (feminine figure), *PRINCI A INVENTVTIS*, *BEATA* (altar with the votes in the coinages of Crispus), *PROVIDENTIA CAESS* (military field or fortress, Constantinus I and II, Constantius II, Gallus, Constante, Valentinianus I), the wolf breastfeeding Romulus and Remus (without inscription, Constantinus), *PROVIDENTIA AVGG* (military field, Licinius), *IOVI / CAESAR*, *VIRTVS* (Licinius the son), *CASTOR / POLVX* (Maxentius); temple with round dome, without inscription, coined after the death of Maxentius' son, Romulus, still an infant (reference to the nomination of Caesar on the obverse).

The coin still presents itself as an excellent source because, from its analysis, we find several aspects that cover the series in its totality. That is, political, state, legal, religious, economic, mythological and aesthetic aspects. It can give information about the most varied flashbacks of a society. It witnesses certain cultural relationships that are important for a historian. We cannot forget, though, that the coin as a document is not a reflex of a simple economical heating, but of another parallel occurrence. A materiality formed by sedimentary layers of interpretations: “the document, thus, is archeologically thought as a monument” (Jenkins: 2001, 11).

Donis Dondis states that, for the illiterate, spoken language, image and symbol continue to be the main forms of communication. And among them only the visual form can be maintained under any practical circumstance.

*(...) this is as true as it has been throughout History. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the artist served the Church as a propagandist... The visual communicator has served the emperor and the people's commissary...*

*Pictorial communication directed to low literacy level groups, if it intends to be effective, must be simple and realistic (...). (Dondis: 1997, 184)*

Pascal Arnaud highlights that in Late Antiquity coins, especially during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, it is common, in the obverse, that the head or bust of the emperor comes crowned by a diadem with the aspect of a simple pearl band with two or three edges (Arnaud: undated, 195). It is a specific symbolic message, whose meaning is that of designating the person of the ruler.

To the Roman possessor of a certain strange monetary species, this would speak to him through the metal, noble or non-precious, in which it was coined, by the type and inscription. The first informed him about the wealth of a kingdom and the other two elements told him something about the art, that is, the bigger or lesser technical improvement used in the fabrication of the current cash; about the power of the issuer and, above all, about the political-religious ideology that gave body to it.

### **Final Considerations**

Power cannot be apprehended by the study of conflict, fight and resistance, unless in its most restrict manifestations. Power is not a feature of a class or dominating elite, nor can it be attributed to one of them. For Foucault, power is a strategy attributed to functions. Power does not have its origin in politics, nor economy, and it is not there that its basis is found. It exists as an infinitely complex net of “micropowers”, power relations that permeate all social aspects. Power cannot be repressed, but it can also create. Within all these aspects, the most controversial is the understanding that power creates truth and, therefore, its own legitimation. It is up to historians identify this production of truth as a function of power (Hunt: 1995, 46).

It is the job of the historian to identify and define his sources, since the document is not innocuous and, according to Le Goff, “... a conscious or unconscious assembling of the history, of the time, of the societies that produced it... effort for historical societies to impose to the future... a particular image of themselves...” (Le Goff: 1984, 103). The support of several disciplines is necessary so that a disassembling of the ambivalence document/monument is carried out, through the same environment that produced it, aided by archeology and not based on a single historical criticism.

The symbols that inhabit Numismatics are provided with a clear hieroglyphic organization, since they come from the fact that these widespread images are always articulated with the shown language, in which power expresses itself secularly. It is, according to de la Flor, the rise of the representations of eagles, lions, as well as towers,

crosses (Flor: 1995, 183), of the phoenix, of emperors or characters belonging to a political-economic elite, that represent the orbit of power's action, up to the point in which Numismatics can be defined "as an official monument at the service of the State."<sup>6</sup> We remind that, as Cassirer states, "... instead of defining the man as a *rationale* animal, we should define him as a *symbolicum* animal." (Cassirer: 1977, 70). Thus, iconography, and all its symbology, appears as a more evident testimony of the imaginary of past societies.

These signs keep a causal relationship of natural physical contiguity towards their object. As an example, we can quote the letters or Greek symbols located in the coins' field. They point out that the coinages were done by monetary policies of Greek origin or influence. Making a comparison with the *exergo*, we can prove this relation. Greenwell, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, already defended an important position of Greek cities, especially Cyzicus, as a coinage center (Greenwell: 1887, 9).

Chartier highlights the importance of the interpretation of this symbology, named by him as "signs of power".

*"Hence the need of constituting homogenous series of these signs of power: whether is the insignia that distinguishes the sovereign from other men (crowns, scepters, vests, seals, etc.), the monuments that, as they identify the king, also identify the State, even the nation (coins, weapons, colors), or the programs that have the goal of symbolically representing the power of the State, as the emblems, medals, architectural programs, the great cycles of painting..." (Chartier: 1990, 220).*

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