

The Ipswich Mint

Part One: The Hobby of Kings

When I first joined the Society for Creative Anachronism, the collecting, cleaning and attribution of ancient coins (in specific Roman coins) was to be my Arts & Sciences focus. This will be a series of articles on what I learned way back when. Enjoy.

Brief History and Justification



To begin, the first minting of coinage occurred in about the seventh to sixth century BC. There is some debate as to where the first coins were minted, but the ancient civilizations of Anatolia, Greece, India and China are all likely candidates. Before the appearance of coins, precious metals were commonly used as the basis for trade, but needed to be carefully weighed at each transaction and the purity of the metal verified. This was probably not conducive to a rapid exchange of goods. The development of minted coinage in which the weight and

metal composition were certified by a government represented a significant advance in the evolution of commerce.

When I first started this hobby, I was told on several occasions that this was not a valid ‘period’ project. Well, I have to disagree. There are many indications that the collecting of coins beyond the purpose of simply hoarding them dates back to at least the Roman Era. Emperor Augustus is often cited as being one of the first collectors of coins. According to Suetonius in his *De vita Caesarum* (The Lives of the Twelve Caesars), written in the first century CE, the Emperor Augustus sometimes presented old and exotic coins to friends and courtiers during festivals and other special occasions. During the reign of Trajanus Decius (ad 249–251), the Roman mint issued a series of coins commemorating all of the deified emperors from Augustus through Severus Alexander. The designs on these coins replicated those of coins issued by the honoured rulers—some of the original coins being nearly 300 years old by that time. It would have been necessary for the mint to have examples of the coins to use as prototypes, and it is hard to see such an assemblage as anything but a collection. The eminent French numismatist Ernest Babelon, in his 1901 work *Traité des monnaies Grecques et Romaines*, refers to a manuscript dating to 1274, *Thesaurus magnus in medalis auri optimi*, which recorded a formal collection of ancient coins at a monastery in Padua, Italy.

During the 15th and 16th centuries, ancient-coin collecting became the “hobby of kings,” and the list of collectors is a list of European nobility. The Italian scholar and poet Petrarch is credited with being the pursuit's first and most famous aficionado. Following his lead, many European kings, princes, and other nobility kept collections of ancient coins. Some notable collectors were Pope Boniface VIII, Emperor

Maximilian of the Holy Roman Empire, Louis XIV of France, Ferdinand I, Henry IV of France and Elector Joachim II of Brandenburg.

It is during the Renaissance that the collection of ancient coins became known as the “Hobby of Kings”, perhaps because only the very wealthy could afford the pursuit. In these early days, coin collecting was very much associated with art collecting. Coins were valued as much or more for attractive or interesting imagery, as they were for scarcity or historic significance.

References:

- Tranquillus, C. Suetonius, The Lives of the Twelve Caesars, (1 CE) Section LXXV
- The British Museum: Explore/Money, www.britishmuseum.org.
- Wayne G. Sayles, Ancient Coin Collecting

Hlaford Symon de Ipswich