Buying loyalty: targeted iconography and the distribution of cash to the legions

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INTRODUCTION

A key element in maintaining a professional standing army, as the Romans did from the days of the later Republic onward, is ensuring their loyalty, to their direct commanders as well as to the supreme commander. Ancient authors as well as modern military historians state the importance of troop morale, cohesion and esprit-de-corps, which are created and kept upright by providing adequate food, shelter and health care, as well as by shared experiences, clearly defined future goals and joint corporal exercise¹. Crucial though the steady supply of basic necessities was, arguably as important were guaranteed and regular payments. Reports of mutiny in the ancient sources usually refer to harsh conditions, long service and low or postponed pay as causes for the unrest². Therefore, it might be assumed that a tight control over the logistics of military pay as well as a clever timing of bonuses (donativa) were central tasks of the military and financial overseers. Delivering cash on time and in the expected amounts to the far ends of the Empire surely was an important element in keeping the troops happy.

In this paper I intend, however, to go one step further and pose the question in how far not only the monetary value of the received payments, but also their ideological value was employed to buy the loyalty of the troops³. Although still questioned by some scholars, consensus seems to be that the images and texts on Roman coinage were not selected just for their aesthetic qualities, nor solely to reflect current or past political achievements, but served a communication purpose⁴. By displaying real or desired aspects of the emperor or the Empire, imperial values and ideas could be circulated among broad segments of society. Given the importance of troop morale, cohesion and esprit-de-corps as mentioned above, one could suppose that imperial imagery as advertised on coins could be made instrumental

¹ Driessen 2007, 60-64 for detailed treatment of these aspects of military psychology, both from a modern and a roman perspective.
³ Combining previously published work and ongoing research: Kemmers 2005 ; 2006 ; 2009a and 2011.

Kemmers, in : De l'or pour les braves !, p. 229-241
for creating common ground, for emphasizing certain goals, for praising specific deeds or for highlighting particular favours, etc. Of course, this could have worked on a general level, but would have been even more effective when targeted at specific recipients (i.e. diversification towards military units) or at specific occasions (i.e. donativa). In some cases, the coin iconography and text give clear evidence as to whom it intended to address, yet frequently – especially in imperial times as coin output and the number of different types issued rose – this remains uncertain. In those instances, a detailed analysis of the distribution of certain types or series across the Empire seems an obvious method to test the theory.

In chronological order I will discuss a number of case studies where targeted iconography might have been employed by the Roman government to buy the loyalty of the troops. Focus will be on the (north)western Roman provinces as coin finds and hoards in the East have not nearly been as systematically published.

OLD STOCKS AND NEW IMAGES: THE EARLY EMPIRE

The phase of conquest and consolidation in the northwest of the Roman Empire is archaeologically particularly well attested by a large number of – often short-lived – military camps with accompanying coin finds. Especially for the Augustan period, a sequence of forts is known each with very distinct bronze coin profiles\(^5\). The earliest phase (app. 19-12 BC) is characterized by halved Republican bronzes, coins of the so-called Copia – and Vienna-series and incidental Nemausus dupondii(?) – and Moneyers’ asses from Rome. The period of Drusus’ campaigns into Germania is well known for its overwhelming dominance of the Nemausus-dupondii, often countermarked. The first decade AD, up to Varus’ defeat in the Teutoburg Forest sees an almost complete changeover to asses from the first altar series of Lyon. Finally the very late Augustan/early Tiberian period (Germanicus’ campaigns?) is dominated by countermarked Moneyers’ asses and coins from the second altar series of Lyons. It has been questioned whether this rapid turnover of the bronze coin series associated with the various stages of the conquest and consolidation phase is evidence of the soldiers being paid in bronze coinage\(^6\). One of the arguments against bronzes as military pay is the enormous amounts necessary and the cumbersome transport. On the other hand, the monolithic character of the batches of bronze coins present makes it hard to imagine purely private entrepreneurship as a driving force. What is clear however is that the bronze coins used by the soldiers in this period were a combination of (very) old coins and (relatively) new ones\(^7\). As can be deduced from table 1, the images dominating in the phase up to ca. 12 BC were mostly traditional, in the sense that they did not deviate too much from the coinages of the Republican period. On the obverse one could discern a double head, either of Janus (on the Republican bronzes) or of Octavian and the deified Caesar (on the Copia and Vienna bronzes), on the reverse the prow of a ship. The period of Drusus’ campaigns

\(^7\) Although it has to be noted that the dating of some of these coin series is partly based on their presence or absence in military settlements related to the various phases of the Augustan conquest, for example van Heesch 1993.
sees bronzes displaying a double head, Marcus Agrippa and Augustus, and the famous crocodile-chained-to-palmtree, a clear reference to the battle of Actium and the succeeding conquest of Egypt, which marked the rise of Octavian to sole power. The double portrait gives way to the portrait of just Augustus, combined with the altar of the cult for Roma and Augustus on the reverse, in the coinage dominating the next period up until the defeat of Varus. Finally, the issues, minted some decades previously, showing the image of Augustus and references to the established republican institution of the tresviri monetales and the legislative power of the Senate, came to dominate the scene, joint with those graced by the portrait of the heir apparent Tiberius and the altar of the imperial cult.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Series</th>
<th>Obverse</th>
<th>Reverse</th>
<th>Date of Issue</th>
<th>Mint</th>
<th>Phase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican bronzes</td>
<td>Janus</td>
<td>Prow of ship</td>
<td>211-89 BC</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>19-12 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copia/Vienna</td>
<td>Octavian-Deified</td>
<td>Prow of ship</td>
<td>38-36 BC</td>
<td>Lyons, Vienne</td>
<td>19-12 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nemausus</td>
<td>Augustus-Agrippa</td>
<td>Crocodile-palmtree</td>
<td>16(?)-10 BC</td>
<td>Nimes</td>
<td>12-8 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altar I</td>
<td>Augustus</td>
<td>Altar imperial cult</td>
<td>7-3 BC</td>
<td>Lyons</td>
<td>5/4 BC – AD 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moneyers’</td>
<td>Augustus</td>
<td>Text, republican institutions</td>
<td>19-2 BC</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>AD 10-16(?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altar II</td>
<td>Augustus or Tiberius</td>
<td>Altar imperial cult</td>
<td>9-14</td>
<td>Lyons</td>
<td>AD 10-16(?)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. The iconography of the dominant bronze coin types in the Augustan conquest phase.

Other scholars have pointed out, that the transitional phase from Republic to Empire - a step-by-step process in which ultimately all powers were centred in the hands of one man - can equally be discerned in the iconographic repertoire employed on the monetary issues of the period.8

The consecutive imagery with which the soldiers were confronted on a massive scale, and – one could assume – on a daily basis, was thus gradually changing from fairly conventional to blatantly imperial in the course of three decades. Although it might have been a not entirely intentional side-effect of the start-up phase of institutionalized large scale troop payments in far-off regions, the iconographic content of the distributed coins seems to have been well suited to support a transitory phase in service – command- and authority-structures.

8 Wallace-Hadrill 1986; Grant 1953.
A next phase of conquest and consolidation is the Claudian invasion of Britain and its build up in the preceding years. By now, there is clear evidence of preparatory work for this invasion already under Caligula, as testified by the establishment of a number of military forts in the Rhine delta to ensure supply lines to Britain9. Thus, we have a number of castella founded around AD 40 – albeit longer lived ones than the fortresses associated with the Augustan campaigns discussed above – allowing insight in supply patterns in this period. Across the Channel there now seems to be conclusive evidence, that pre-Claudian coins are mainly found in association with military sites and infrastructure, and that therefore the conquest marked the beginning of the large-scale influx of Roman coinage10.

Comparing these two regions, which both saw military activity in the forties AD, but of a different nature, a few remarkable differences can be observed (fig. 1 and 2)11. The Lower Rhine delta has yielded an enormous amount of Caligulan bronze coins, a substantial proportion of which was countermarked with the name of Claudius (TICLAVIMP), implying official distribution after Caligula’s death. Caligulan coins (countermarked or otherwise) hardly ever turn up in Britain though. Claudian denarii are a rarity altogether, which is not related to a low coin output, but to their rapid disappearance from circulation after the monetary reforms of Nero. Still, they are almost twice as common in Britain as in the Rhine delta. In the latter region however, Claudian sestertii are a lot more frequent (app. 15 % versus app. 3 %). Furthermore, Republican denarii are far more frequent across the Channel than in the Rhine delta. Augustan and Tiberian denarii, ubiquitous on the Continent seem to be far and few between12.

It seems therefore, that the troops sent to Britain in the phase of conquest and its immediate aftermath were supplied with either old to ancient coinage or brand new, but rather explicitly not with coins of Claudius’ predecessors. For an emperor with allegedly quite a bit of an image-problem, this might have been a deliberate strategy to focus the troops’ loyalty to him in person or the Roman cause at large, rather than on his Julio-Claudian descent.

After the well-known interruption in the production of bronze coin supply between AD 42 and 62, it is only in the last years of Nero’s reign, but especially during the Flavian period, that the Western Empire sees the large-scale influx of new non-precious metal coinage. In this respect, especially the year AD 71 stands out, as almost everywhere this seems to have been a year of high coin production and supply, both in the mints at Rome and at Lyons13. It was the first year of substantial bronze coin production for Vespasian, after the troubles and turmoil of the civil war period following Nero’s death and thus the first year the new government in Rome could have employed bronze coins for distributing messages to various socie-

10 Walton 2012, 77-78., 77-78.
11 Rhine-delta data are derived from Kemmers 2004, Kemmers 2008, Kemmers 2009b. For Britain the data stem from Walton’s inventory of the PAS data, Walton 2012, 239-241.
12 Walton does not give the denominational structure of the pre-Claudian coins. On www.finds.org.uk, accessed on August 12, 2013, 1245 Republican denarii and quinarii, 153 Augustan denarii (out of 202 Augustan coins), 145 Tiberian denarii (out of 184 Tiberian coins), 6 Caligulan denarii (out of 45 coins), 28 Claudian denarii out of 621 Claudian coins were registered.
Fig. 1. The ratio of coins per period (Republic-Claudius) in the Rhine delta and in Britain (based on the data of the Portable Antiquities Scheme).

Fig. 2. The denominational structure of Claudian coinage found in the Rhine-delta and in Britain (based on the Portable Antiquities Scheme data).
tall groups. Looking at three regions available for study it is clear that bronze coin supply was regionalized. In the Lower Rhine area, three reverse types constitute 61% of the coins issued in AD 71. These are the types displaying Victoria, Securitas and Aequitas respectively on their reverse (fig. 3)\textsuperscript{14}. In Italy, five reverse types amount up to 68% of the total number of AD 71 coins, viz. Roma, Aequitas, Pax, Concordia and Judaea (fig. 4)\textsuperscript{15}. In Wales 56% of the coins is showing either Victoria, or Securitas or an Aquila on a globe (fig. 5)\textsuperscript{16}. Yet, not only is this distribution regionalized, it seems rather effectively relevant to the various regions: Messages of Peace and Concord in Italy, as well as the patron-deity of the Urbs and the capture of Judaea, the spoils of which were visible in Rome itself. This region had seen civil war and thus Pax (internal peace) and Concordia are particularly well suited. In the Rhineland the Batavian Revolt had just been crushed and a new legionary base erected to keep the unruly hinterland in check. Here the soldiers received messages of Victory, Security and Equity. The first two of these seem straightforward enough, Aequitas is not as easily understood. In a recent in-depth treatment of the personification Aequitas on imperial denarii, Noreña has stressed its use by the imperial authorities to ‘advertise….the honest administration of the imperial mint’\textsuperscript{17}. He concluded that ‘the main application of Aequitas was precisely in the monetary sphere….the emperor’s portrait guaranteed the intrinsic value of the coin – symbolized, in this case, by Aequitas – which in turn reinforced the authority of the emperor himself’\textsuperscript{18}. However, in his treatment of this topic he exclusively dealt with precious metal coinage. What exactly could have been the intention of Aequitas on aes coinage is not necessarily identical. Furthermore, Vespasian was only the second emperor, after Galba, to employ Aequitas as a coin type. Could it be, especially in this early stage of development of the coin type, that its meaning should be sought rather in the more traditional use of Aequitas in the sense of imperial fairness\textsuperscript{19}? In AD 71 this might be interpreted as a message of fairness and justice after revolt and unrest.

In Wales, to conclude, Victory and Security are likewise advertised, but the commonest type displays an eagle on a globe. This clearly is a blatant symbol of military power and domination, the Aquila being the emblem of every Roman legion. Now, the early seventies AD saw large scale campaigning in Britain to conquer Northern England (Cerialis’ campaigns of AD 71) and Wales (Frontinus’ campaigns of AD 73)\textsuperscript{20}. Messages of power, strength and victory seem very apt to enhance troop morale in such a period.

So far, the discussion has mainly centred on bronze coinage. As precious metal coinage tends to be underrepresented in site finds it is more difficult to get a grasp on how the distribution process worked out in the denarii used for payments and donatives in the early Empire. What is clear however is that Republican denarii completely dominated the coin

\textsuperscript{14} Kemmers 2006, 231-232.
\textsuperscript{15} Kemmers 2006, 233.
\textsuperscript{16} www.finds.org.uk, accessed on August 12, 2013. The data are derived from the inventory by Guest and Wells of Roman coins found in Wales, thus combining excavation-finds, hoards and single finds made by members of the public, Guest & Wells 2007.
\textsuperscript{17} Noreña 2011, 67.
\textsuperscript{18} Noreña 2011, 70-71.
\textsuperscript{19} Noreña 2011, 63-67.
\textsuperscript{20} Mattingly 2006, 113-119.
Fig. 3. Reverse types on coins minted in AD 71 found in the Lower Rhine area.

Fig. 4. Reverse types on coins minted in AD 71 found in Italy.

Fig. 5. Reverse types on coins minted in AD 71 found in Wales.
pool well into the first century AD\textsuperscript{21}. The chronological composition of these denarii is empire-wide comparable, thus above all indicating production patterns rather than anything else\textsuperscript{22}. The large scale production and enormously wide distribution of the Caius-and-Lucius denarii of Augustus, and the substantial emission of the Pontif-Maxim denarii of Tiberius did decrease the importance of the Republican silver stocks a bit, but not by that much. As the short-lived site of the Flavian canabae legionis at Nijmegen demonstrates, even at the end of the first century AD pre-Flavian silver coinage still amounted up to approximately seventy percent. This is in sharp contrast with the proportion of pre-Flavian aes coinage on the same site, which only constitutes about a quarter of the total amount. This is not an exception as comparisons with numerous other sites in the northwestern Empire have shown\textsuperscript{23}. Another argument, therefore, for the theory that in the first century the troops mainly received new bronze coins and old silver coins. New silver coinage came in when the old stocks regularly employed did not suffice, which would have been the case with donatives. The silver coin per year ratio of the Nijmegen assemblage closely mirrors the general production pattern of denarii as deduced from hoards and auction sales by Carradice and Buttrey, showing high coin output in AD 70 and AD 80\textsuperscript{24} (fig. 6), quite likely related to accession donatives.

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig6.png}
\end{center}

\textit{Fig. 6. The proportion of silver coins per year in the Flavian canabae legionis at Nijmegen (n = n8)}.

\textsuperscript{21} Kemmers 2006, 181-186, 90 \% at Nijmegen-Hunerberg, 74 \% at Oberaden, 67 \% at Haltern, 58 \% at Kalkriese (single finds only). In hoards the situation is very similar, Republican denarii constituting on average well over 70 \% of the Augustan hoards and still over fifty percent in early Neronian hoards: Estiot & Aymar 2002. In the canabae legionis of the Tenth Legion Gemina at Nijmegen (ca. AD 70-104) Republican denarii reach a percentage of almost sixty percent, Kemmers 2006, 181.

\textsuperscript{22} Peter 2001, 40; Estiot & Aymar 2002, 83-85; Kemmers 2006, 33-36.

\textsuperscript{23} Kemmers 2006, 172-186.

\textsuperscript{24} Kemmers 2006, 207; Buttrey & Carradice 2007, 49, 195-196. For Domitian this is less easily reconstructed because of the increase in fineness of denarii in AD 83 and the decrease in AD 85 (Buttrey & Carradice 2007, 258-260).
Enrich the soldiers: changes under the Severans

How things developed in the second century AD is much more difficult to discern, not least of all because of residual coin circulation. The late second and early third century AD however, marks a period when a more detailed look is possible. The sharp decline of the silver content of the denarius in AD 194\(^{25}\) and the doubling of military pay in AD 197\(^{26}\) seem to have marked the end of the supply of fresh aes coinage to the military\(^{27}\). From Severus’ reign onwards the regular stipend seems to have been paid solely in precious metal coinage. The decrease in silver content of the denarius will have rapidly driven older coinages out of circulation, just as the wide-scale re-introduction of the antoninianus under Gordian III made the Severan denarii disappear from circulation. Therefore, Severan coins found as single finds or in excavations will almost certainly have been lost or deposited in the Severan period or briefly afterwards.

Looking at the number of coins per year (not including hoards) in the northwestern provinces of Britain, Belgic Gaul, Upper and Lower Germany and Raetia\(^{28}\), a few things can be observed (fig. 7). Overall, the coins are quite regularly distributed over the period 193-235, with a few notable exceptions. The early years of Septimius Severus’ reign, most notably the year AD 196, show a higher coin output than on average. Likewise, the reign of Elagabalus

![Graph](image)

*Fig. 7. The proportion of coins per year under the Severan emperors (hoards excluded).*

\(^{26}\) Speidel 1992.
\(^{27}\) Kemmers 2009c; See also Wigg-Wolf, this volume.
\(^{28}\) Data are derived from my database with Severan coin finds, including all coins reported in publications of hoards and site finds in excavation reports, numismatic journals, archaeological journals, and inventories like the *Fundmünzen der römischen Zeit in Deutschland*-series in Britain, The Netherlands, Belgium, Luxemburg, Northern France, Germany, Switzerland and Austria.
and the first few years of Severus Alexander are extremely common. Most notable is the very low number of coin finds that can be ascribed to Caracalla’s sole reign (AD 212-217) and the final years of Severus Alexander (AD 232-235). Of course, one has to bear in mind, that the coin finds displayed in figure 7 almost exclusively consist of denarii, aurei being extremely rare as single finds and aes coins being uncommon in the northwest under the Severans. Yet, whereas the pay rise under Septimius Severus can rather easily be discerned in this overview, one wonders which coins were used to finance Caracalla’s increase of the military stipend. Was it paid in aurei (unlikely), in kind (perhaps), in old coins (possibly) or maybe not at all in his reign but only under his successors?

If the proportion of coins per year is calculated for the various provinces and narrowed down to military sites only, the picture becomes more diversified. In figure 8, it can be discerned that coins issued in the period AD 200-211 are relatively more common on military sites in Britain than on military sites in the German provinces. Vice versa coins issued in the years AD 218-227 are more common in the Rhine provinces. In the period AD 208-211 Septimius Severus himself, as well as both his sons, were campaigning in Britain, and according to Dio Cassius (77.11.1) he brought along an enormous amount of money. This seems to be visible in figure 8. Most likely, this should not be interpreted as soldiers on campaign receiving more money, but soldiers on campaign receiving more freshly minted coins. Again, this points to the relevance of the newest images and messages in binding troops to a common goal. Taking a close-up look at the distribution of coins per year in Britain on military sites on the one hand and civilian sites on the other (fig. 9), this priority to military supply becomes even clearer. Coins issued in the period AD 198-211 are more common on military sites, especially the coins from the years AD 200-202 and AD 209-211.

Fig. 8. The proportion of coins per year under the Severan emperors on military sites in Britain and the German provinces (hoards excluded).
Concluding remarks

From the case studies presented above, it will have become clear that the distribution of cash to the Roman troops was not one big homogeneous affair, but diversified. This diversification was at least partially inspired by the current situation of the receiving troops; brand new coins with relevant messages if necessary and possible, (relatively) old coins as a standard option and on occasion ancient coins to avoid more recent unwanted types and messages. The visual world of the Roman soldier was of course filled with imperial imagery, but coins differed slightly as they were actually owned by the soldiers and thus were noticed in private situations, not just in the public sphere. As such, we might suppose that the amount of money paid to the troops certainly was most effective in buying their loyalty, but that the kind of coins used contributed to this extremely important aspect of imperial strategy too.

Fig. 9. The proportion of coins per year on military and civilian sites in Britain (hoards excluded).
Bibliography


