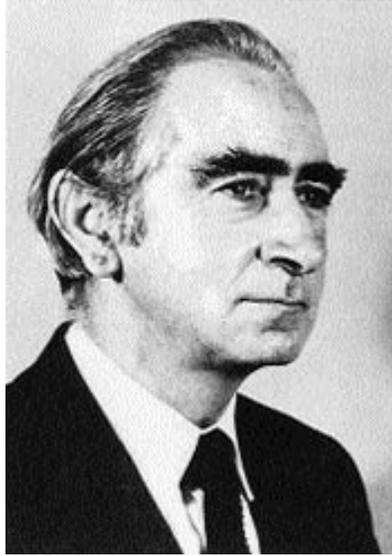


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Robert Carson in Australia



In 1984 Robert Carson, the distinguished numismatist, and his wife, Francesca, moved from England to Sydney. On Robert's retirement from the British Museum they decided to follow their son who had settled in Australia a few years earlier. R.A.G. Carson was a former Keeper in the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum, president and honorary fellow of the Royal Numismatic Society, and fellow of the British Academy. A bibliography of Carson's published works was prepared by Roger Bland in 1993 for the celebratory volume, *Essays in honour of Robert Carson and Kenneth Jenkins*.

This present note, written a few days after the death of Robert Carson on the 24th

March 2006, is intended as a short record of his numismatic life in the Antipodes. A quiet retirement in the northern seaside suburb of Newport was his intention but he took a kindly interest in local numismatic affairs (becoming patron of the Australian Numismatic Society) and expressed a willingness to help with any 'minor' tasks relating to Roman coinage. He was invited down to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart to assess a fine collection of Roman coins which had been donated by an Irish peer. He also found time to contribute some notes on coins to a catalogue for a visiting exhibition on Pompeii (J.-P. Descoudres ed., *Pompeii revisited*; Sydney 1994). In 1988 he was invited by Pat Boland, honorary numismatist at the

Powerhouse Museum, to put their Roman collection into order. Thus began Robert's regular weekly visits. The collection largely consisted of small Roman bronze coins from the third and fourth centuries AD which had been brought back to Australia from the Levant by returning soldiers and then donated to the Australian Museum. For the author (with J.P.C. Kent) of 'Bronze Roman Imperial coinage of the late empire', *NCirc.* 65 (1957) – 67 (1959), which became (with Kent and P.V. Hill) *Late Roman Bronze Coinage, AD 324–498 BC* (London 1960) this was a pleasant chance 'to keep his hand in' as he once remarked, and he would bring along his own copy of LRBC to check details of this standard and indispensable work on the subject. As a staff member of the museum I was fortunate enough to be able to discuss numismatics and archaeology with him during the tea breaks. I came to learn that Robert was not only a master of Roman numismatics, he was also an experienced student of excavation coins, and well versed in the problems of the eastern Roman mints.

In 1985 Dr Anthony McNicol, field director of the University of Sydney excavations at Pella in Jordan, died after a prolonged battle with cancer. McNicol had been responsible for the publication of the excavation coins. In 1988 I was asked to take over this responsibility. Having seen the poor preservation of some of the Roman coins from the site (the soil of Pella is highly corrosive) I quickly realised that completion of the work within a reasonable time span would only be possible if Robert agreed to share the project with me. Robert was indeed interested, provided he didn't have to travel to Jordan (coming to

Australia was enough). Fortunately, the Jordanian government permitted all of the coins to come to Sydney before they were finally to be lodged in Jordan. And so began the weekly visits of Robert and I to Sydney University and the Pella excavation room which would last over three years. I would attend (in plodding fashion) to the Greek, Jewish, Roman Provincial and Byzantine coins, while Robert marched with confidence and the eye of an expert through the much larger Roman section.

A good many of the coins from the Pella excavations survive merely as worn bits of metal without any marks. Robert was able to identify some 849 Roman coins; without his vast experience and endless patience the number would have been much smaller. The publication, *Pella in Jordan 1979–1990. The Coins* (Adapa Monographs 1, Sydney 2001), was the first final report of the excavations at Pella, and only the second detailed account from Jordan of a major excavation's coins; the first had been A.R. Bellinger's 1938 monograph (*NNM* 81) and report (C.H. Kraeling, *Gerasa. City of the Decapolis*) on the finds from Jerash/Gerasha. Robert confirmed the remarkable dominance in the region of coins minted by Constantius II (348–361), as well as the fact that the finds tail off quite sharply in the latter half of the 5th century after Theodosius II. He also brought into focus the very large amount of AE4s of the 4th and 5th centuries recovered from Pella. The legacy of Robert's work with these excavation coins is substantial: it will serve as a crucial guide to those who must now write the reports on the stratigraphy of the site, and it will also stand as a basic text for scholars studying the history and

character of Roman coin circulation in the Levant. This, his last work, is also to be recognised as an important contribution to the emerging study of Roman occupation in the Jordan Valley.

A detailed account of the remarkable career and achievements of Robert Carson has now been prepared by Roger Bland and Andrew Burnett. It will be published in a forthcoming volume of the *Proceedings of the British Academy*.

Kenneth Sheedy