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Images and insights: the provincial coinage of Mark Antony

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The interpretation of the provincial administration of Mark Antony has long been tied up with his relationship with Cleopatra and his abandonment of traditional Roman modes of power. His image is habitually portrayed in Roman and modern literature as a counterpart to the pious proper Roman figure of Octavian, representing all that was wrong with the Republic and the influence of the decadent Roman East. The question remains as to how Antony himself wanted to be represented, particularly regarding his role as ruler of the Eastern Empire. To do this he needed to interpret his role in terms of previous Roman and Hellenistic administration as well as his own dominant role in Roman politics. To start to understand this vision, we need evidence that is contemporary and untainted by later bias. The provincial coinage of Antony provides that evidence. Coins, which were issued in his name, along with those of his lieutenants and with Cleopatra, provide the link to the contemporary policies of the ruler of the East and the images that he wanted to transmit.

The division of the Empire after the victory at Philippi left Antony in control of the Eastern half. This area had a long history of monarchical control, for much of the territory had traditionally been ruled by kings, either by the Persians or by

Alexander the Great and his successors. Octavian's areas of influence, however, had a different tradition; they were more used to local and city-state methods of rule. The differences in the historical backgrounds of the two geographic areas necessitated different approaches to ruling by the two men. Antony's role as a sort of Eastern Hellenistic overlord made sense in the geo-political climate of the East. To the West and to Octavian, Antony's style of governing seemed foreign and extravagant, while in reality it was adapting itself to his new position in the context of local traditions of power.

Of importance in understanding provincial coinage is determining who decided on the images and text to be put on the coinage. This is something that can be very difficult to determine in some cases, and can be crucial to the motivations inspiring the types and the interpretation of the imagery. In the case of Antony's provincial coins there are a number of possible authorities involved in the minting process. These could have included Antony himself, deciding on the types and legends for his coins, his subordinates who used his image or name as part of their issues, Cleopatra who may have influenced the choices or minted under her own authority with Antony's image or name, and lastly, individual cities

which attached Antony's portrait to their issues. The degree of influence that Antony exerted in each of these categories is difficult to determine, but it affected the overall interpretation of the types.

The so called 'Fleet Coinage' of Antony provides a good starting point in understanding the coexistence of Eastern and Western elements combined in one series.¹ This series was made in six Roman bronze standards, namely the *sestertius*, *tressis*, *dupondius*, *as*, *semis* and *quadrans*. Bronze coinage was usually based on local standards and had a limited region of circulation. To introduce bronze standards from Rome to the provinces was an unusual act, and invites the questions: Would the recipients of the issues understand their values? Why would Antony go to the trouble of doing this? The coins themselves provide some evidence to answer the first of these questions. They provide multiple means of understanding their values. Each denomination has a mark of value, expressed as a Greek letter, a symbol that runs parallel to the mark of value, and a reverse type, which is closely related to their values. For example, the largest issue, the *sestertius*, has a *delta* (the fourth Greek letter of the alphabet) and a square object, combined with four Hippocamps, all representing the idea of its value being four *asses* (Fig. 1).² The coins themselves could not be clearer as to their system of value. This is an indication that they were designed for an area which was unfamiliar with the denominations, and the presence of Greek letters indicating their numerical values, suggests they would be circulated within a Greek-speaking area.

However, there remains one factor that could still prove problematic in the reception and use of these issues. The weight of the denominations fluctuated greatly within the three series. The *sestertius* for example has a highest weight of around 39 grams and a lowest of around 10 grams, with varying weights in between. This means that coins bearing the same value were produced, ranging from a half to a quarter of the size of the largest pieces. It would prove very difficult in daily transactions to find a use for a series that was so unpredictable in its metal content. So why, especially with a large weight variation, were these bronze coins produced? The majority of scholarship has focused on the dating and interpretation of the types in terms of Antony's relationship with Octavian.³ The production for propaganda value, not only to rival Octavian's Western bronze issues but also to emphasise ideas of collegiality and celebration of ties created through marriage, is seen as the overarching reason for their production. But this is too simplistic an interpretation for an issue that is so complex in its denominational value and weight, while being a set of Roman denominations displaced into a Greek context. Theodore Buttrey's interpretation of the issue comes close to explaining the purpose.⁴ He saw the problems created by the large-scale introduction of Roman gold and silver issues without a corresponding small denomination. The need would arise to equate Roman standards with differing local ones, and a complete system of coinage would make transactions easier. This issue was a practical idea, showing



Figure 1. *RPC* 1468, Classical Numismatic Group Inc, Mail Bid Sale 61, 25/9/02, Lot 1029.

Not to scale. 29 mm diameter, 18.26g.



Figure 2. *RPC* 2201, Australian Centre for Ancient Numismatic Studies, Gale Collection.

Not to scale. 16mm diameter, 11.6g.

innovation and an understanding of the needs of financial management, but it seems to have largely failed. While the coinage itself was made accessible to both Greek and Latin speaking audiences, with easy to understand values, it was only ever produced in small quantities, most probably in Greece and Syria.⁵ Whether this was due to unpopularity or lack of resources is unlikely to be known.⁶ Nevertheless, the coinage itself provides important insights into Antony's understanding of the practical needs of administration. The implementation of a coinage usable by everyone in the region, whether they be Roman legionaries or Greek speaking city merchants, shows an able statesman working to solve problems of Roman integration in the East.

The silver *cistophori* produced by Antony, possibly in Ephesus, reveal another aspect of his provincial coinage. Unlike the Fleet Coinage that took the form of Roman issues transplanted into a Greek context, the *cistophori* were traditionally from Pergamum and circulated in Asia. The two types created by Antony contained traditional motifs accompanied by a Latin legend and images of himself and his wife Octavia (Fig. 2).⁷ The importance of this issue is

linked to the Dionysian elements reflected in the imagery, elements which parallel the depiction of Antony as the New Dionysus.⁸ The understanding of Antony acting as Dionysus in the East was an important element in the propaganda of Octavian, both before and after Actium. Dionysus was contrasted with Apollo, whom Octavian adopted as a patron and symbol of his traditional Roman values. In contrast, the negative aspects of Dionysus' image came to be associated with Antony.⁹ Is this the type of image that Antony is attempting to portray on these coins?

To determine this it is necessary to look at the links between Dionysus, the imagery on the coins, and the development of the *cistophoric* types in general. Early *cistophori* contain four main images: a *cista* or basket with a snake emerging encircled by a wreath of ivy leaves and flowers, and two snakes twisting upwards around a bow case. The *cista* and wreath are symbols of the worship of Dionysus, and establish from an early stage association of the coinage with Dionysus.¹⁰ These images remain constant on all *cistophori* until Antony. In the early 40s BCE Roman magistrates began to influence innovations in the denomination. In 49 BCE, C Fannius issued *cistophori* with a combination of

Latin and Greek legends and a hexastyle temple on the reverse. In the same year Q Metellus Pius Scipio minted with a Latin legend and *aquila* on the reverse.¹¹ However, even with the various innovations, traditional elements are still always present. Antony's two issues incorporate these traditional elements with symbols of his power: portraits of himself and his wife Octavia, and a Latin legend describing his offices.¹² The presentation of Dionysian elements should not necessarily be seen as an official representation of his adoption of Dionysus as a patron, but rather as an inseparable element of the *cistophoric* tradition.

The portrait of Antony is one of the most pervasive elements of the provincial coinage. Almost all coins issued directly by Antony and his subordinates, and some issued possibly independently by towns, have his portrait on the obverse.¹³ From Roman issues Antony's portrait is typically identified by the thick neck, prominent nose and chin.¹⁴ Some of these aspects are mirrored in the provincial coins, although many are also crudely executed with only minor similarities. The presence of portraits of living men was a new element in Roman coinage, but a traditional one in the East. It is in this context that minor magistrates and towns adopted his image for their coins as a representation of the leading authority of the region. The accuracy of the likeness was not the most important factor; rather it was the prominence of his political and military position in the region.

None of Antony's portrait coins have caused quite as much controversy and debate as those that included the image of

Cleopatra.¹⁵ The double portrait coins are seen as the most overt depictions of his affair with the queen, as an indication of his dynastic links with Egypt and a distinct break from Rome. Antony had previously depicted his last two wives, Fulvia and Octavia, on his coinage, but without any identifying features or legends.¹⁶ The issues with Cleopatra are marked clearly with her name, and plainly reflect her royal status. The coins, combined with the Donations of Alexandria and his identification with Dionysus, have been interpreted as symbols of Antony's creation of a new Empire, one which might have ultimately conquered both the East and the West.¹⁷ However, did the coins intend to represent this statement? Apart from a lack of evidence that Antony had intentions to take over the West, the coins should be examined in context of the role of Cleopatra in Antony's ability to maintain control of the East. Antony was highly reliant on Cleopatra as a base of support and for the wealth of Egypt. Cleopatra ruled in her own right as one of the few remaining monarchs not directly answerable to Rome. Her support was crucial for Antony to maintain political control in the region. Furthermore, Egypt provided supplies and money, without which Antony could not pay his armies. This alone could explain the presence of Cleopatra.

The issue from Syrian Chalcis is illustrative of the important role she played (Fig. 3).¹⁸ Even though the issue has the portraits of both Cleopatra and Antony, it is not Antony who is the focus of the issue but rather Cleopatra. The legend of this coin is highly unusual as it only refers



Figure 3. *RPC* 4771, Classical Numismatic Group Inc, Triton V 15/1/02, Lot 553.

Not to scale. 23mm diameter, 6.69g.

to Cleopatra but is present on both sides of the coin, also accompanying the image of Antony.¹⁹ This is a clear sign that it is Cleopatra who is the dominant figure and it is not an issue intended by Antony to parade claims of dynastic intentions. The coins with Cleopatra cannot be so easily explained by Antony's romantic ties, but need to be studied further in terms of the political and economic role of Cleopatra in Antony's Eastern administration.

Antony's provincial administration can be seen to be more complex and insightful than history would have us believe. He was not merely lost in the decadence of the East, having abandoned all ties with Rome as Octavian would have us believe. Instead, he can be seen as adapting to a new mode of power in an area long used to monarchy. The provincial coinage can provide insights into how his power was conceived and received, how he adapted to the development of Roman influence in the East, and how he mediated with other powers. Antony's provincial coinage is a largely untapped body of evidence which can come closer to providing an understanding of an important, but understudied, period of Roman history.

References

1. "Fleet Coinage" issued by L. Sempronius Atratinus, *RPC* 1458–1461; M. Oppius Capito, *RPC* 1462–1470; L. Bibulus M.f., *RPC* 4088–4093.
2. The rest of the denominations follow a similar pattern. See *RPC* for a detailed description of the system of values and symbols.
3. See Buttrey, Theodore V. Jr. *Studies in the coinage of Marc Antony*, PhD thesis, Department of Classics (Princeton, 1953), Chapter II, for an excellent overview of the traditional scholarship.
4. *Ibid.* 52.
5. While the coinage was only ever produced in small, poorly produced quantities, many of the surviving examples are badly worn. This may indicate some degree of success for the issue as the wear on the coins indicates use and circulation.
6. Unpopularity seems a more likely choice, as Antony has large amounts of silver available for his issues of *denarii* as well as the *cistophori*.
7. *RPC* 2201–2202.
8. Antony is linked with Dionysus in Velleius Paterculus II.82.4; The Elder Seneca, *Suasoriae*, 1.6–7; Plutarch, *Life of Antony*, 24.3, 26.3, 60.2–3, 75.3–4; Dio 48.39.2, 50.5.3, 50.25.3–4.
9. Plut. *Ant.* 24.3
10. Kleiner, Fred. S and Noe, Sydney P. *The early cistophoric coinage*, Numismatic Studies (New York, 1973), 13.
11. *BMC Mysia* 28; *BMC Lydia* 54.
12. M. ANT. IMP. TER. COS. DES. ITER. ET. TER. III. VIR. R.P.C
13. For example, issues were produced by Syrian towns in their local style but with the portrait of Antony on the obverse: Balanea, *RPC* 4456; Aradus, *RPC* 4466–4468; Marathas, *RPC* 4494; Ptolemais Akko, *RPC* 4740.
14. For example *RRC* 542 and 543.
15. *RRC* 543; *RPC* 4094–409; 4741–4742; 4752; 4771.
16. The coins depicting Fulvia include: *RRC* 489/5–6; *RPC* 3139–3140, 4509. The coins depicting Octavia include: *RRC* 527, 533/3; *RPC* 1453–1456, 1459–1466, 1468–1470, 201–2202, 4088–4091.

17. Williams, J., "Imperial style and the coins of Cleopatra and Mark Antony" in *Cleopatra Reassessed*, British Museum Occasional Paper Number 103, ed. Susan Walker and Sally Ann Ashton (London, 2003), 87–94, 92.
18. *RPC* 4771.
19. *Obv.* (Cleopatra's head) BACCIAICCHC
KΛEOΠATPAC. (of Queen Cleopatra)
Rev. (Antony's head) ETOYC KA TOY KAIS
ΘEAC NEΩTEPAC. (Of year 21 which is also
6; of the Younger Thea).

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