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# Coinage of the Social War

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Following Rome's victory in the Hannibalic War, Roman coinage came to dominate the Italian peninsula. The diversity of local coinages, especially in the Greek south, gradually dried up as Rome's political and economic pre-eminence grew. At the beginning of the first century BC, a league of peoples from central and southern Italy mounted a final challenge to this dominance, declaring war on Rome and striking their own coins. This coinage is remarkable as the only surviving document produced by this Italian league and hence must be central to any study of the war and its aims. Scholarship on this coinage has tended to emphasize its relationship with Roman currency. This paper will examine the ways in which the coinage of Italia varies and subverts Roman models to make a series of powerful statements about the new league's identity and values.

Late in 91 BC, an alliance of peoples from central and southern Italy declared war on Rome. While lists of participants vary, the earliest and most determined members of the league were the Marsi, Samnites, Picentes, Vestini, Marrucini, Paeligni and Lucani<sup>1</sup>. Their precise grievances are unclear, but their complaints centred on their treatment by Rome. As part of their treaties with Rome, the Italians provided men for Rome's armies, and these troops had been integral to Rome's success in winning an overseas

empire. Italian businessmen had been quick to take up trading opportunities offered by Rome's increasing power, but the Italians remained subjects in this arrangement, rather than partners, unable to hold political office at Rome, direct Roman policy or compete equally for business in the empire<sup>2</sup>. Even more pressing, Romans and Italians were in increasing conflict over access to land in Italy, with Rome's colonization schemes encroaching on Italian territory<sup>3</sup>. Velleius Paterculus says that injustice—that the Italians had raised Rome to greatness but were treated as outsiders—was the root of the war<sup>4</sup>. Remedying this inequality by granting Roman citizenship to the Italian allies on a large scale had first been seriously suggested by the consul, M Fulvius Flaccus, in 125 BC; but this was not well received by the Romans, who objected to raising the Italians to equal status<sup>5</sup>. In 91 BC, citizenship grants were proposed by the tribune, M Livius Drusus, as part of a far-reaching package of reforms. Again, however, the plan met with resistance, and Drusus was assassinated in his home. Drusus had been in contact with the Italians and the leader of the Marsi, Q Poppaedius Silo, had been a guest in his house<sup>6</sup>. Following Drusus' death, there was a massacre of all Romans resident in Asculum in Picenum, and shortly after the league of Italian peoples declared war on Rome. This conflict is



Figure 1. Campana Series Two showing helmeted 'Roma' style obverse type.

Image CNG mail bid sale 57, 2001, lot 942.



Figure 2. Campana Series Nine showing laureate obverse type and Oscan legend.

Image ACANS collection 07 A-29.

referred to as the Marsic War, because of the leading part taken by the Marsi, or Social War, as it was fought against Rome's former allies or *socii*. Although the Italian confederation was defeated by Rome, the former allies were granted Roman citizenship and gradually integrated into the Roman state. Dispute continued about the exact status of the new citizens, but by 87 BC the war was over and the Italian league dissolved.

The greatest challenge facing historians of this conflict is the lack of any account from an Italian perspective. The only document produced by the allies to have survived is the coinage minted by the league. This body of coinage, consisting with one exception of silver minted on the *denarius* weight standard, offers the best means of examining how the Italians conceived of their league. Minting coins is described by G Williamson as both a political and economic act<sup>7</sup>. By producing coins, the alliance was able not only to answer the pressing need to feed, outfit and reward their troops, but also to make a statement about their political identity. The coins are predominantly issued in the name of the confederation, *Italia* in Latin or *Viteliú* in Oscan. This legend identifies and publicizes the arrival of the new entity

to anyone handling the coins. Particularly significant for the new league's identification is the appearance of the personified *Italia* on several series of coins. Series One and Two feature a female head in a winged and crested Attic helmet, clearly imitated from contemporary 'Roma' types (Fig. 1). In three of the series, however, the obverse shows a laureate female head, wearing a single-drop earring and single strand necklace. This jewellery designates the figure as female, making impossible M Crawford's identification of her as Apollo (Fig. 2)<sup>8</sup>. By developing a unique patroness for the league and differentiating her strongly from *Roma*, the Italians made a clear statement of their separate identity. An examination of the Italian coinage indicates that they valued their league as more than an *ad hoc* military alliance, formed opportunistically to fight Rome. Rather, producing the coins and using the personified *Italia* suggest they believed that they had forged a new and enduring collective identity.

Scholarship on the Italian league's coinage has often focused on its debt to Roman coinage. It is not the purpose of this paper to deny that this relationship exists but to argue that it is best understood in terms of interaction, not mere imitation.



Figure 3a. Campana Series Three showing oath-taking with eight warriors on the obverse.

Image Nicholson Museum collection 2003.261.



Figure 3b. Campana Series Four showing oath-taking with four warriors on the obverse

Image CNG Triton XI, 2007, lot 589.



Figure 3c. Campana Series Five showing oath-taking with two warriors on the obverse.

Image CNG Triton XI, 2007, lot 590.

The relationship with Roman coinage is most conspicuous in the use of the *denarius* weight standard. The adoption of this weight standard should be understood as a practical measure by the allies. The occurrence of the Italian coins in hoards mixed with Roman *denarii* indicates that the two currencies were circulating together<sup>9</sup>. Following Rome's victory in the Hannibalic War, the *denarius* became the dominant weight standard used in Italy. For the allies to adopt any other standard would have been simply perverse and made the use of their coins in Italy impractical. Furthermore, Crawford has argued that the primary contact of the central-highland peoples with currency would have been through the medium of Roman military pay<sup>10</sup>. The league needed to produce coinage acceptable to their troops, who were used to Roman *denarii*.

The relationship between the iconography of the allied coinage and Roman *denarii* is more complex. Series One of Campana's catalogue<sup>11</sup> is a direct copy of the usual *denarius* types of the second century BC, showing a helmeted female head on the obverse and the Dioscuri charging on horseback on the reverse. However, this series seems to have been a short run and may represent an early experiment by the allies<sup>12</sup>. Had it been their intention merely to produce 'imitation *denarii*,' they would surely have continued minting these types. When one considers the whole body of the allied coinage, an innovative programme becomes evident.

The most discussed specimens of the Italian coinage are the three series featuring a bull. In particular, Series Six, depicting the bull of Italy trampling on a Roman wolf, is often cited as evidence of the war's separatist aims<sup>13</sup>. In comparison, the three series depicting an oath being sworn are quite neglected, but close analysis of the evolution of this type reveals a more complex and inward looking ideology than the blatant militarism found in the images of the warrior and bull. Series Three, Four and Five all feature varied scenes of oath-taking on the reverse (Figs 3a–c). Armed



Figure 4. Atellan bronze with Oath scene on reverse.  
Image CNG Triton V, 2002, lot 16.



Figure 5. RRC 234/1 showing oath-taking scene.  
Image CNG mail bid sale 76, 2007, lot 1164.

figures stand on either side of a kneeling attendant, who holds a piglet in his arms. The standing figures point their swords towards the piglet. After the oath has been sworn, it will be sealed by the piglet's sacrifice. Livy reports an oath formula, in which the parties call on Jupiter to strike down the party who breaks the oath as the priest strikes the pig<sup>14</sup>. This image has its antecedents in Roman coinage, having first featured on a series of gold *staters* struck during the Hannibalic War (RRC 28/1–2, 29/1–2). It is worth noting that a series of bronzes struck at Capua and Atella during the period of their alliance with Hannibal, also depicts the swearing of an oath, although this type shows only the two warriors, holding the piglet between them and raising their swords to one another (HNI 466 and 487, Fig. 4). These coins feature legends in Oscan, emphasizing independence from Rome. H Willers has argued that the Roman coins commemorate the pledge of loyalty given to Rome by the Latins in 209 BC, reported in Livy<sup>15</sup>. Crawford rejects this theory, dating the pieces prior to 215 BC, but does not offer any alternative explanation for the image<sup>16</sup>. In his article 'Foedus and Sponsio' he appears to deny any link between the third century gold pieces and the reappearance of the image on a series

of *denarii* in 137 BC, struck by Ti. Veturius (RRC 234/1, Fig. 5). He interprets these *denarii* as representing the conclusion of the treaty with the Samnites by the moneyer's ancestor, T Veturius Calvinus, after the Samnite ambush of the Romans at the Caudine Forks, an explanation first proposed by Mommsen. Crawford adds that Veturius chose to represent this treaty in 137 BC as an expression of support for the Numantine treaty, as he believes that the moneyer was a cousin of Ti. Sempronius Gracchus. Willers also argues that the *denarius* represents the Caudine treaty but says that this had nothing to do with the allies' adoption (and adaptation) of the type during the Social War. He sees it as merely an expression of the Italian alliance.

A new discussion of the scene is offered by M Koortbojian<sup>17</sup>. He argues that, rather than representing the conclusion of the treaty at Caudium, the scene in fact depicts Titus Tatius and Romulus concluding the agreement that would combine their communities. In his commentary on the *Aeneid*, Servius states that a statue group showing the two kings sacrificing together stood in the Via Sacra. Koortbojian argues that this was the model for the coin type. Whatever the origins of the scene itself, it clearly moved beyond

recalling a specific event to representing the more abstract values of *virtus* and *fides*, the essential characteristics of the warrior. Both Roman and Samnite troops traditionally swore an oath of allegiance to their commanders and each other prior to battle. In book ten, chapter 38, Livy describes the enrolment of the Samnite 'Linen Legion' in a horrific process, involving copious gore and the sacrifice of both human and animal victims. Much of this is probably exaggeration as Livy is emphasizing the barbarity of the Samnites at this point, characterized by their flashy armour and superstition. Beneath this, the basic content of the oath, pledging to follow the commanders, not to flee and to kill anyone who tries to, tallies with Livy's later description of the oath sworn by the Roman forces before Cannae, in which they swear not to leave their ranks except to retrieve a weapon, kill an enemy or save a comrade<sup>18</sup>. The fact that both the Romans and Campanians were minting coins with oath scenes during the Hannibalic War indicates that the oath was understood as a potent symbol of warrior loyalty.

The Italian confederation then took this scene and adapted it to a new context. Where the third century models depict only two participants in the oath, the Italian coins multiply the number of participants to four, six and finally eight. While Campana dates Series Three first, arguing that it was minted at Corfinium in 90<sup>19</sup>, Series Five should probably be placed first. With two warriors, it is closest to the original Roman type. As production progressed and the allies developed their own symbolic language, the type evolved to arrive at Series Three, where the number of participants has increased radically and

the allies' own *Italia* type is found on the obverse. Mattingly describes this proliferation of participants as reaching the point of absurdity<sup>20</sup>, but this fails to appreciate the game played by the allies. The increased number of warriors shows the growth and strength of the league and the commitment of its members to one another. Appreciation of the subtleties of the numismatic evidence provides insight into the self-fashioning of the league that is absent from the Romano-centric histories of the war. *Italia* was a new creation and the leadership needed ways to express this new alliance. One way of doing this was the creation of a unique league patroness. An image, representing the *virtus* and *fides* of true warriors expanded to show the inclusive nature of the new Italy, was another.

### Acknowledgements

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### References

1. This is the list found in Livy *Periochae* 72. Appian lists twelve peoples in his *Civil Wars* 1.39. Livy's list gives the earliest participants in the alliance, while Appian includes the Frentani, Hirpini, Pompeiani, Venusini and Iapygii who became involved later.
2. E Gabba and E T Salmon see the wish to direct foreign policy and access the public contracts as key reasons for the war. E Gabba 'Origins of the Social War and Roman politics after 89 BC' in *Republican Rome: The army and the allies* trans. P J Cuff, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1976, 70–130 at 76 and E T Salmon 'The cause of the Social War' *Phoenix* 16, 1962, 107–119.
3. Appian *civil wars* 1.36
4. Velleius Paterculus *Roman history* 2.15
5. Appian *civil wars* 1.21
6. Plutarch *Cato the Younger* 2.1

Campana Series	Obverse	Reverse	Obverse Legend	Reverse Legend
One	Helmeted Italia	Charging Dioscuri	—	<i>Viteliu*</i>
Two A	Helmeted Italia	Rearing Dioscuri	<i>Mutil</i>	<i>C Paapi C</i>
Two B			Italia	<i>C Paapi C</i>
Two C			Italia	Italia
Three A	Laureate Italia	Oath scene- 8 warriors (6 in 3F)	—	—
Three B- F			Italia	—
Three G			Italia	Q. Silo
Four	Helmeted Mars	Oath scene- 4 warriors	<i>Viteliu</i>	<i>C Paapii C</i>
Five	Helmeted Mars	Oath scene- 2 warriors	<i>Mutil Embratur</i>	<i>C Paapi C</i>
Six A-B	Wreathed Bacchus	Bull goring wolf	<i>Mutil Embratur</i>	<i>C Paapi</i>
Six C			—	<i>Vitelliu</i>
Seven A, C	Laureate Italia	Italia seated on shields, crowned by Victory	Italia	
Seven B			—	Italia
Eight	Diademed Italia	Seated Victory	—	Italia
Nine A	Laureate Italia	Warrior with bull	<i>Viteliu</i>	<i>Ni Luvki Mr</i>
Nine B			<i>Viteliu</i>	—
Ten	Helmeted Italia	Warrior with bull	<i>C Paapi C Mutil</i>	<i>Viteliu</i>
Eleven	Helmeted Italia	Warrior with bull	<i>C Mutil</i>	<i>Safinim</i>
Twelve	Bust of single Dioscurus	Figure (Italia?) in biga	—	—
Thirteen	Bust of Minerva	Figure with animal**	—	—
Fourteen	Bust of Minerva crowned by Victory	Warrior with trophy and charging bull	—	—
Fifteen	Bust of Minerva crowned by Victory	Two warriors meeting, ship's prow behind	—	—

Table. \* Italics indicate legend in Oscan. \*\*Interpretations of this scene range from Bacchus with a panther to Hercules with a bull.

7. G Williamson, 'Aspects of identity' in C Howgego, V Heuchert & A Burnett (eds.), *Coinage and identity in the Roman provinces*, Oxford University Press, 2005, 19–28
8. M Crawford, *Coinage and money under the Roman Republic*, Methuen, London, 1985, 181
9. *RRCH* 221, 222, 234, 252, 269, 336, 493
10. M Crawford, 'Army and coinage in the late Republic' in *La Romanisation du Samnium aux II et I Siècles av. J.-C.* Centre Jean Berard, Naples, 1988, 135–7
11. A Campana, *La monetazione degli insorti italici durante la guerra Sociale (91–87 A. C.)* Modena, Soliera 1987. This is the major catalogue of this coinage. All references to the series are to this catalogue, summarised in the Table above.
12. Campana *ibid.* 39 dates this series to 90 BC and suggests it was struck at the confederate capital of Corfinium/ Italia. He identifies one obverse and two reverse dies in this series.
13. On the bull series see in particular E Dench, *From barbarians to new men* Oxford University Press 1995, 215 and 'Sacred springs to the Social War: myths of origin and questions of identity in the Central Apennines', in T Cornell and K Lomas (eds.), *Gender and ethnicity in ancient Italy*, Accordia Research Institute, London, 1997, 43–52 and also F Tataranni, 'Il Toro, La Lupa E Il Guerriero: L'immagine marziale dei Sanniti nella monetazione degli insorti italici durante la guerra sociale (90–88 A.C.)', *Athenaeum* 93, 2005, 291–304. Tataranni argues for a more

- specifically ‘Samnite’ significance for the bull than does Dench, who sees it as a unifying symbol for the confederation.
14. Livy 1.24 and 9.5 give the same oath formula.
  15. H. Willers ‘Die Römische Goldprägung vom Jahre 209 V Chr’ in *Corolla Numismatica: Numismatic essays in honour of Barclay V Head*, Oxford University Press, 1906, 310–24. Livy 27.9.10.
  16. M. Crawford, ‘Foedus and Sponsio’ *Papers of the British School at Rome* 41, 1973, 1–7 and *Roman Republican coinage*, Cambridge University Press, 1974, 46.
  17. M. Koortbojian ‘A painted exemplum at Rome’s Temple of Liberty’ *Journal of Roman Studies* 92, 2002, 33–48.
  18. Livy 22.38.
  19. Campana *op. cit.* 56.
  20. H. Mattingly, ‘From coins to history’ (The President’s address) *Numismatic Chronicle* 2004, 357–360 at 359.

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