'Fantastic'
CONN IGGULDEN

'Brilliant'
EMMA SOUTHON



MONETA

A HISTORY OF ANCIENT ROME IN TWELVE COINS

GARETH HARNEY

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A History of Ancient Rome in Twelve Coins

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To my father,
for placing ancient Rome in the palm of my hand.

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When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword, nor war's quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory.

Shakespeare, Sonnet 55

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Introduction

'This is two thousand years old,' my father reminded me as he placed the small silver disc into the palm of my hand. It was still gleaming, cool to the touch, no bigger than a penny. My young mind could not possibly – and will always struggle to – comprehend such an expanse of time. This coin was older than both world wars, older than Shakespeare, had already existed for a millennium when Harold took an arrow in the eye at Hastings.

The details were worn but, peering closely, I could make out letters of an alphabet I understood; encircling the profile of a man whose determined stare seemed to reach far beyond the coin's edge, as if still planning his next move. Grasping the true antiquity of the shimmering metal might have been beyond me, but I was immediately curious about this man whose portrait was forever stamped into its surface. My father soon clarified: 'That's the Roman emperor, Trajan.' The leader, he went on to explain, who ruled over an empire so vast it stretched all the way from Scotland to Iraq, and this coin, known as a *denarius*, would buy my bread at each end of it.

I had to wonder, looking down at the stern face of an emperor of Rome, how he rose to become the most powerful man in the ancient world. Just as he lay in my hand, the fate of millions once lay in his. What might it have been like to meet him, and what would he make of our distant century – to know that children and their fathers were still gazing at his coins, speaking his name, and recounting his deeds after two millennia? The more I thought about the adventure that shining denarius must have taken through time, the more it seemed to tingle with electricity in my palm.

'Let's call that the first coin in your collection,' my father said.

A few decades and countless Roman coins later, it is safe to say that from that moment my imagination was captured. These were, after all, hand-held windows into a world inhabited by the most colourful

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Silver denarius of the Roman emperor Trajan who ruled AD 98–117, held by the author.

and entertaining characters, who wielded the power of gods while falling victim to the most human weaknesses. A world with no comforting distinctions between hero and villain, where triumph was balanced always by tragedy – and the best part was that this was no fanciful work of fiction. This rise and fall was a true-life epic, with many of its most dramatic scenes playing out before you in precious metal.

Perhaps more than any other artefact, coins offer us a tangible and immediate connection to our ancient past. Their invention in the seventh century BC represents a crucial spark in humanity's intellectual awakening: it has rightly been observed that wherever man began to think, money began to live.[1] They have been our close physical companions ever since, coveted and carried always about our bodies, designed to sit in our palms, to be passed between the hands of strangers and friends – a focus of human contact through much of recorded history. The relationship would soon become a sacred one: to this day we still throw them in pools of water and

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make a hopeful wish, place them in the foundations of new buildings, carry them as good luck charms, hide them in food, and give them as gifts.

First crafted as a convenient and mass-produced means of financial exchange, coins quickly turned into so much more, with the ancients treating the small discs of metal as a canvas on which to showcase the fundamental ideals of their culture. While the Greeks pushed the medium to its artistic limits, attaining levels of beauty and sophistication arguably never seen before or since, the Romans appreciated the practical power of coinage to disseminate their own civilisational brand. As cultural transmitters, coins promoted the very concept of *Romanitas* – what it meant to be Roman. Empire would be built as much by their silver and bronze, as it would by the iron of the legionary's blade.

Struck on an industrial scale under the might of Rome, coins truly became humanity's first mass media. Two thousand years before the printing press, they were efficiently spreading ideas, beliefs, news, and propaganda to the furthest reaches of the known world. Counting your change in the Roman market might also mean seeing the face of your new emperor for the first time – it seems beards are back in fashion again! – or learning of the latest military triumph over those trouser-wearing barbarians. You might even get your first glimpse of a new in-vogue god from the East – if Mars or Venus have yet to answer your prayers, why not try a sacrifice to them instead?

Ancient coins exist as stirring reminders of that intimate bond, though in my view their unique ability to place history at our fingertips is rarely harnessed to its full potential today. By their nature, coins are small and difficult to display effectively. While many museums around the world hold dazzling collections, contextualising them for the visiting public can present a seemingly impossible task; understandably, most institutions only exhibit the tiniest fraction of their ancient money.

Likewise, while the scientific study of coins and currency, known as numismatics, pre-dates other disciplines like archaeology and anthropology by centuries, it remains one of the most obscure

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academic fields. The literature is only for the brave, filled often with technical jargon that keeps at arm's length many who might threaten interest. Even among historians, numismatics is seen as an esoteric area of study. Coins are rightly valued by the archaeologist for the precise dating evidence they can provide for an ancient site – but they also risk being reduced to exactly that: just well-dated pieces of metal.

They need not be seen in such enigmatic terms; indeed, far from being exclusionary, coins can provide one of the most welcoming gateways into ancient history. Unlike other rare and untouchable artefacts, they survive in their millions, many in pristine condition; are conveniently held in the hand, and are still – for now at least – used much as they always were, instantly recognised by young and old. Coins were one of the few objects handled equally by people from every walk of ancient life, treasured by the slave and the senator alike. A universality that endures today as the ancient artefact most frequently unearthed by the general public; brought to light by farmers, construction workers, and metal detectorists far more than they are by archaeologists. Unless they were deliberately melted down, most ancient coins were accidentally lost or, in an age before banking, intentionally buried in hoards. People have therefore been finding them – in vast numbers and in the most surprising places – for centuries, and there remain untold amounts still to be discovered. So many survive that any history lover hoping to bring the classical world to life with a collection of its money can see it as a perfectly realistic goal. As such, they are the only handcrafted pieces of ancient art freely collected by enthusiasts of all backgrounds across the world.

Further adding to their accessibility is the fact that coins are an inherently visual art form: intrinsic stores of monetary value first and foremost, but also picture books of the past, specifically designed to cross cultural and linguistic barriers for appreciation by the widest audience possible. Their study provides a complete immersion in the enchanting myths and the harsh realities of the classical world, a visual manifest through the essential components of Western

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civilisation, diarising the evolution of art, language, architecture, war, government, and much more besides. It is no exaggeration to say that a dedicated ancient coin enthusiast might acquire in the pursuit of the hobby their own 'classical education'; before long they will be able to read a coin's Greek or Latin legends, identify its gods and goddesses, recount the myths it portrays, locate the cities where it was struck and, of course, recognise the faces of kings and emperors stamped on its surface as if they were old friends.

Yet as well as igniting the intellect, ancient coins also strike at the heart. Holding one in your hand, the mind inevitably imagines the countless others who have also looked down upon its designs, both in far-off millennia and in recent centuries. Maybe the coin once lay in the palm of a hardened legionary, a brutalised gladiator, an enterprising merchant; perhaps later, a British monarch or president of the United States – both surprisingly possible.[2] In the circle of a coin we find an uncanny portal connecting us not only to its makers, but to every one of its custodians, both past and future.

From the seed of that first denarius gifted by my father, my own collection of Roman coins grew steadily, alongside an inevitable fascination with the world that struck them into being. Researching their origin stories – often as intricate as the tiny designs stamped into their surface – took me to dusty libraries and grand museums; but most thrillingly of all, to the Eternal City where they were forged in fire and the still-standing monuments celebrated in their metal, as well as to ruinous towns where they had united people by a shared measure of exchange. Clambering over the broken fragments of once-magnificent structures, much like holding a coin, it is not so difficult to hear the voices of those people who surely looked around at their empire and thought it could never end. The remains of the classical world would take even the most enthusiastic traveller many lifetimes to fully discover; so far, I have been lucky enough to explore hundreds of Roman sites all over Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa, including in lesser visited countries like Libya and Albania. But returning always to the miniature realm of Rome's coins, to realise myself as part of the same history as immortal names like Julius

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Caesar, Cleopatra, Caligula, Nero, Hadrian – to reach out and touch the face of the past.

This book sets out to celebrate the power and immediacy of coins as primary sources from the Roman world. Not faded and crumbled like painted frescoes, nor burned or corrupted in later centuries like fragile manuscripts; but durable, unchanging – 'a true reflection of their time'.[3] Striking into metal the faces of her rulers – earthly and divine – along with the deeds credited to them, Rome inadvertently left behind a near-unbroken personal record of her achievements. Coins told the story – at times they even *became* the story. As we will see, the shocking designs that some leaders dared to place on their money quickly had commentators reaching for their stylus pens, and political rivals reaching for their daggers.

The exploits of the ancient Romans are well-worn tales; embellished by historians, ornamented by Shakespearean tragedy, and reimagined by Hollywood epics. But the handcrafted coins they left behind invite us to see these stories newly minted, to experience the most climactic moments in Roman history, as if for the first time. Transported through the millennia by their imagery, we will witness, first hand, the mythical founding of the city; be thrown into the chaotic aftermath of Rome's most infamous assassination; jostle to our seat in the packed Colosseum; see unveiled the symbol of an invincible new God; and ultimately, watch with dread as a barbarian army masses outside the city walls.

Coins enchanted me by giving the intangible wonder of ancient history a physical form; granting it weight, vivid colour, and a human face. For the reader, this book hopes to do something of the same.

By no means will this be a guide to collecting coins, though if a reader is enthused to read more on the topic, or even search out their first Roman coin, then the book will have surely succeeded in its aims. Nor will this be an encyclopedic reference work on Roman coinage; the Republic and Empire of Rome struck coins across three continents for the better part of a thousand years. There will, no doubt, be many numismatic masterpieces that are painful to omit,

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but in this personally curated selection of coins from a variety of Roman denominational values – gold, silver, and bronze – I hope to give the reader the fullest possible experience of Roman money. The fact that this story could be rewritten a hundred times featuring different Roman coins with each telling, only serves as a testament to the art of their creators.

There will be no intimidating glossary of terms demanding study before we embark on this journey. In delving into the backgrounds of each coin, we will discover the mechanics of their creation and the anatomy of their design along the way. Their stories will be brought to life through rigorous historical research, but I will equally seek to embrace the excitement and flights of imagination that accompany the experience of holding these ancient time capsules in your hands.

Coins need little explanation to evoke a pang of recognition. They have been treasured friends on our human journey for over a hundred generations – and yet it seems increasingly likely that our very generation will be the one to break that long bond. As we prepare to bid farewell to physical money in our lives, and step into an intangible digital future, I believe it more vital than ever that we celebrate the role coins played in bringing humanity together.

Ancient Rome, meanwhile, shows no signs of losing its timeless appeal. Film and television productions continue to dig its rich history for inspiration, and seemingly every month there are new archaeological excavations, museum exhibitions, or scientific discoveries that make the Romans, once again, headline news.

Still, the Romans themselves are hard to grasp. At a distance they can seem to us strange, cruel, irrational – beings from another world. This book hopes to introduce you to them, face to face. We will pick up lovingly crafted coins made by their ancient hands and hold them in our own. Looking closely, we will read in the recognisable letters, sharp as the day they were struck, their names, their vain boasts, and their solemn vows. We will see what they believed and what they valued, their brightest hopes and their darkest fears – some of which we might still share. But their living portraits will

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be read most clearly of all. Familiar faces made immortal in precious metal, tenacious and vital, almost seeming to breathe; as if they might, at any moment, turn to us and begin to tell us of that world long gone.



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Prologue

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'In a way the coin is our superior. The hardness of its metal secures for it "eternal" existence . . . A coin does not grow, it issues ready-made from the mint and should remain as it then is; it should never change.'

Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*



Silver denarius struck by the moneyer Titus Carisius, 46 BC.
Obverse: Head of Juno Moneta, 'Moneta' behind.
Reverse: Tools for striking coins: tongs, anvil die, punch die, and hammer.

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Juno's Warning

The night was moonless, clear, perfect for the attack. From the summit of the citadel, the Roman defenders would never see them coming through the darkness, yet the silver glow of the starlight was just enough to illuminate a route for the Gauls up the rugged cliffs.

This siege had gone on long enough. Several months had passed since the Gallic tribe, led by their chieftain Brennus, had won an astonishing victory over the Romans a few miles from the city. So bewildered were the Gauls at their sudden success, they hesitated in marching upon Rome itself, suspecting an elaborate trap. The delay allowed many of the citizens to escape, and a steadfast contingent of warriors to fortify a position on the Capitoline Hill, Rome's most sacred summit and home of her gods. From their high stronghold, the remaining men watched helplessly as the barbarians rampaged through the familiar streets below, putting to the torch their revered temples and their beloved homes. A thousand terrors forced them to turn their eyes to the sea of calamities all around – the screams of those left behind, the roaring of flames, the crashing of falling masonry – as if 'fate had made them spectators to the nightmare of their country's ruin'.[1]

It seemed that before young Rome even had a chance to realise her potential, she had fallen.

The city was left a smouldering wreck, her last soldiers surrounded and massively outnumbered. Still, they were certain they would prevail. Romans, after all, embraced fearful odds. Not to mention that the Gauls lacked the discipline needed for protracted siege warfare. Rationing of supplies, guard details, watchwords: these things meant nothing to bearded barbarians. The attackers had also burned the city's grain supplies during their sacking and were now encamped in charred, malarial valleys strewn with the rotting dead. The Romans – hardened by disaster and defending ancestral soil – were confident that disease and hunger would break the invaders before long. They would soon be proved right.

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The attack, though, when it came, took them by surprise. The Gauls had eventually identified the most vulnerable ascent to the citadel, if only by following the footprints of a Roman messenger who had passed freely though their lines. Tonight, navigating by starlight alone, they would scale the cliffs by the same route and put an end to this upstart republic.

It would prove a difficult scramble, especially when attempted in darkness and under arms. But with uncharacteristic self-control the Gauls ascended in silence, passing weapons between each other without a sound, and acting as footholds for their comrades as they hoisted themselves up the jagged rock face. The Roman sentries on duty heard nothing of the coming attack. Their guard dogs too, tuned to the slightest noise in the darkness, did not stir. As destiny would have it, a more unlikely animal was to play the role of Rome's saviour that night.

Cresting the summit of the hill, the Gauls emerged before a flock of geese left to wander the citadel. These were the sacred animals of Juno, chief goddess of the Roman state and protectress of the city. Despite the near starvation of the besieged soldiers, the birds had not been killed for food and were, indeed, kept well fed. That devotion was soon to be rewarded. Disturbed by the barbarians, the geese clapped their wings frantically and shook the night air with their honks, like trumpets rousing every soldier from his slumber.[2] First to the scene was the highly decorated and perfectly named officer Marcus Manlius, who charged the leading barbarian and with a crushing blow from the boss of his shield, sent him headlong back over the cliff. With more Romans arriving, other Gauls soon followed him into the void, tumbling down onto their fellows below. The defenders rained down javelins on the remaining barbarians clinging desperately to the rock face. As Juno's geese gabbled their approval, every one of the attackers was soon sent hurtling into the blackness.

Spurred by their successful defence, the Romans offered the weary barbarians a decisive battle and the chance to end the entire ordeal once and for all. Their victory was swift, bloody, and complete – the Gauls were annihilated. With her sacred geese, Juno had saved Rome

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from imminent destruction. The wife of Jupiter and queen of the gods had once again affirmed herself protectress of the city. Rebuilding commenced immediately. Rome, as she would do so often throughout her history, would return from disaster with more strength and resolve than ever before.

The Gallic sack of Rome in 390 BC would ever after haunt the Roman imagination. Having only thrown out its kings a little over a century before, the fledgling Republic had been brought to the brink and survived. Virtues that defined the Roman character – discipline, courage, endurance, piety – had been put to the test in the crucible of war and delivered a resounding victory over the enemy. For the next 800 years, no barbarian would breach the walls of the city.

A glorious new temple now rose on the site of the foiled Gallic attack.[3] It would honour Juno in her role as the goddess who warns Rome of imminent dangers. The Temple of Juno Moneta, 'the Warner' (from the Latin verb *monere*, meaning 'to warn'), would thereafter watch over the ever-growing city from its prominent outcrop on the Capitoline. Yet as well as guarding the Roman populace, Juno Moneta would also safeguard the wealth of the state. It was perhaps for this reason that the temple soon took on a second function: it became the mint of the Roman Republic. Here, Rome would strike her name not only into the coins that fuelled her economy, but into history itself. From the mint, a gleaming and seemingly endless river of lovingly crafted coins flowed by the million, ready to spread the dream of Rome far and wide. Coinage struck in this very building would travel to every corner of the world under Roman dominion and beyond – later to be unearthed as far afield as Iceland, India, and China.[4]

For centuries, those gathering in the Forum square – the epicentre of the Roman world – could, with a single glance, look from the coins in their palms up to the temple in which they were created. So connected were the two in the Roman mind that those precious discs of gold, silver, and bronze were simply called *moneta*, after the watchful goddess. In this way, the Temple of Juno Moneta continues to loom large over all our lives today. It is, of course, from her name that we derive the English word for that force which still makes our world go round: money.

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Masterpieces in Miniature

Every single ancient coin was made by hand. When you hold one in your fingertips and marvel at its intricate design, it is vital to remember that each stage of its creation was completed by skilled craftsmen without any modern tools or machinery. Awed by the engineering perfection of a Roman aqueduct or the mind-boggling complexity of a Greek astronomical 'supercomputer', we may be forgiven for assuming the ancients must have devised a clever mechanised solution for something as simple as hammering coins.[5] In fact, the process was a manual one from beginning to end, remaining essentially unchanged until the sixteenth century's first experiments with machine-pressed 'milled' coinage.

Understanding the basics of how ancient coins were created helps to remind us that these cold discs of metal have a human story to tell – each one the product of human sweat, toil, and ingenuity. Essentially, ancient coins were made by placing a blank disc of metal called a *flan* between two engraved dies and striking them with a hammer. The lower die, set tightly into an anvil, would imprint the *obverse* or 'heads' side of the coin, while the hand-held upper die would imprint the *reverse* or 'tails' design. But this swing of the hammer was just the final step in an intricate process, demanding the skills of a diverse team of workers. Minting ancient coins was, in every respect, a collaborative endeavour.

The story of each coin can be traced as far back as the extraction of its metals from the earth. Of the many cruel fates that might await the enslaved across the ancient world, condemnation to the mines – *damnatio ad metalla* – was the most feared of all. Slaves in their thousands – an estimated 60,000 working at one Roman mine in Spain alone – were forced to hack endlessly at the rock in the near-total darkness of cramped, suffocating tunnels.[6] So horrific were conditions for those labouring in the mines, being sent to one was generally considered a prolonged death sentence. When not being mined directly, the precious metals required for coinage were plundered from conquered lands. The emperor Trajan is thought to have

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brought home from his conquest of Dacia (modern Romania) around 225 tons of gold and 450 tons of silver to fill the state treasury – enough to strike thirty-one million gold *aurei* and 160 million silver *denarii* coins.[7]

Questions of how much coinage to inject into the Roman economy were closely tied to state expenditure at the time, though little is known of the bureaucracy behind such decisions.[8] What is clear is that coinage has always helped, as one scholar put it, to 'facilitate exchange between people, the payment of taxes and external trade'; naturally, as the scale and population of Rome's dominion expanded, so would the demand for new coin from the mint.[9] Once a finance magistrate, consul, or emperor decided on the amount of coin needed, the allotted weight of precious metals was designated by officers in the Roman treasury situated in the Temple of Saturn at the base of the Capitoline. The bullion was then taken on a short journey to the summit and delivered to the mint, presumably under the tightest security. Going by the procedures at medieval mints, from which more evidence survives, we can assume that the metal passed through a network of officials and assayers who carefully tested its purity. Batches of blank circular flans of gold, silver or bronze were then pre-prepared by metal workers to exacting weight standards.[10]

No coin was complete until it was embossed with a carefully chosen design – the state's stamp of approval. Of all the skills involved in ancient coin production, perhaps none impresses more than the artistry of the die engraver. The detail and creativity of the designs stamped into the metal of ancient coins, often just millimetres across, continued to fascinate long after the ruin of the classical world. As the wonders of Rome faded from memory, the art of her coinage remained prevalent, inspiring many a great Renaissance mind.[11] The dies that punched both sides of a coin were cut entirely by hand. It is worth emphasising what this entailed: a craftsman engraving tiny images and lettering directly into the hard bell-bronze stamps, using only simple chiselling tools – and for good measure, cut in reverse so designs were read the correct way when imprinted. As no Roman die

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The die-engraver's art: a startlingly lifelike portrait – just a few millimetres across – of Hadrian's heir, Aelius Caesar. Denarius struck in AD 137, from the author's collection.

engravers ever signed their creations, they remain to us anonymous masters.

All of this was completed without any eyeglasses or magnification. This feat seems even more miraculous today: many delightful details on coins from my own collection can only be revealed under the microscopic scrutiny of high-definition photography. While primitive lenses are known from the ancient world – and one anecdote reveals that the emperor Nero may have used a lens of sorts to better see the action at gladiator fights – these were rare curios.[12] It seems fair to assume that expert mint engravers would have suffered from significant short-sightedness by the end of their careers. Furthermore, the intense stresses placed on these hand-cut dies during the minting process meant they only survived a few thousand blows of

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the hammer – perhaps a single day's use – before they cracked or wore down to an unacceptable degree.[13] By that point, engravers needed to be ready with another set of dies without delay. Studies have shown that a single issue of Roman coinage would routinely require hundreds of engraved dies for each side of a coin.[14]

When it was time for the strike, the metal blanks were heated to soften them in readiness for the hammer blow. Visual or written descriptions of mint teams in action are all but non-existent in ancient sources, perhaps owing to the secrecy and security around the process; forgery was enough of a problem already, without giving counterfeiters an instruction manual too. But from the scant surviving evidence, we can surmise that a team of at least three men brought the minting process to its climax. A rare bronze token shows one man placing the flan on the anvil, another positioning the upper die over it, and another wielding the hammer, ready to strike.[15] Given the enormous output of the mint, it is likely that multiple teams like this were at work simultaneously, from dawn till dusk and possibly beyond; a later medieval chronicler states that the 'hammers of the moneyers are never still, day and night'.[16]

Before they bring the hammer down, we may ask, who were the craftsmen making these coins? Thousands must have worked in the mint during the many centuries it operated, yet not a single testimony from one of them has come down to us. Does that mean, then, that they were downtrodden slaves, not so far removed from those toiling in the mines? A fortuitously surviving inscription celebrates a selection of workers at the mint in the year AD 115.[17] It lists sixty-three names and whether they are *liberti* or *servi* – freedmen or slaves. Just over half are labelled as free men. In the great social dynamism of the era, many of the slaves would have hoped to earn their freedom through the quality of their work at the mint. Conditions were no doubt dangerous and unpleasant, but this was not a torturous workhouse. Skilled men worked together in small teams, with little distinction between the free and enslaved, to manufacture a precision-made product. While their voices have been sadly lost to time, they continue to speak to us through the countless artworks they left as a lasting legacy to the world.

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The Hammer and the Anvil

With splendid irony, an intriguing glimpse of the tools used by our tireless mint workers is offered to us on a coin that they created.[18] The silver denarius was struck in 46 BC in the name of the moneyer, Titus Carisius. As moneyer, Titus was one of three junior magistrates at the outset of their careers who took charge of coin minting for a single year. In the highly competitive political world of the Roman Republic, a stint as moneyer was the perfect way to raise your profile, coming as it did with the privilege of placing your name on that year's coinage. It seems they were even given free rein over coin designs; while in the imperial age, the emperor surely had the final say – though how he reported his requests to the mint remains a mystery. A minor position it may have been, but Titus Carisius clearly took pride in his role as moneyer, choosing for the obverse of his coin the face of Juno Moneta herself. The patron goddess of the mint is shown with her hair tied back in a bun, wearing cross-shaped earrings and a necklace. Evidently, Titus also felt that the mint workers deserved a rare bit of recognition, presenting to us on the reverse the essential tools of coin production. We can see the tongs used to place the hot metal blanks in position, a pair of dies, and the all-important hammer. In a telling addition, the upper 'punch' die is shown garlanded with a laurel wreath, while another wreath artfully frames the whole design – triumphant symbols that emphasise coin production as a sacred craft and a driving force in Rome's unstoppable rise.

Though the mint in the capital would remain the most prominent, it would not be the only place to strike the coins of empire. As we will see, a general on a multi-year campaign far from Rome might need to create his own coinage with which to pay his soldiers. In these instances, a stripped-down travelling mint would operate while moving with the legions through enemy territory. Perhaps the most famous example would be that of Julius Caesar, who took a mobile military-mint with him on his epic conquests. In times of civil war, rival claimants to power might each strike their own coinage in the hope of legitimising their positions. And as Rome's sphere of

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influence expanded, other cities, especially in the East, would be granted the right to strike their own coins. This 'provincial' coinage in bronze and silver was designed to fulfil the needs of local economies and used locally recognised denominations. Without coins, the legions, ports, marketplaces – indeed, all the mechanisms of empire – would quickly grind to a halt.

Now we reach the final moment of creation: with a precise swing and deafening clang, the hammer meets the die exactly, and a coin is wrought into being. The explosive effort of the hammerer – the above-mentioned inscription reveals that these men were called *malliatores* – is often evocatively frozen on the face of a coin in the form of shockwaves called 'flow lines', radiating out through the metal. Many people, when they hold an ancient coin, ask why the design is not perfectly centred like our modern money – and sometimes so misaligned that part of the image or text has dropped off the edge. Having tried striking reproduction coins myself with similar tools, I can attest how difficult it is to keep the die perfectly placed over the blank as you bring down the hammer. With a little practice and a great deal of concentration, I just about managed one well-centred coin after many attempts. Now factor in the fatigue and the lightning pace of production needed to meet demand – some estimate one coin struck every three seconds – and it is no surprise that not every coin is perfect to modern eyes.[19]

In other instances, the reverberation of the impact caused the die to bounce and impress its design into the coin twice – known as a 'double strike'. An even more dramatic mishap sometimes occurred when a coin became lodged in the upper die. If this went unnoticed by the striking team, the obverse side of the trapped coin would be embossed into the next blank to be struck, instead of the reverse design of the die. This could result in error coins known as 'brockage', with mirror-image heads on both sides. Quality-control measures in place at the mint held each team accountable for their daily output, but inevitably some of these blundered coins slipped through. Indeed, many modern collectors enjoy seeking out such imperfect examples; all happy accidents reminding us that these coins were made by human hands that tired, that rushed, that made

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mistakes. Underlined by all this is a compelling truth: every single ancient coin is a unique work of ancient art. Even two coins struck seconds apart, by the same team with the same dies, will never be identical.

The coins produced by Rome, two millennia ago, must surely rank as the most widely surviving artefacts from all antiquity – still emerging from ploughed English fields and parched Israeli hillsides on an almost daily basis – yet surprisingly little is known about how exactly they were created.[20] Modern experimental archaeology and even cutting-edge atomic spectrometry is only beginning to reveal the secrets of the minting process. What we do know is that each coin was the result of a dynamic collaboration of metallurgists, assayers, smiths, artists, engravers, and labourers. Ancient coins were mass-produced, yet at the same time, artisanal. Labours of love crafted on an industrial scale.

A Forge of Ideas

A thousand noises compete in the cacophony. Flaming furnaces roar, quickened by blasting bellows. Molten metal spits out crackling sparks as it pours from glowing crucibles. Through clouds of hissing steam, overseers struggle to be heard as they call out commands to their teams. And always cutting through the din, the unending chimes of the striking hammers, like the peal of frantic bells ringing out over the heart of Rome.

Perched on the sacred hill of the gods, adjacent to the house of Jupiter himself, the temple-workshop of Moneta watches proudly over the city.[21] In the bustling streets below, close to a million people exchange her wares by day and night. Deals are made, bets are won and lost, exotic items from a boundless empire are bought and sold. Juno's coins connect those usually separated by gulfs, passed between the hands of the rich and the poor, the free and the enslaved – allowing them all to relate through a 'common measure'.[22] From the great metropolis paved roads emanate like arteries, carrying these coins to people in even the most distant province. A gleaming denarius fresh

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from the mint might go on to buy beer in Britannia or pepper in Syria.

The workshop of Moneta is many things simultaneously to the vast Roman world. An engine room, with hammering pistons that power the wheels of empire; and a newsroom, where the latest headlines are imprinted and rushed out to every corner of the Mediterranean. A cultural ground-zero bringing Roman gods, emperors, and fashions to the masses; yet equally, a Ministry of Truth, still controlling narratives and offering 'alternative facts' across the millennia.

Here Rome strikes gold, silver, and bronze coinage on an unprecedented scale, but the mint is also a workshop of ideas. Accompanying the heat of the forge is heated discussion of artistic composition, symbolism, and persuasion. On the enduring metal, Rome writes her unfolding biography; a visual journey from difficult childhood all the way to *caput mundi* – capital of the world. These will be tales of glory and sorrow, of heroism and betrayal; like the coins they are stamped into, there will always be opposing sides. In the end, as with most history, the genre will be tragedy. There will be a triumphant rise and cataclysmic fall – but even when the world that made them is long buried, the coins will still emerge, glinting in the dark earth, ready to tell their stories.

These are just a few of them.

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Chapter I

WOLF

'Then Romulus, proud in the tawny hide of the she-wolf, his nurse, shall found the walls of Mars and call the people Romans after his own name. For these Romans I set no bounds in space or time; but have given empire without end.'

Virgil, *The Aeneid*



Silver *didrachm*, 269–266 BC, Rome mint. The first coin struck in Rome, under the name 'of the Romans'.
Obverse: Diademed head of young Hercules, with club and lion skin over shoulder.
Reverse: She-wolf suckling the infant twins, Romulus and Remus. 'ROMANO' in exergue.

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Children of Mars

The flood had passed. Finally, the river had retreated to its tangled banks. From the dark undergrowth there, a pair of amber eyes scanned the waterline. Only when she was sure, did she emerge from the shadows into the open. Thirst often brought her down from the wild hills to drink here, most recently with the latest litter she had reared. Those pups had followed her so closely, grown so fast; until one day they needed her milk no longer, and bounded off into the woods. Now she was alone again. Planting her paws into the soft mud of the riverbank, she lowered her muzzle and lapped at the cool waters.

The scent reached her first, swept downstream on the brisk air. All at once her muscles tightened, her eyes narrowed, her pointed ears stood alert for every sound. A lone wolf quickly learned to sense danger everywhere. Then came the faint whimpering, almost lost as it mingled with the gush of the tumbling waters. She thought of running, but her curiosity – and her hunger – drew her towards the sound. Along the riverbank she stalked, closer and closer to the origin of that strange mewling. Pushing through the thick reeds at the water's edge, she bared her glistening teeth instinctively. And then she saw them.

They lay, writhing in river muck, next to the basket that had turned them out as the flood receded. Tiny arms and legs flailing, naked, utterly helpless before her. With every weak cry she padded nearer, until she stood over the two infants. Spittle dripped from her open mouth as she sniffed their shivering skin. Famished ribs showed through her fur. She was ravenous, deadly – yet still, a mother.

Curling her grey tail protectively around the pair, she began licking them down. Her slick tongue washed away the mud and warmed their blood. With their wails renewed and vigorous, she offered her teats, still distended and lactating from the recent rearing of her pups. She could hardly spare the energy, drained as she already was, but there on the banks of the Tiber, she suckled the twins with all the

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life-giving milk she could muster.[1] Milk imbued in equal measure with maternal gentleness and wolven ferocity. After the feed she carried each of the babies up to her shadowy cave, the Lupercal, where she would rear them as her own.

It was here, some time later, that the shepherd came upon them as he led his flock through the hills. He was struck dumb with astonishment at the sight before him: a wild wolf tenderly nursing motherless human twins that clung to her lovingly. Moved though he was at the almost supernatural scene, he drove the she-wolf away and took the boys up himself. The moment he held them, Faustulus sensed that they were no normal children, but surely of royal – perhaps even divine – heritage. And he had heard those rumours from the nearby city of Alba Longa; that the princess Rhea Silvia, daughter of the rightful king, Numitor, had given birth to twins after declaring that she had been raped by Mars, the god of war. Her uncle, Amulius, who had seized the throne, threw Rhea in prison and ordered that the illegitimate children be drowned. The servant tasked with the deed could not bring himself to see it through and instead sent the babies down the flooded river in a basket.

Whether the rumours of their parentage were true or not, the gods had clearly decided the miraculous twins should live. Besides, the life of a herdsman like Faustulus was tough, and sons would one day provide him welcome help. The boys needed names – and he would derive them from the Latin *ruma*, describing the teat at which they were found suckling.[2] In naming them, he could not have known he was also naming history's greatest city and empire. Back at his humble shepherd's hut, Faustulus presented to his wife their new adopted sons, Romulus and Remus.

Ab Urbe Condita

The story of Rome begins with an enigma: how did a hamlet of a few thatched huts on a hillside above a murky Italian marsh grow in just a few centuries to be the most powerful empire in the history of humanity? Even the Romans themselves struggled to answer this

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question, concocting a fascinating mythology to explain their staggering explosion out of Italy and seemingly predestined rise to greatness. In the prelude to his epic *History of Rome*, Livy declares that 'antiquity draws no hard line between the human and the supernatural'; boundaries that become especially blurred as historians, poets, and artists of every era turn their gaze back to the hidden origins of the Eternal City. Everywhere we encounter 'tales with more of the charm of poetry than of a sound historical record' and events which merely 'carry with them an appearance of truth'.[3] The narrative of the founding of Rome has always been a heady mix of primal myth, received tradition, and embellished reality, which even today's exciting archaeological discoveries struggle to separate from each other.

While they could not settle on a single definitive origin story for the Roman world, the accounts of most ancient writers converge in that sacred scene chanced upon by the shepherd in the woods: the wild wolf-mother suckling the feral human twins, Romulus and Remus. An image so evocative of the Roman character, it would remain an emblem of the city and its citizens across the upheavals of millennia. Any visitor to Rome – where there is no shortage of competition for religious icons – will be greeted by the wolf and twins at every turn, still nursing lovingly to this day. Yet before the strange diorama had been described by the earliest Roman historian in the third century BC, it had already been hammered into gleaming silver at the mint on the Capitoline Hill.[4] Rome had barely completed the conquest of the Italian peninsula, let alone the wider Mediterranean, but she had already struck a coin that presented her people with the defining image of her founding myth.

The origin stories that evolved in the Roman mind reveal much about their perceived place in the ancient world. Most accounts link the rise of their legendary city to the fall of another. Following the destruction of Troy – narrated for the ages in Homer's epic poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* – the Trojan warrior Aeneas found himself exiled with a group of his followers, left to wander the Mediterranean in search of a new homeland. After many adventures and divine interventions that echo the journeys of the Homeric hero Odysseus, Aeneas eventually landed on the shores of Latium in Italy, where he

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chose to settle for good. The Trojans and Latins gradually merged into one people through intermarriage, and the descendants of Aeneas spread out to create cities of their own. His son Ascanius would go on to found the kingdom of Alba Longa, where generations later the princess Rhea Silvia would fall pregnant after apparently being raped by the god of war. These were claims of divine conception that even Roman historians would later question; Livy could not help but wonder if the sworn Vestal Virgin was 'merely hoping by the pretence to alleviate her guilt'.[5]

Down the River Tiber would go the twin sons of Mars, towards the teats of the she-wolf and the crook of the herdsman Faustulus. Incidentally, numerous other mythological and historical figures supposedly began their lives as the proverbial 'baby in the basket' cast down a river, such as Osiris, Sargon of Akkad, Moses, and Bacchus. The boys grew to be hardy shepherd lads, blissfully unaware of the royal blood in their veins. But signs of their noble lineage – or were they qualities imbued through the mother's milk of the wolf? – regularly showed themselves. The twins even became Robin Hood-like figures in the local community, attacking brigands and sharing the stolen goods among all the other shepherds. Eventually, they would push their altruistic escapades too far, with Remus being captured by a gang of ruffians and brought before the hateful king Amulius for judgment. Romulus rushed to rescue his brother, but not before his adoptive father Faustulus revealed to him the truth of their parentage: that they were the banished king Numitor's grandsons, exposed on the riverside by the evil brother who had stolen his throne. Romulus gathered a force of his fellow herdsmen and led a surprise attack on the king's palace, where he succeeded in rescuing his brother and killing Amulius. Returning to his kingdom, Numitor acknowledged the twins who had reclaimed his throne as his own kin, conferred on them royal titles, and together they led a jubilant parade through the streets.[6]

Buoyed by their successful revolution and new royal status, the brothers set out on a pilgrimage to find the mystic riverside where they had been rescued by the wolf; and there, do what any self-respecting young princes would do: found a city. Though just when their tale threatens a heroic end, we encounter the dangerous sibling

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