

Scholarly reply to Wallace-Hadrill, A. 'Image and Authority in the Coinage of Augustus', *The Journal of Roman Studies* 76, 66-87

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In this influential article published in 1986, Wallace-Hadrill aims to contribute to the debate about the design and impact of Roman imperial coinage¹. Against Jones and following Sutherland, he firmly inscribes himself in the (now dominant) tradition that emphasizes the political significance of coinage and has been otherwise and for instance illustrated by the works of Cheung, Crawford, Levick, Lummel or Manders². While explicitly refusing to use the word “propaganda” and engage in what he probably rightly sees as a largely semantic debate³, Wallace-Hadrill bases his case on three convincing hypotheses and starting points.

Firstly, he helpfully contests and rejects what he calls the “false dichotomy” between the coins’ obverse and reverse⁴. Crawford indeed considered that the message of Roman imperial coinage was primarily transmitted through the ruler’s portrait on the obverse and Grant similarly restricted the role of the reverse to a space where (presumably less important) news could be alluded to⁵. Florus, one of the *tresviri monetales*, the magistrates in charge of issuing the coinage in Rome, could thus strike in 18 BC *aurei* and *denarii* featuring a portrait of Augustus on the obverse but also references to his prestigious Aquilii ancestors on the reverse⁶. According to Wallace-Hadrill, the autocrat Augustus

¹ Wallace-Hadrill 1986.

² Jones 1956 ; Sutherland 1976 and 1983 ; Cheung 1998: 53 ; Crawford 1983 ; Levick 1982 and 1999 ; Lummel 1991 ; Manders 2012: 7.

³ Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 67.

⁴ Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 74.

⁵ Crawford 1983: 69 ; Grant 1958: 14.

⁶ Cardone 2008: 68 ; Wolters 2012: 339.

however intended to “monopolize all symbols of authority”, a point also subsequently made by Levick, who showed that imperial coinage had the “tendency to engross the whole potential of the coin for making value-laden statements for the benefit of the emperor”⁷. In this respect, the reverses of Flavius’ coins indeed matter, as they signify Augustus’ discourse regarding the *res publica restituta* and his (at least) formal adhesion to certain Republican traditions. This vindicates Wallace-Hadrill’s contention that reverse and obverse should be analyzed and interpreted as a whole, a point also made by Hiérnard, Manders or Noreña⁸. The complementary messages of obverse and reverse are also illustrated by Kraft and Zanker’s analyses of three *denarii* from 31 BC, which implicitly associate a portrait of the then Octavian with the goddesses Pax, Venus and Victoria⁹. In a subsequent work, Wallace-Hadrill indeed contends that Augustus “used the gods to produce a novel confusion of private and public, human and divine”¹⁰.

Secondly, Wallace-Hadrill helpfully places Augustan coinage within Republican traditions: the “revolution” once theorized by Syme¹¹ was in fact a “gradual change”, as also illustrated by Rowan, Sutherland or Wehnacker¹². He notes that the young *tresviri monetales* owed their position to Augustus and logically asserts, following Levick, that “it is unnecessary to suppose that the coin designers...received direction from the emperor on the terms in which they ought to glorify him”¹³. The increasing numbers of issues from Eastern cities depicting the emperor’s portrait appear indeed more the result of a (politically and economically rational) decision of local elites eager to please the ruler than a deliberate policy enforced from Rome¹⁴. Relatedly, on the other side of the Mediterranean, the gradual disappearance of local issues in the West was probably more the consequence of changing economic conditions than the outcome of instructions or orders from above¹⁵.

⁷ Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 85 ; Levick 1999: 46.

⁸ Hiérnard 1997: 95 ; Manders 2012: 30 ; Noreña 2011: 108.

⁹ Kraft 1969: 206-207 ; Zanker 1988: 53-57 ; King 1999: 129.

¹⁰ Wallace-Hadrill 2017: 935.

¹¹ Syme 1939.

¹² Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 71 ; Rowan 2016: 50 ; Sutherland 1951: 1 ; Sutherland 1959: 49 ; Zehnacker 1990: 189.

¹³ Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 67.

¹⁴ Heuchert 2005: 44.

¹⁵ Burnett 1987: 56.

Thirdly, Wallace-Hadrill deserves credit for considering Augustan imperial and provincial coinages as a whole. Mattingly and Sydenham's distinction between five categories of issues (the senatorial coinage of Rome, the imperial mint of Lugdunum for gold and silver, the provincial mint of Lugdunum for aes and the Western and Eastern provincial coinages) is of course still valid, as illustrated by the work of Howgego, Heuchert and Burnett on provincial coinages¹⁶. Yet, any attempt to interpret the impact of coinage unavoidably needs to consider all its types.

Wallace-Hadrill thus makes a good case for the "persuasive" dimension of coinage but he also relies on three more debatable assumptions. Firstly, his view of Republican coinage as "unpoliticized" and characterized by the "blandness of its persuasive content"¹⁷ could be criticized and I feel tempted to argue (even if only semantically) that the "traditional" Republican Roma coins (as well perhaps as the Athenian drachma) were in fact more "*polis*"ticized, and self-explanatory than imperial issues. More than in politicization and, as in fact hinted by Wallace-Hadrill, the real novelty resided in the uniformity of Augustan coinage, the product of an "imperial value system" which "could tolerate no rival"¹⁸. The design of imperial coins, whether or not directly approved by the emperor, relied on an iconographical repertoire of recognizable references and personifications. This was in fact characteristic of Roman imperial art as whole, which, according to Hölscher, developed a vivid and diverse "language of imagery", even if this later became increasingly static and repetitive¹⁹.

Secondly, even if he rightly acknowledges that the coin design ensured its circulation and its authority (as illustrated by the SC on the bronze issues)²⁰, Wallace-Hadrill too quickly brushes aside the economic function of coinage (what he calls its "legalistic" side)²¹ and only briefly hints at the typically Roman pragmatism and the economic interests behind bronze emissions or the competitive

¹⁶ Mattingly and Sydenham 1923: 49 ; Burnett 2005: 173.

¹⁷ Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 74.

¹⁸ Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 76.

¹⁹ Hölscher 2004: 11, 111 and 127.

²⁰ Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 80.

²¹ Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 67.

nature of provincial issues²². To put it bluntly, Augustus reformed the imperial currency system and *had* to issue new coins to pay his former legionaries²³: not coincidentally, the gold mines of northern Spain started to be exploited between 25 and 23 BC²⁴. Coin production had been heavily disrupted and even interrupted during the civil wars and as noted by Grant, the new *princeps*, like Alexander at the end of his conquests, pragmatically needed to inject new liquidities into the economy²⁵. In this respect, the persuasive nature of coinage should therefore be nuanced. Old coins continued to circulate alongside new issues and dies and did not lose their pecuniary value, if only because, as evidenced by the remaining coins of Gaius and Geta, the authorities were not easily able to take them out of circulation²⁶. Coinage was an instrument of economic policy²⁷ and, unlike Burnett or Manders²⁸, Wallace-Hadrill insufficiently acknowledges the interdependence and interactions between its economic and ideological / “propagandistic” functions.

Thirdly, and perhaps more importantly, Wallace-Hadrill purports to use Augustan coinage as a case study to interpret imperial coinage as a whole, an approach which, as he himself implicitly acknowledges²⁹, might lead to unfounded inferences. All numismatic material is not equally interesting³⁰ and, if Augustus’ monetary issues provide a fascinating insight into the rise of the empire, they might not be sufficiently typical to allow for meaningful generalizations. Veyne, following Zanker³¹, thus contends that Augustus’ charisma made its rule, and, one feels tempted to add, its coinage, “unique” and hardly representative. Relatedly, this deliberate focus on the Augustan era indirectly leads Wallace-Hadrill to uphold an outdated and obsolete vision of the coinage of the

²² Heuchert 2005: 32.

²³ Woytek 2012: 330. See also Ando 2000: 173 and 222 ; Brennan 2007: 8 ; Howgego 1982: 18.

²⁴ Howgego 1992: 7.

²⁵ Grant 1954: 6.

²⁶ Crump 1985: 430.

²⁷ Cascio 1981: 76.

²⁸ Burnett 1987: 66 ; Manders 2012: 29

²⁹ Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 70.

³⁰ Metcalf 1999: 13.

³¹ Veyne 2002: 28.

Antonines, which he somewhat unfairly dismisses as characterized by “soporific blandness”³². To be fair, the article was written in the 1980s, a time where ancient or art historians overwhelmingly focused on the late republic and early empire³³. Yet, this also means that Wallace-Hadrill’s conclusions now need to be reconsidered in the light of the recent studies of the Flavian, Antonine and later periods, for instance conducted by Buttrey, Hedlund, Kemmers, Manders, Noreña or Rosso³⁴.

As Wallace-Hadrill himself suggested in his discussion of the specificities of bronze *aes* coinage, “the authorities targeted their persuasion on identifiable groups”³⁵. This is vindicated by this new scholarship, often based on those other imperial eras and quantitative analyses. The focus on the coinage’s “senders” (whether the emperor, the senate or the provincial cities) needs to be completed by an analysis of its “receivers”. Lummel identified four potential target groups (the senate, the Roman plebs urbana, the army and the provinces)³⁶ and there is increasing evidence that the coins’ messages depended on the types of metals. Although technical considerations related to differences in flan size and the fact that silver is intrinsically more complex to mint than gold or bronze might have played a role³⁷, the iconography of imperial coins struck in gold and silver, circulated among higher classes, markedly differs from the bronze issues, which tended to emphasize different virtues and especially the *liberalitas* or generosity of the emperor³⁸. More generally, in his study of the relative frequency of the personifications and virtues depicted on a sample of over 185,000 coins minted at Rome between 69 and 235, Noreña demonstrates that the authorities (whether or not with the direct input or supervision from the emperor) consistently privileged Pax and Concordia on silver and Fortuna and Salus on the bronze issues³⁹. The circulation of coinage also appears to have been regionally differentiated. The coins featuring Augustus’ once presumptive heirs Gaius and Lucius

³² Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 70.

³³ Hedlund 2008: 34.

³⁴ Buttrey 1972 ; Hedlund 2008 ; Kemmers 2004 ; Manders 2012 ; Noreña 2011 ; Rosso 2009.

³⁵ Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 84.

³⁶ Lummel 1991: 8.

³⁷ Beckmann 2009: 153.

³⁸ Hekster 2003: 23 ; Metcalf 1993: 337.

³⁹ Noreña 2011: 22, 23 and 146.

struck by the imperial mint of Lugdunum in gold and silver thus appear to have been used to pay the legionaries based in Germany and presumably constituted a convenient way to reinforce the army's adhesion to the imperial family⁴⁰. Similarly, under the Flavians, the legions based in the northern provinces (and especially those who had not previously supported the new dynasty) used and were likely deliberately sent bronze issues which emphasized the importance of the virtue of loyalty⁴¹.

For all this, if Wallace-Hadrill's intuition regarding the persuasive nature of coinage has been confirmed by those quantitative analyses and the identification of receivers as well as senders, his article fails to address what is arguably the most interesting question. It is reasonable to assume that coinage was of a "propagandistic" or at least persuasive nature but did it reach its intended targets? When it comes to effectiveness, Wallace-Hadrill indeed (and somewhat frustratingly) contents himself to state that the coins "were not the most important vehicle: monumental sculpture and above all the public rituals and ceremonial that clustered around the imperial cult will have had greater impact"⁴². Crawford and Crump both similarly relativized the importance of coinage as a way to inform the population about the emperor or politics because news travelled faster than new coins, but acknowledged that coinage could be useful as a means to commemorate important events⁴³ and promote what Balburger calls a *Siegesideologie*⁴⁴. Recent evidence however suggests that new coins circulated faster than previously assumed⁴⁵, and among a wider population: Lorient hence notes that gold coinage was not solely held by the upper classes but could also occasionally reach traders and even certain villagers of the Egyptian Fayum⁴⁶. The coins were not the "newspapers of the day"⁴⁷, "officially-inspired publicity"⁴⁸ or "portable billboards"⁴⁹, but the promptitude with which the new

⁴⁰ Claes 2013: 14.

⁴¹ Kemmers 2004

⁴² Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 68.

⁴³ Crawford 1983: 58 ; Crump 1985: 429.

⁴⁴ Balbuza 1999: 278.

⁴⁵ Van Heesch 1999: 166 ; Cheung 1998: 55, 56 and 61.

⁴⁶ Lorient 2003: 57.

⁴⁷ Mattingly and Sydenham 1923: 22.

⁴⁸ Grant 1954: 7.

⁴⁹ Weima 2012: 334.

emperors or usurpers struck coinage⁵⁰ suggests that this was an altogether not totally inefficient way to establish or affirm their power⁵¹. The repetition of similar coin dies had a cumulative and incremental impact on the population⁵² and coinage should be envisioned as part of the wider propaganda tools available to Augustus and his successors. Wallace-Hadrill's reference to monumental sculpture mentioned above is indeed in this respect fitting and Meadows, Williams and Cheung have actually described and studied coins as "monuments in miniature" and defined the transition between the end of the republic and the empire in terms of "monumentalization", the "transformation of the previously neutral and unchanging field of coin design into an opportunity for commemorating and thereby advertising the reputations and achievements of the moneyer and his family", as well as the emperor of course.⁵³

Beyond this (and the advances of research since 1986), Wallace-Hadrill's article would benefit from a more interdisciplinary perspective in several areas. First, any attempt to interpret Augustan coinage can now hardly fail to engage with the works of Galinsky, Hölscher and Zanker and examine coinage as an integral part of the imperial visual agenda, global *Bildsprogramm*⁵⁴. The commonalities between Horatian poetry and the iconography of coinage have for instance been studied⁵⁵, as are the similarities between the representation of the Victory goddess on Augustan coins and the Boscoreale vase⁵⁶. The study of the Roman "epigraphic habit"⁵⁷ and the debate about the *res gestae* (and who ordered it to be inscribed in stone at Ancyra)⁵⁸ could indeed also positively contribute to an assessment of the "propagandistic" nature of coinage.

⁵⁰ Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 69 ; Haegemans 2003: 467 ; Manders 2012: 29.

⁵¹ Bond 1957: 150.

⁵² Noreña 2011: 197.

⁵³ Meadows and Williams 2001: 43 ; Cheung 1998: 57 ; Howgego 2005: 4.

⁵⁴ Galinsky 1996 ; Hölscher 2004 ; Zanker 1988.

⁵⁵ Assenmaker 2008: 75.

⁵⁶ Rich 2003: 331.

⁵⁷ MacMullen 1982: 233; Hurlet 2015: 118

⁵⁸ Cooley 2009: 21.

Secondly, Wallace-Hadrill is of course an expert in Roman history but an analysis of Augustan and imperial coinage could take advantage of Hellenist studies on the coinage of another “empire” builder, Alexander. The (deliberate?) iconographical ambiguities mentioned by Wallace-Hadrill (for instance when Jupiter “becomes” Caesar)⁵⁹ are in fact reminiscent of the confusion between the representation of Herakles and his uncanny likeness with Alexander on the obverse of the ubiquitous silver tetradrachms issued by the Macedonian ruler⁶⁰.

Thirdly, Wallace-Hadrill fails to demonstrate how coinage provides evidence for the “nature of the state as contemporaries perceived it”⁶¹, perhaps because of his hypothesis that “contemporary coinage is notable for the low level of its ideological appeal”⁶², an assertion arguably contestable in the light of the heated debates which accompanied the introduction of the Euro in continental Europe. To be fair, the use of coinage as a source and window into imperial Roman rule is unavoidably limited by the impossibility to fully comprehend mentalities: even the Romans might not have been able to clarify the message conveyed by the coins they were using in their daily life⁶³. A large part of the meaning of ancient coinage is bound to remain inaccessible to modern observers and in any case would only give us access to the self-representation of the elites⁶⁴, in this case the emperor and the oligarchy studied by Syme which rose to power with Augustus⁶⁵. Wallace-Hadrill confidently states that “the spread of the head of Augustus...is the most dramatic sign...of autocracy”⁶⁶ but one cannot help thinking that historians or archaeologists retrospectively looking at queen Elizabeth II or king Philippe on contemporary British or Belgian coins might actually misinterpret those representations as evidence of “autocracy”. There is clearly more to the message than the iconography of the coins, the same way as Augustus’ *republica restituta* was not really ‘*restituta*’. Augustan coinage in fact needs to be seen as “dynamic” and iterative, reflecting the different phases of Octavian / Augustus’ power and the shift

⁵⁹ Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 71

⁶⁰ Carradice and Price 1988: 108 ; Dahmen 2007, 41 ; Price 1991: 33.

⁶¹ Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 84.

⁶² Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 70.

⁶³ Levick 1999: 58.

⁶⁴ Howgego 2005: 16-17

⁶⁵ Syme 1939.

⁶⁶ Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 85.

between *auctoritas*, *imperium* and *princeps*⁶⁷: as Wallace-Hadrill himself writes in a subsequent work, Augustus had no ‘blueprint’ and “changed his mind”⁶⁸.

Ultimately therefore and to conclude, Wallace-Hadrill’s article is important and perhaps most useful when evidencing the “sense of confusion” prevailing in Roman coinage⁶⁹. Zanker, followed by Veyne, depicted a consistent Augustan visual program and viewed Augustan coins as “models of clarity and simplicity”, contrasting with the “barely legible” late Republican issues⁷⁰ but Wallace-Hadrill helpfully reintroduces the notion of “deliberate ambiguity”⁷¹. This “intentional multi-referentiality”⁷² and those different “layers of meaning”⁷³ were the outcome of a complex two-way process⁷⁴ and resulted from the emperor’s need to reach a consensus and establish his legitimacy with the social groups that still had a say in the politics of the Roman state⁷⁵. Wallace-Hadrill helpfully contests some of the “binary oppositions”, for instance between obverse and reverse or authority and message, which have traditionally funded numismatic studies. He convincingly illustrates the persuasive intent of the imperial coinage, correctly intuited that its message might have been targeted at certain social groups. Yet, he however (even if somewhat unavoidably), fails to address and provide evidence as to how efficient the message actually was and Grant’s suggestion that Augustus’ numismatic propaganda was successful⁷⁶ thus still remains to be proven.

⁶⁷ Sutherland 1951: 1 ; Wolters 2012: 342.

⁶⁸ Wallace-Hadrill 2017: 613.

⁶⁹ Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 72.

⁷⁰ Zanker 1988: 54. Veyne 2002: 3.

⁷¹ Wallace-Hadrill 1986: 77.

⁷² Galinsky 1996: 34.

⁷³ Cheung 1998: 54.

⁷⁴ Ando 2000: 77 ; Hedlund 2008: 17.

⁷⁵ Seelentag 2011: 77.

⁷⁶ Grant, 1954: 8 ; Grant 1958: 26.

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