

Manseau Esq. F. N. S.

NOTES ON COINS:

READ BEFORE THE

Numismatic Society

OF MONTREAL,

BY STANLEY C. BAGG, ESQ., F.N.S.,

VICE PRESIDENT;

BEING THE FIRST PAPER READ BEFORE THIS
SOCIETY.



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H. & D. ROSE, 274 NOTRE DAME STREET,

Printers to the Numismatic Society.

1863.

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IN order that this first literary production presented to the Numismatic Society of Montreal may possess greater merit, and prove more interesting and instructive, I have taken such extracts from various writers as I hope may tend to create a desire in at least a few of my friends to pursue the study of Numismatics. Such being the case, should you discover in this paper any remarks you may before have seen, I trust you will be generous enough to admit the above as a sufficient apology and not accuse me of plagiarism.

The science of Numismatics has a claim on all intelligent persons that no other subject of study can surpass. In Coins and Medals, more than in any other monuments, the past is preserved and its heroes and great events are kept memorable, forms of worship, manners and customs of nations; titles of kings and emperors may thus be determined;— in fact, coins have been frequently of the greatest service, by illustrating doubtful points of history,

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and even by bringing to light circumstances and events unknown to us before. Without the help of medals and inscriptions we should be ignorant of a fact exceeding honorable to the memory of Antoninus Pius. Possibly it was to the almost imperishable nature of the splendid medals of the Augustan age that Horace alluded, when he spoke of a fame more enduring than brass. Then, as now, the record of coins and medals were regarded as most lasting; and it may be safely affirmed, that we owe as much of our historical knowledge of the remote past to the coins of nations long since passed away, as we owe to their written chronicles on paper or parchment.

Coins first consisted of rude lumps of metal, and were afterwards stamped on one side only with simple devices, such as a pomegranate or bird, helmet or flower. The device was afterwards improved into a head, generally of the patron divinity of the country or town where the money was coined; and at a subsequent period the clumsy mark of the hammer, visible on the earliest specimens, was exchanged for some emblem or device, thus giving to each side of the coin a similar decoration. Portraiture of rulers was not introduced on coins before the reign of Alexander the Great, and he was first represented as the god Jupiter Ammon, in

which character he appears on a coin struck by Lysimachus. A Grecian Drachma, coined in the days of Alexander the Great, was picked up in the streets of the once buried Pompeii. It has on one side the head of Alexander; on the reverse, a figure of Jupiter sitting in a chair, holding a hasta pura (spear of favor) in his left hand, and an imperial eagle in the right,—the inscription is Alexander. During the age of Phidias and Praxiteles, the most flourishing period of Greek art, some of the most beautiful statues of divinities were copied on coins, and occasionally groups of figures were added, so that by this means we can behold transcripts of many celebrated works which perished ages ago. This custom also prevailed in the time of the Roman emperors. Coins may fairly be called sculpture in miniature; and it is by their means that the famous Venus of Cnidos, the Palatine Apollo, and the Colossus of Rhodes, are still preserved, although history too clearly narrates the exact circumstances of their destruction. Various family types occur in Roman Consular Coins, which commemorate some remarkable events connected with the consulships of certain individuals.

As historical records, therefore, these coins are peculiarly interesting. The coins of the Æmilian family supply striking examples of types of this

class. Thus, M. Lepidus has a denarius, upon which he appears placing a crown upon the head of the youthful King, Ptolemy Epiphanes, with the legend TVTOR REGIS. Another denarius of the same family represents Aretas, King of Arabia, submitting himself to M. Scaurus, under the symbol of a figure kneeling by a camel and presenting an olive-branch, from which depends a diadem. And a third of these coins records the youthful exploit of M. Lepidus, who appears mounted and with a trophy; the accompanying legend being M. LEPIDVS. AN. XV. PR. H. O. C. S.—(Anno XV. prætextatus. hostem. occidit. civem. servavit.) Similar types and legends were continued in the imperial series, to which portraits were added. The imperial types also exhibit triumphs and consular processions, the Emperors continuing to retain the ancient consular rank and authority. Allusions to the consulships and consulships-elect of the emperors are frequent in the legends of the imperial coins; the compound titles which the emperors were pleased to assume, with their names, are also in this same manner recorded.

It will be borne in remembrance that the title IMP. (Imperator) was not prefixed to the imperial name until, in later times, the Romans had become so familiarized with sovereignty that they

no longer hesitated publicly to recognise and record the fact. At a late period of the empire, the place of mintage was generally denoted upon the Roman coins by letters struck upon the exergue, or space below the line upon which, in the reverse of any coin, figures are placed. The first Brass, the largest of the copper coins, called by the Romans from the Augustan age NVMMVS,—hence the term Numismatics,—forms the most interesting series, not only on account of size, but also for beauty and historical interest. At the era of the Antonines it decreased in size and degenerated in both the interest of the types and the quality of the execution, and under Gallienus it finally disappeared.

Under the title of Roman Medallions are included all those productions of the Roman mint which exceed the current coin in size and weight. These medallions were struck, both at Rome and in the Provinces of the empire, on various occasions, generally for the purpose of commemorating some event of historical interest, and occasionally for ordinary currency. Before Hadrian, Roman medallions are very rare, but subsequently they are of more frequent occurrence. The medallions struck by the Senate bear the letters S. C. (Senatus Consulto). The following Emperors, comme-

morated their conquests in Britain on certain of their coins:—Cladius, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Commodus, Severus, Caracella, and Geta. A few years since a number of small brass coins, evidently from a Roman Mint, were dug out at Canwick, at a depth of eighteen inches from the surface. The majority are in a high state of preservation, especially some of the time of Constatine the Great, commonly known as the first Christian Emperor. A small brass coin is comparatively little impaired by the immense lapse of years it must have lain in the ground. The obverse, which is sharp, clear, and distinct, has upon it the helmeted head of the Emperor, and bears the inscription **CONSTANTINVS AVG.** (Constantinus Augustus.) The reverse is less distinct; but upon it may be traced two winged figures, apparently in an act of ovation, and an inscription which, though partially erased, in all probability was **VICTORIÆ BRIT-TANICÆ.** Though the statues, of marble, the arches of triumph, the gorgeous palaces reared by the Monarchs of the Empire of Rome, have been razed to the ground and have crumbled into dust, these, in themselves, paltry coins remain monuments of the might of the age they represent, and record, fresh as the day they were coined, such great historical facts in their inscriptions as *Victoriæ Britannicæ* and *Judæ Captæ.*

The following musings in the cabinet of the United States' mint, will give you an idea of what trains of thought the view of an ancient coin may be suggestive:—

“ At a small case near the entrance, which contains, among other curiosities, the ancient Jewish coins, the stranger has his curiosity awakened by observing the earnest and eager, but suppressed inquiries of some, and the contemplative sadness of others, whilst directing their attention to the very ancient looking and diminutive object labelled ‘ The Widow’s Mite.’

“ It is the smallest of copper coins, its metallic value being scarcely one-tenth of our *cent*, yet, from the associations and reflections to which its name gives rise, as well as from its rareness, it is valued beyond price; or, to use the words of the official in attendance, ‘ No money would buy it.’

“ The printed slip attached, which gives its name, states that it was found in the ruins of Jerusalem, but does not inform us whether there were any other specimens of the coin extant, or whether this is the only remaining evidence of the existence of a description of money, two pieces of which once constituted the whole wealth of a pious but destitute daughter of Israel.

“ Whilst viewing this precious relic, the mind

readily but insensibly adverts to the period and circumstance where alone its existence is recorded, and from which our impressions concerning it are drawn. We forget, for the time, that we are in a modern temple containing more of the products of a new Ophir than the edifice which the wise, yet foolish, King of Israel erected, could exhibit of gold and silver treasures.

“ The *mite* before us, serves to transport us at once to the Holy City, and introduce us into the temple dedicated to the worship of Jehovah. It carries us back in chronology more than eighteen hundred years, and places us amongst a people to whom our hemisphere, which now conduces so largely to the weal or woe of myriads of mankind, was utterly unknown. We see around us, in imagination, multitudes who have come up to the temple to offer sacrifices, and to make intercession for forgiveness of their sins; or to return thanks for being better and holier than other men.

“ Among them, seated ‘ over against the treasury,’ we behold the great Teacher, observant of those who entered the sacred edifice, ostensibly to worship, but, too frequently, only to ‘ have honor of men,’ from the amount of their alms gifts, as well as the length and frequency of their prayers.

“ As their several contributions to the treasury

are deposited, we hear him say to his disciples, when "there came a poor widow and she threw in *two mites*, which make a farthing," "this poor widow hath cast more in than all they which have cast into the treasury, for all they did cast in of their abundance, but she of her want, did cast in all that she had, even all her living"

"*His* life is thus brought into review before us, surrounded by his disciples, listening with surprise to his words of wisdom and instruction, or questioning him as to the meaning of his parables, and inquiring *when* his predictions are to be fulfilled. We observe the sternness with which he rebukes the bigotry, hypocrisy and intolerance of the Scribes and Pharisees—the priest and the Levite; or the unbelief, venality and crimes of the Sadducees. But with what mildness does he address the poor, the lowly and the sorrow stricken! How forgivingly does he remind them of their sins, supply their wants, heal their diseases, and relieve their sufferings; making his gospel, indeed, 'glad tidings to the poor!'

"We see the temple, too, in all its grandeur—its extensive courts and colonaded porticoes—its gilded portals and gorgeous adornments—its 'goodly stones,' not one of which was to be left standing upon another.

“ We see the throng of worshippers departing, after having made their sacrificial offerings and paid their vows, or delivered up their accustomed amount of prayer. Among all these, none interest us so much, nor excite our sympathies so strongly, as the ‘poor widow.’ We are anxious to penetrate into her history. How long has she been a widow, and by what circumstance did she become so? Is she still in the Spring-time of life, like Ruth; or has she, like Naomi, ‘no longer any hope?’ Have length of days and many sorrows made her weary of the world and anxious to ‘flee away and be at rest?’ How came she to be so poor that her whole wealth consisted of the pittance with which she had just parted; and how will she sustain life in the future?

“ In answer to the latter suggestion, we can only surmise that she has heard from the great Master the injunction, ‘Take no heed for the morrow,’ and has entire faith that he who provides the young ravens with food, and does not suffer a sparrow to fall unnoticed, will not let her want. We admire such reliance upon the Eternal Providence, and her gift is magnified in our estimation thereby, beyond any which kings or potentates e’er gave. We are anxious to trace her course thereafter. Did she have a home to return to, and kind

friends to welcome her, or was she without shelter or refuge—alone in the world? Perhaps her life is devoted to the exercise of pious duties, until death shall afford a prospect of deliverance from her sorrows; but, of all these inquires each must remain unanswered, for none remains to tell us aught concerning her.

“It were vain to look for her retiring figure in the market place, or in the marts of trade, where Jews and Gentiles congregate to traffic and to barter, that they may cunningly convert their shekels into talents, and be ‘clothed in purple and fine linen, and fare sumptuously every day.’

“Nor yet need we search for her where learned rabbis are expounding the law, and the traditions of the fathers, or unravelling the mysteries of the prophecies of Ezekiel and Daniel, and debating the propriety of paying tribute to Cæsar. She has vanished forever, but of her existence we have full assurance, since the gospel asserts the fact, and this silent witness, the *mite*, corroborates it.”