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TOO BIG TO STUDY? THE NUMISMATIC COLLECTION IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AQUILEIA

Abstract

This contribution try to provide for the first time an extensive historical survey of the coin cabinet of the National Museum in Aquileia. Details are given about how and when this collection was formed and the features of its different sections are examined as well. Thanks to the inventory lists, is possible to know that by the end of the First World War more than 60,000 coins were already part of the collection. Since the entire assemblage of the 20th century still needs a detailed survey, the real amount remains undetermined but a total number of 80,000 specimens, or more, is to be expected. For this reason, after Rome itself, Aquileia features the greatest archaeological numismatic collection in Italy and one of the more prominent in the entire Mediterranean area. Since the collection is up to day largely uninvestigated, a methodological approach is proposed as well to deal with such a large amount of data to be recorded. This work has to be undertaken in the future in order to provide a unique set of data concerning coin finds and to convey to the large public, in the best way, one the most important collections held in the National Museum of Aquileia.

Keywords

Aquileia, numismatic collection, coin finds

Aquileia, the 9th among the most important Roman cities of the Roman Empire according to Ausonius¹, is well renowned since the beginning of the Modern age as a gold mine of archaeological artefacts, especially ancient coins. Ercole Partenopeo, an 18th century erudite once stated that “ad Aquileia si trovano tante monete come fossero state seminate”² and Giandomenico Bertoli, founder of the archaeological science in Aquileia, once declared that he used to collect 1,500 coins every year³. Such words well highlight the potential of this site as regards coin finds and reflect the importance of the numismatic collection kept in the local National Museum. In fact, after Rome itself this assemblage is the greatest in Italy and one of the most important in the entire Mediterranean area, formed of finds coming almost exclusively from the area of the ancient city, with a very few exceptions. Nevertheless, it still remains largely uninvestigated.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Since the 18th century large private archaeological collections had been formed in Aquileia, featuring a large amount of ancient coins. So far, we have no evidence that pieces coming from these very first gatherings are today hosted in the National Museum. In fact, among the most important ones, the Bertoli numismatic collection was entirely sold by 1759⁴, the Zannini collection of coins and gem stones found its way to Wien in 1826⁵ and the Zandonati archaeological collection, including 9,000 coins, moved to Trieste in 1870 after the death of its owner⁶. Indeed, the Austrian Government, in that time Aquileia was still part of the Habsburg Empire, made great efforts to secure every local find of coins to the royal cabinet, thanks to a special legislation, from the end of the 18th to the middle of 19th century⁷.

The birth of public exhibitions in the second half of the 19th century, after a first attempt at the beginning of the same century⁸, marks the very turning point in the de-

¹ Auson. 9, 64-72.

² Gorini 1984, p. 286.

³ Buora 1993, p. 154.

⁴ Giovannini, Maselli Scotti 2009, pp. 37-40 with further bibliography. On the numismatic collection see Devilla 1992; Buora 1993, pp. 153-159; Devilla 1994.

⁵ Giovannini 2007, pp. 261-263.

⁶ On this collection and its owner see Bravar 1993; Casari 2015.

⁷ Giovannini 2007, pp. 234-235. See Noll 1983 on the antiquities from Aquileia kept nowadays in Wien.

⁸ For the Museum Eugenio, the first public museum in Aquileia, founded in 1806 by Leopoldo Zuccolo see Giovannini 2004, cc. 464-466.

Recapitulation		
Münzen aus Gold		Stück 7
ditto	Silber	" 291
ditto	Billon	" 92
ditto	Bronze	" 744
ditto	Blei	" 2

Aguileja um 15 September 1886

Picture 1 – Summary of the numismatic collection belonging to the “Museo Patrio”, merged into the Royal Imperial Museum in 1883

velopment of the present Museum collection, including the numismatic one. After its establishment in 1882, the National Museum, at that time Royal Imperial Museum, became for the first time an institutional gathering point for many archaeological finds which were deliberately collected by local land owners and otherwise sold on the antiquarian market⁹. Beside the foundation of a public exhibition, the institution of a control committee over private archaeological investigations, the Zentral Kommission¹⁰, prevented as well, to some extent, the dispersion of ancient artifacts of local provenance. Before the establishment of the national Museum, a civic exhibition was opened in 1873; this included a numismatic collection of 1,168 pieces¹¹ afterwards merged into the main institution in 1883 (pic. 1)¹².

⁹ Giovannini 2007, p. 233.

¹⁰ Buora, Pollak 2010; Giovannini, Maselli Scotti 2009, p. 42.

¹¹ The so called “Museo Patrio”; Giovannini 2016. See also Giovannini 2007, pp. 284-302; p. 284 and p. 295 for the numismatic collection.

¹² Giovannini 2004, cc. 467-472; Giovannini 2007, pp. 303-307.

16277/79	"	"	"	148	m. 30	PB 8
16280	"	"	"	147	m. 40	"
16281/85	"	"	"	129	m. 23	PB
16286/87	"	"	"	130	m. 29, 30, 31	"
16288/89	"	"	"	181	m. 24	"
45.745-16290/92	"	"	"	211	m. 15	PB 6

ns 746
 57809
 Oggetti della Rivoluzione
 neri 2164

Picture 2 – A section of the new inventory of the 19th century collection issued in 1919/1920. On the left the total amount of 16,292 coins is visible

So, the official birth of the coin cabinet took place under the direction of Enrico Maionica, head of the Museum between 1882 and 1913¹³. Through archaeological excavations and especially acquisitions from private owners he managed to put together 16,292 coins of local provenance, still today part of the coin cabinet (pic. 2)¹⁴.

The first World War constitutes another key moment in the history of the collection for two main reasons¹⁵. Firstly, a selection of precious small finds, including 1,617 stone gems and coins, was sent to Wien soon after the war declaration in April 1915¹⁶. The envisaged final destination was the Austrian Archaeological

¹³ Giovannini, Maselli Scotti 2009, pp. 42-45.

¹⁴ From 1884 the State Museum had the right of preemption over archaeological artifacts privately excavated; Giovannini 2007, pp. 516-517. In his guide on the Royal Imperial Museum, in which a survey on the numismatic exhibition is present, Maionica doesn't give informations about the collection by that time; Maionica 1911, pp. 95-96.

¹⁵ Giovannini, Maselli Scotti 2009, p. 46; Giovannini 2015a.

¹⁶ Giovannini 2015b, pp. 332-341.

Institute but after the end of the war, Italian authorities managed to find the missing collection in the University of Czernowitz in Romania. In 1920 these materials returned to Aquileia in its entirety as proved by the survey carried out by Celso Costantini, head of the museum from 1919 to 1920, in cooperation with Giovanni Brusin, future director from 1922¹⁷. The second and most affecting consequence of the first World War on the numismatic collection of Aquileia was the activity of the Italian authorities once they took over the modern town and the archaeological site in 1915. Between June and October 1915 one of the first efforts of Ugo Ojetti, appointed by the Italian government to supervise the antiquities of Aquileia, was an entire new inventory of the museum collection¹⁸. In this occasion the old numeration related to the so called *Accesionjournal*, the inventory book drawn up by Enrico Maionica during his direction, was completely deleted and replaced by a new one. In this way all data concerning the findspot of all the archaeological artifacts which were part of the Museum collection by that date, including coins, got almost irremediably lost.

The 20th century saw a remarkable increase of the collection thanks to new acquisitions and archaeological investigations¹⁹. Giovanni Brusin, head of the Museum between 1922 and 1953, undertook large excavations in several sectors of the ancient city such as the Roman forum and the harbour on the river Natissa, today among the most famous archaeological attractions in Aquileia²⁰. In his report *Gli Scavi di Aquileia* some sections are devoted to the small finds, including coins, recovered in the different areas investigated²¹. Nevertheless, for the numismatic collection the most prolific time of the 20th century came under the direction of Luisa Bertacchi (1959-1989)²². On the one hand, she managed to purchase a significant number of coins in a period in which the introduction of new agricultural techniques (deep ploughing) led to an outstanding abundance of archaeological finds²³. On the other hand, for the first time ancient artifacts recovered in excavations were systematically collected, as opposed to the past when only precious finds were considered²⁴. This new approach, combined with the extensive archaeological investigations carried

¹⁷ An inventory list resulted from this survey whit a section devoted to gold coins is preserved in the archive of the National Museum; Giovannini 2015a, p. 338.

¹⁸ Ojetti 1964, 64, 150; Buora 1999, 46-47, 49-50; Giovannini 2007, p. 537, note 93.

¹⁹ On the coin cabinet in this time see Brusin 1929, 185-189.

²⁰ On the work of Giovanni Brusin in Aquileia see Burtulo, Fogolari 1977; Argenton 1989; Scrinari 1993.

²¹ Brusin 1934.

²² Gorini 2015.

²³ Bertacchi 1993, 238; Giovannini 2015b, 166-168; Gorini 2015, 201.

²⁴ Bertacchi 1993, 237.

out between the '60s and '80s²⁵, led to a significant further growth of the numismatic collection of the National Museum. Eventually Luisa Bertacchi arranged for the first time a scientific numismatic exhibition featuring more than 5,000 specimens²⁶.

In the 21st century ancient coins are still found in Aquileia in great quantity, mostly thanks to archaeological investigations, both rescue or planned excavations meaning the discovery of several, sometimes hundreds of, coins every year. These new materials are of the greatest importance since they are retrieved according to a scientific methodology, helping us to analyze the monetary circulation and the function of coins in Roman Aquileia under a new light. Nonetheless, the real challenge is still the recording of the great collection kept in the National Museum, a terrific assemblage of coin finds which is still largely unknown to us.

STRUCTURE AND FEATURES

To the best of our knowledge, the numismatic collection in Aquileia can be divided into three main sections, each one formed in different times and with different features.

The first one represents the historical collection, the oldest, which was gathered, as seen before, between the second half of the 19th century and 1915. Thanks to the inventory manuscript cited above we know that coins belonging to this section are more than 16,000, including ancient and medieval issues. Many numismatic rarities are featured in here, but the way in which coins have been collected affects the potential of this assemblage in terms of scientific relevance. In fact, many of the specimens surely come from hoards found in Aquileia, but possibly disassembled after the discovery in order to arrange a chronological collection, a habit in many European numismatic collections in the second half of the 19th century²⁷. With regards to this last aspect, the issue of the aforementioned new inventory prevents us from knowing the inclusion of these hoards. In general, a thorough analysis of the *Accessionjournal* would be desirable as it would possibly allow us to reconnect some of the most peculiar elements of the collection to the original findspot²⁸. In this time coins were also explicitly selected according to the state of preservation. Issues made of poor alloy,

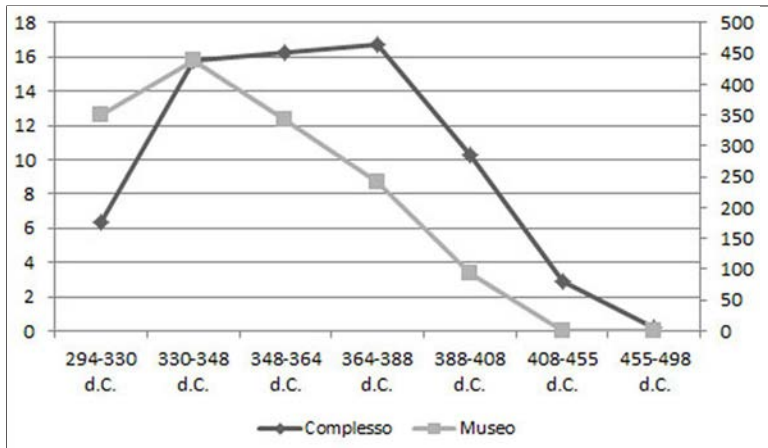
²⁵ See for instance the excavations on the Roman forum between 1980 and 1989; Bertacchi 1989; Bertacchi 1995.

²⁶ For the first time coins have been displayed separately from other metallic objects; Bertacchi 1962; see also Giovannini 2015b, p. 163.

²⁷ See for instance the numismatic cabinet in the Yorkshire Museum, one of the greatest regional collections of coins in England; Drost 2018.

²⁸ See Giovannini 2009 for the same approach applied to gem finds.

more often subjected to corrosion and so hardly legible, were carefully excluded. In this way the coins belonging to the late Roman period, especially the bronze coins, are clearly underrepresented as demonstrated by the comparison with an alternative sample of the collection (pic. 3)²⁹.



Picture 3
Chronological distribution of late Roman coins in the 19th century collection (grey) and in a sample from excavations of the second half of the 20th century (black) in comparison. After Stella 2017, 22, pic. 9

The second group contains coins acquired or retrieved during excavations carried out during or after 1915. This constitutes the most important part of the collection since the findspot is known for most of the specimens. Nevertheless, the total amount is up today undetermined.

A first segment was gathered during the direction of Giovanni Brusin. Coins acquired through purchasing were provided with an inventory number³⁰, quite the opposite for coin finds from excavations. In this last case, the only link to the findspot is represented by the date of discovery which redirects to the excavation journal drawn by Giuseppe Runcio, field assistant of Giovanni Brusin, where a list of coins found every day is given. Only a small part was listed in the aforementioned work of Brusin “*Gli Scavi di Aquileia*”, often lacking important information such as the mint in the case of late Roman coins.

The second and most important part of the 20th century collection is the one formed under the direction of Luisa Bertacchi. As said before, she put together a large assemblage of coins, systematically collecting finds from excavations and thoroughly

²⁹ Stella 2017, 22-25.

³⁰ About 1,500 inventory numbers are related to coins acquired by Giovanni Brusin, including the republican and imperial silver *denarii* belonging to a hoard found in 1922; Brusin 1928.

N.º progr.	OGGETTO: monete		
	Deposito monete (Arca di Tito)		
	Monete d'argento		
1399	1 sacchetto di monete d'argento della repubblica romana, di ottimo, buona e media conservazione..... pesi 532 quantità 10	4	505
		4	500
		4	498
		"	498
		"	495
			<u>4241</u>
13586			
13587	12 argento, impertrite fino e lacinate,		



Picture 4a-c – The account list of 42,441 “second choice” silver and bronze coins and their current placement (referred to to bronze only , c20,000 specimens) in one of the National Museum’s storehouses

recording the findspot. At the same time, she acquired many stray finds consigned to the Museum by finders. Moreover this section remains still unrecorded in detail and its total amount is so far unknown³¹. Furthermore Luisa Bertacchi mentioned only occasionally and briefly coin finds in her published archaeological reports.

³¹ An approximate amount of 9/10,000 coins is inferred from the inventory numbers after a recent systematic survey.

A third segment is represented by a very peculiar assemblage of coins formed by 1959, the first year of Luisa Bertacchi as head of the National Museum. As mentioned before, only starting from this date archaeological artifacts have been thoroughly collected during archaeological investigations. As regards coins, in the past those showing high degree of corrosion, mainly bronze, were simply discarded in favour of the well-preserved specimens, the sole to become part of the collection. Nevertheless, dumped coins have been collected in a large wooden box kept in the Museum's store houses. Later its content has been moved to a plastic case including at least seven large plastic bags filled with coins. The conservation process of a sample of 600 specimens carried out between the '80s and '90s has revealed that many of them needed only an accurate cleaning and are actually in a very good state of preservation. Sometimes also silver coins were recorded after removing corrosion layers. A documentation attesting the existence of a numismatic deposit alongside the official collection arranged during the direction of Enrico Maionica was recently discovered in the Museum's archive. According to the manuscript account this gathering included more than 2,700 silver Roman and Medieval coins alongside 40,000 bronze coins mostly belonging to the Roman age (pic. 4a-c). There are no doubts in connecting it with the massive assemblage mentioned before. Except for the silver issues possibly belonging to hoards, finds included here come surely from archaeological investigations in the ancient urban area and necropolis carried out from the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century up to the First World War³². Because of the state of preservation, they were regarded as second choice materials and kept apart from the official collection. As to bronze coins, actually in some cases silver or billon ones, what strikes most is the variety of monetary series featured in this assemblage, seldom represented among finds from the most recent excavations in Aquileia. At first sight, apart from the massive number of Roman imperial bronze coins, several Greek, Celtic and Roman provincial issues as well as early Medieval and Byzantine ones have been detected and much more are expected to be identified after completing the analysis. Even though the provenance is only generically related to the ancient city and finds cannot be divided precisely according to a specific archaeological context (graves, votive deposits, hoards), this sector of the collection is of great importance for the study of the monetary circulation. Given its incredible size and nature this assemblage need surely to be explored in depth in order to fully enhance its potential.

³² Cfr. "1000 piccoli bronzi frusti" from the excavations of the Roman harbour on the river Natissa; Brusin 1934, 149.

METHODOLOGY

An exhaustive work of recording of the collection is under many aspects a pivotal task to undertake. To do so, a master plan is needed as well as a standard working methodology.

First of all, the massive size of the assemblage corresponds to a massive work. To deal with this, the major groups forming the collection could correspond to the simultaneous effort of three different teams or, in alternative, to three different stages of a common schedule. In the same perspective priority could be assigned to the recording of those coins bearing information about the findspot, i.e. coins from excavations and located purchasings, in order to make available at first the most valuable data to be processed for the study of monetary circulation.

The recording process can lean on the already existing SIGEC WEB database and the standard digital NU (numismatic) data sheet developed by the National Cultural Heritage Office and in use since 2004³³. Nevertheless, given the importance of the assemblage, both in terms of size and features, the implementation of a new database specifically devoted to the numismatic collection in Aquileia would be desirable and this should be developed according to the standard international numismatic vocabulary provided by the NOMISMA project through the linked open data system³⁴. The same framework could be further applied to other important gatherings, one above all gem stones, a very distinctive production in the Roman Aquileia. The development of a devoted database could cope both for scientific and management needs. On the one hand the collection in Aquileia could be more accessible to scholars for special research tasks, on the other one the management for the Museum personnel could be easier.

Besides digital representations, data concerning the collection have to be published also in a traditional way through an editorial project. From 2010 a new series named *Ritrovamenti monetali di età romana nel Friuli Venezia Giulia* (Coin finds of the Roman age in the region of Friuli Venezia Giulia), a side project of the well renowned *Ritrovamenti monetali di età romana del Veneto* (Coin finds of the Roman age in the region of Veneto), has been conceived for the publishing of the ancient coin finds recovered in the territory of the region Friuli Venezia Giulia³⁵. Obviously, several volumes will be devoted to the numismatic collection in Aquileia, at least four are needed to cover the first half according to a brief account.

In one case a massive restoration process has to be addressed as well. As seen before, a very large portion of the collection still need conservation work, but the me-

³³ *Scheda NU*.

³⁴ <http://nomisma.org/>

³⁵ *RMRFVG III-IV*.

chanical cleaning of every single specimen is to be ruled out, in particular for reasons of time. A possible approach would imply the use of controlled chemical cleaning in order to make legible, at a reasonable degree, as much coins as possible in the shortest time. Nevertheless, great care must be paid given the very heterogeneous nature of the assemblage made of coins with different size and alloy which request different degrees of cleaning. The advice of a professional conservator is anyway requested.

A last, very crucial issue to discuss is the need of a new arrangement for the coin cabinet. In such a large collection, every single coin should occupy a given position in order to enable its immediate recovery in case of necessity (pictures, conservation or exhibition issues, metal analysis, ecc.). Furthermore, the management would be more simple and intuitive for the Museum personnel with no specific numismatic knowledge. “Topographic data” have to be associated in the future to every single coin recorded, a system already in use in other archaeological collection of coins such as that of the Museum Carnuntinum³⁶. A similar approach could be further applied to other important categories of small find, for instance gems, amber artefacts and so on.

In conclusion, what comes to light is that, on the one hand, the numismatic collection of the National Museum in Aquileia amounts to much more than 40,000 coins, as it is usually presumed. Instead, by the First World War more than 60,000 specimens were already part of the coin cabinet. On the other hand, since a large sector still need to be quantified, an actual amount ranging from 80,000 to 100,000 pieces is to be expected. Recording in detail and rearranging such a large and peculiar collection of coins is an undeniable opportunity. The outcomes of undertaking such a work are undisputable, for scientific purposes (study of the monetary circulation and production, output of the local mint, history and economy of the city) and for enhancing communication to the public through new permanent or temporary exhibitions.

³⁶ “*The Numismatic Project Carnuntum*” presentation held by Cristian Gazdac at the 2nd joint meeting of ECFN and Nomisma.org, 19th-20th April 2013, Petronell-Carnuntum, Austria.

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