Newell Innovative Teaching Award
Application 2013

THE ROMAN COIN PROJECT

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION: INNOVATION & COMPREHENSIVENESS

Thanks to a generous subsidy from the Department of English, in the Fall of 2012 I purchased approximately fifteen late imperial Roman bronze coins to be used in a unit project in my English 410: Classical Antiquity course. Each student was given a coin and was required to identify its emperor, date range, obverse and reverse Latin legends, and provenance by mint mark. My interest in this project was partly personal and partly professional. I own a collection of approximately 200 Roman coins and occasionally offer guest lectures based on my collection, so working with these artifacts was a labor of love. As a professor, I see the value of classical numismatics in the classroom because these coins offer a tangible connection to the material culture of ancient Rome. From this single project students gain valuable insights into Roman propaganda, politics, economics, and religion. And with each student delivering a PowerPoint-aided oral presentation to the class on his or her coin and emperor, each student becomes an expert on brief period of late imperial history.

This student expertise pays great dividends long after the two-week unit on Roman coinage is over. For example, when we read Augustine’s *Confessions* and Augustine mentions the boy emperor Valentinian II, I can turn to specific students who identified Valentinian II coinage to provide authoritative commentary on this emperor and his age, as well as insight on how Augustine might conceive of him. When we discuss late imperial syncretization between Christianity and
paganism, students who identified coins minted by the first Christian emperor Constantine can offer informed observations on this complex man who minted images of the sun god on the reverse of his coins long after his Milvian Bridge conversion in A.D. 312. Late imperial Roman coinage facilitates an illuminating intertext between artifact and idea—between the imperial propaganda found on the coin and the men who wished to promote it (e.g., Julian the Apostate) or contradict it (e.g., St. Augustine).

The use of coins in the classroom is not unique; however, I do not believe teachers have been as intentional as I have been in requiring students to draw specific connections between the coins they identify and the literature they read. This project might customarily be done in a Latin course, not in a literature course. My pedagogical theory was that students should expand their notion of what it means to read a text. These coins were minted with remarkable iconographical stability from Alexandria to London; they served as crucial carriers of imperial information and propaganda. In short, the coins themselves were meant to be “read”; each had a story to tell. With this project, I challenged my students to read the stories of these coins and compare them with the stories written by the great authors of late antiquity.

OUTCOMES

This project was conducted in the Fall of 2012 and thus occurred within the academic year of this proposal. The project exceeded my already high expectations; at times the students sounded more like apprentice scholars than undergraduates when they were speaking about their emperors in later text-based discussions. My principal area for improvement concerns my evaluation of students’ oral presentations. I tended to give full credit for the presentation aspect of this project and failed to make adequate distinctions between those who were truly exceptional and those who were merely
adequate. My assessment of their written coin identification and commentary was much more rigorous, with more clearly defined evaluation criteria. I should strive for the same type of clarity with respect to their oral presentation evaluation.

Attached please find my formal assignment sheet as well as an evaluation rubric with commentary.
**English 430**  
The Roman Coin Project

**Length:** 1 page single-spaced; oral presentation is to be 5-7 minutes.  
**Due:** Monday, Oct. 22; scan due by Oct. 1 (see below).  
**Grade:** 5% of course grade

**Assignment:** You have in your possession a genuine 3rd or 4th century late imperial Roman coin. You job is to attribute it and write a few discussion paragraphs placing the coin in its cultural and historical context. Of course the coin is yours to keep.

**Cleaning:** If necessary, clean your coin by soaking it in olive oil or distilled water. Scrub with a toothbrush every few days or so. Most do not need cleaning, especially if the dirt or patina helps highlight the coin’s details. Ask me before you clean.

**Attribution:**

**Attribution Basics:** Emperor, obverse and reverse legends in Latin with English translation, basic descriptions, diameter size in mm (see text box to the right for format).

**Attribution Bonuses:** Mint and officina; year or years struck; RIC (Roman Imperial Coinage) volume and number.

Start by trying to transcribe the obverse legend on the coin. After making a couple of good faith efforts, see me if you’re still having trouble. When you think you have the emperor, or a few candidates, consult this website and try to find a match for your coin. Be sure to click for thumbnail images. If you find a close match, most of the info will fall into place. I can help determine if you’re on the right track: [http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/ric/i.html#C](http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/ric/i.html#C)

This site also walks you through the basic steps of attribution and gives you some helpful online tools: [http://www.romancoin.info/](http://www.romancoin.info/)

Also consult David Van Meter - *The Handbook of Roman Imperial Coins* (CJ969 .V36 1991 on reserve)

See also the relevant volume of the Roman Imperial Coinage series, in reference.

**Discussion:**

- Write a paragraph discussing your emperor and his times.
- Write a paragraph discussing your coin’s legends and iconography. What is this coin trying to say? What is its “narrative”?
- What connections to our course texts do you perceive?

**Presentation:**

By Oct. 1, email me a good quality scan or photo of your coin obverse and reverse. Label these files YOURNAME_OBVERSE.JPG and YOURNAME_REVERSE.JPG. I will show your coin on PPT during your presentation.

In a 5-7 minute presentation, summarize your key findings about your coin. Do not merely read your paper; use minimal notes and present orally. Make eye contact.

**Recommended Websites:**

- Guides to abbreviations found on Roman coins: [http://www.davidsear.com/academy/roman_legends.html](http://www.davidsear.com/academy/roman_legends.html)
- Doug Smith's excellent coin pages: [http://dougsmith.ancients.info/index.html](http://dougsmith.ancients.info/index.html)
- Site for the coins of Constantine: [http://www.constantinethegreatcoins.com/](http://www.constantinethegreatcoins.com/)
- My collection: [omitted]
NAME: Student X

ALL SECTIONS WORTH 20 POINTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITEM</th>
<th>POINTS POSSIBLE</th>
<th>POINTS EARNED</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obverse &amp; Reverse ID; Paragraph discussing your emperor and his times.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can’t quite make out your mintmark; if it’s PLN it’s London; if it’s PLA it is Arelatum (Arles). PARL seems possible for Arelatum, but that’s not what appears on the coin.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paragraph discussing your coin’s legends and iconography. What is this coin trying to say? What is its “narrative”?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What connections to our course texts do you perceive?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oral Presentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grammar &amp; Style</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>95</strong></td>
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**COMMENTS:**

I really liked the way you incorporated Peter Brown’s text into this discussion of your coin. I thought your discussion of Constantine’s propaganda was quite interesting; it may be ironic that arguably the most effective artifacts of propaganda—imperial bronze coinage—still promoted paganism in some fashion. You explain this paradox in your second paragraph very well, noting that Constantine (whatever his personal religious objections were) could not abruptly shift the empire.

Your explanation of the iconography was thorough and persuasive, as was your discussion of how all this relates to some of the literary and cultural issues we’ve been discussing.

Generally your prose is quite good. But a significant grammatical misstep is this incomplete sentence: *suggests the shift from state-sponsored paganism to the more personal, monotheistic-like mystery cult religions as seen in...*

You also want to italicize *Confessions.* And the compound subject *presence and disappearance* requires a plural verb.

*to the Apuleius’ religion*  Awkward.

Excellent oral presentation on Friday, especially since you went last with a coin others had as well.

**GRADE: 95%**