

Perenni Vena Scaturiunt:
The Ubiquity of Antique Coins in
the Renaissance

IN HIS *Discours sur les medalles* of 1579, Antoine Le Pois tells of a bronze coin of the emperor Augustus that was found in Brazil, thereby proving that ancient Roman mariners had reached the New World long before Columbus.¹ Le Pois probably learned about this remarkable find from the geographer Abraham Ortelius, himself an avid collector of ancient coins, who gives an account of the errant bronze of Augustus in his great atlas of the world, the *Theatrum orbis terrarum* of 1570.² Ortelius in turn picked up the story from a history of Spain written by Lucio Marineo Siculo, an Italian humanist who found employment at the Spanish court under Ferdinand and Isabella.³ In Marineo's account the remarkable coin of Augustus was discovered not in Brazil but in Darien on the Isthmus of Panama, during the time when Fra Juan de Quevedo was bishop there (1514–1519). This piece was later acquired, Marineo tells us, by his friend Giovanni Ruffo, archbishop of Cosenza and papal legate to the Spanish court, who sent it to the pope as a gift. We would certainly like to know more about the *numisma repertum apud Indos*, which appears to have been the earliest instance of the many archaeological mysteries (or hoaxes) indicating the presence of ancient Europeans in the Americas, such as the jar of Roman imperial coins reportedly discovered in the 1960s buried on the coast of Venezuela.⁴ But whatever may be the truth of the tale of the adventurous *numisma*—which I would like to think is still lying in some tray among the vast numismatic holdings of the Vatican Museum—it demonstrates that Renaissance antiquarians regarded ancient coins as ubiquitous objects, constantly emerging from the earth.

This sentiment was heavily mixed with nostalgia for the golden age of antiquity: “there is no place, region, or country of ancient habitation,” asserts Le Pois in his *Discours*, “where one cannot find these medals of the Romans, serving as witnesses to their grandeur, and as memorials of their empire extending throughout the provinces of the world.”⁵

Compared with other coveted antiquities such as marbles, vessels, and engraved gems or cameos, Greek and Roman coins were plentiful, inexpensive, and available wherever humanists could be found: “for every ancient statue that we have today,” wrote Girolamo Ruscelli in his preface to Sebastiano Erizzo’s *Discorso sopra le medaglie antiche*, “there are many, many medals throughout the world.”⁶ The Venetian humanist was addressing Sigismund II, king of Poland, whose territories contained no classical monuments except Greek and Roman coins brought there centuries ago by audacious merchants, and more recently by modern collectors returning from Italy and the Levant. Roman imperial money drifted far from the borders of the empire in return for amber, pearls, pepper, and silk; at the very edges of Renaissance Europe, in Scotland and Sweden and beyond the Danube, Greek and Roman coins were discovered daily as single specimens or buried hoards.⁷ In 1598 Stefan Zamosius published an account of the antiquities found in Transylvania, once part of the remote Roman province of Dacia; these included some inscriptions, arms, and statues, but by far the most abundant remains of the ancient Romans and their allies in this region were coins: “an innumerable variety of them,” writes Zamosius, of many emperors, especially Trajan and Hadrian.⁸ Even a coin of Cicero has turned up in Transylvanian soil, our scholar reports, which proves that the counterfeiters of the Renaissance, so active in Italy and France, did not neglect the remoter parts of Europe. A remarkable number of Greek coins as well are listed by Zamosius, including the silver of Philip of Macedon, Alexander the Great, Lysimachus, and many other kings and cities, “of which the names are scarcely found in books.” But his favorite among these small Transylvanian antiquities is a silver tetradrachma displaying the beautiful head of Semiramis, queen of Assyria, with a Greek inscription “in the most ancient and crude characters,” a piece which Zamosius describes in rhapsodic terms, and which deserves a place in the same cabinet as the denarius of Cicero.

At Rome, reported one humanist, ancient coins “gush forth from a perennial vein” *perenni vena scaturiunt*.⁹ The image recalls the flow of blood and reminds us that these objects were the most fluid of all antiquities, enjoying a vigorous circulation in Renaissance Europe. They frequently traveled from city to city in letters and passed from hand to hand as gifts and tokens of friendship—“a paltry pledge of my esteem for you,” in the words of one of Erasmus’s correspondents.¹⁰ This great scholar certainly did not keep all the coins he was given, but passed them on to other friends in turn, like Henry Glarean, professor at Paris, who received money of Trajan and Alexander the Great as a wedding present.¹¹ The staters and drachmas of ancient Greece

especially traveled very far from their native cities and islands to come to rest in western cabinets and reliquaries; Isabella d'Este was delighted by the present of an ancient coin sent to her wrapped in a sonnet by Fra Sabba da Castiglione, who had picked up this piece, and composed these verses, while musing among the ruins of the Temple of Apollo at Delos.¹² The number of silver didrachmas of Rhodes preserved as “Judas pennies” in churches throughout Italy and France indicate that this kind of traffic took place very early.¹³ One of the better-known anecdotes associated with this commerce tells how the great Roman antiquarian Fulvio Orsini complained of the high price demanded for a medal of Cicero, supposedly struck at Magnesia in Asia Minor when Cicero was proconsul there. The dealer replied that the price was in no way extravagant since it would scarcely cover the cost of passage from Magnesia to Rome.¹⁴ Perhaps this same medal continued its wanderings to find its way to Zamosius in Transylvania—we can only hope he was not required to pay the entire cost of the passage!

Beginning in 1517, with the publication of Andrea Fulvio's *Illustrium imagines*, the coins themselves were joined by another kind of object that could be collected, circulated, exchanged, and given away, and which seemed to gush forth from its own perennial vein—the numismatic book (fig. 1). Indeed, the profile portraits on the ancient coins, and the low-relief scenes and figures they carried on their reverse sides, seem well suited for reproduction in black and white as woodcuts and copperplate engravings. The fact that they carried inscriptions made them even more compatible with the text of the printed page. Their round shape was no obstacle to aesthetic harmony with lines of print, for they could be surrounded by a great assortment of frames (fig. 2), or placed within the text like the decorative vignettes and historiated initials of the old manuscripts (fig. 3). If Renaissance publishers such as Mazzocchi of Rome, Rouille of Lyons, or Plantin of Antwerp had taken the time to stop and reflect philosophically on their activity, they would have observed that ancient coins were especially suitable for replication by the press, since these were already mass-produced identical objects, the prototype of the aura-destroying technology that Walter Benjamin identified with the mechanical reproduction of art centuries later.¹⁵ To transform the roving images of the coins into woodcuts and engravings for further multiplication and transport seems almost a fulfillment rather than an interruption of their original telos of circulation and exchange.

The coin collections of the Renaissance, and the printed books that reproduced them, were a major force in making the culture of classical antiquity—formerly the exclusive property of a small cadre of text-bound

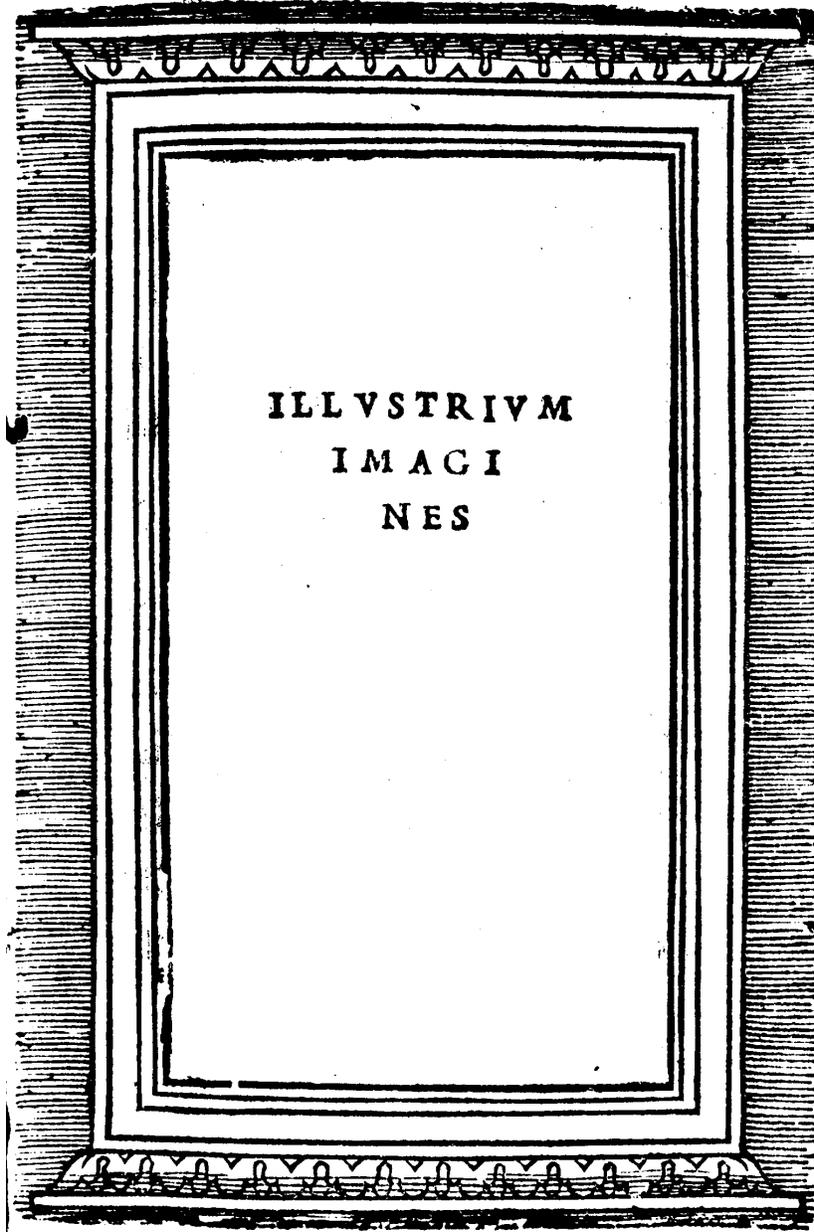


Fig. 1

Andrea Fulvio, *Illustrium imagines* (Rome, 1517), title page.

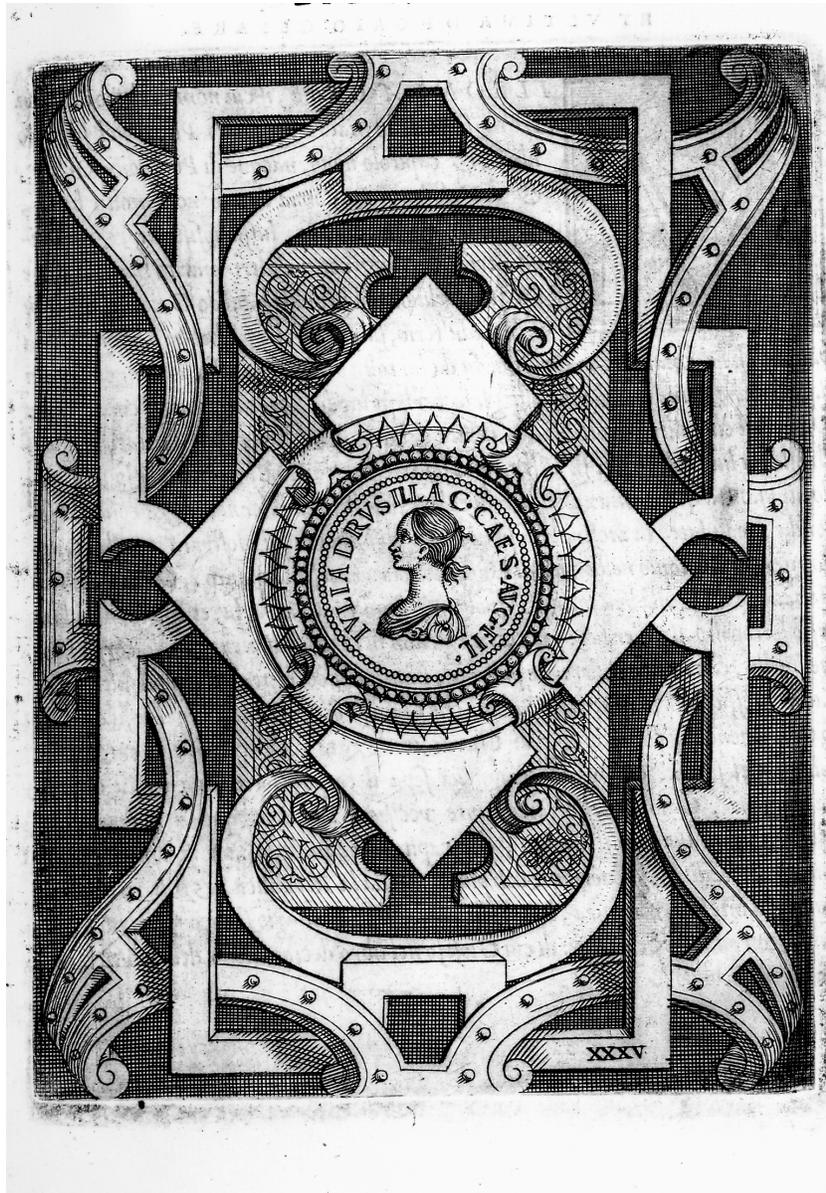


Fig. 2

Enea Vico, *Le imagini delle donne Auguste* (Venice, 1557), pl. 35: Julia Drusilla.

I M A G I N E S

foribus templi est ara, in cuius basi duo sunt augurales pulli, farinam colligentes, super illos est imago viri, cum aliis ornamentis compositis ex frondium ligaturis. Ad dextrum aræ latus Imperator lorica-tus & galeatus consistit, dextra schedam tenens, à cuius tergo duo vi-dentur milites galeati. Laevo aræ lateri sacerdos palliatus sinistra sche-dam tenens, dextra pateram, in ara sacrificaturus, assistit: à cuius ter-go duo milites loricati nudatis capitibus conspiciuntur, sine inscri-ptione.



MALLIA SCANTILLA vxor Didii Iuliani Imperatoris. Ab hac persuasus Iulianus, Imperium suscepit, ac postea à Senatu Augusta est appellata.

DIDIA CLARA Iuliani ex Mallia Scantilla filia, Cornelio re-pentino in coniugium tradita, Augustaque nominata. Post patris in-teritum, nomen est abrogatum, sed concessum patrimonium.



PESCENNIVS NIGER ex patre Annio Fur-co, inatre Lampridia natus, mediocriter eruditus, moribus ferox, di-
uitis

Fig. 3

Jacopo Strada, *Epitome thesauri antiquitatum* (Lyons, 1553), p. 94: coins of Scantilla, Didia, and Pescennius.

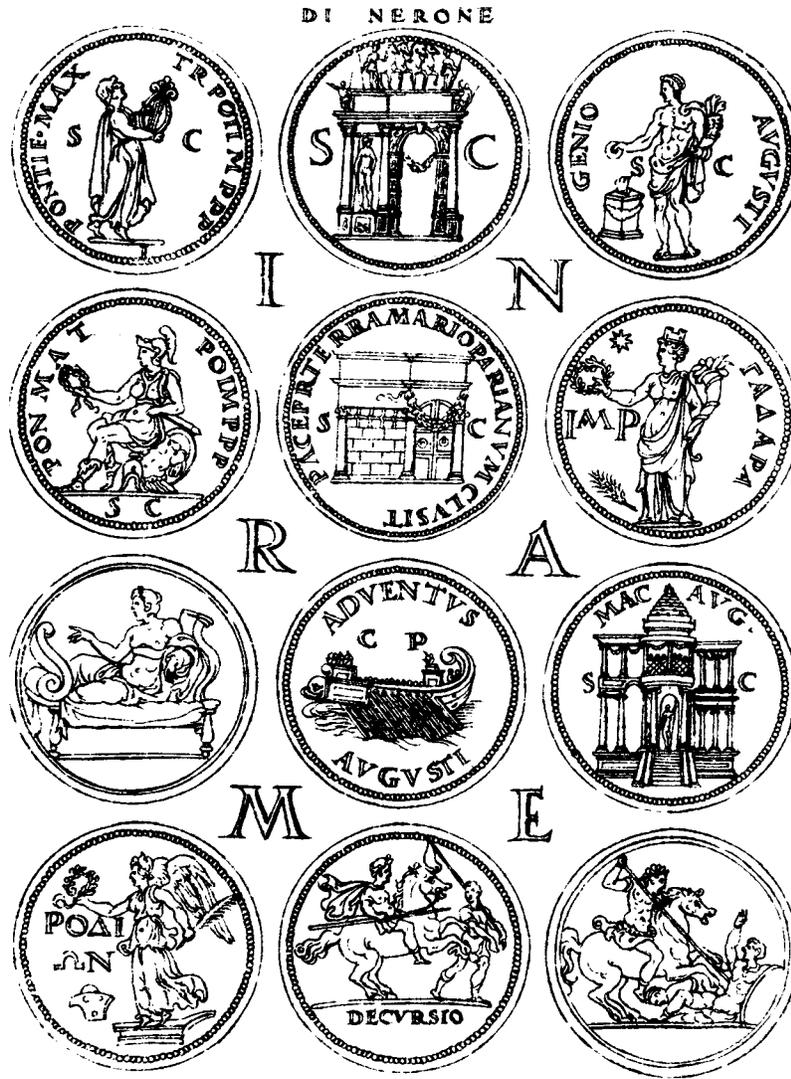


Fig. 4

Enea Vico, *Le imagini con tutti i reversi de gli imperatori* (Venice, 1548), plate showing bronze coins of Nero.

M E D A G L I E A N T I C H E . 35

& Dione, si giacque con tutte le sue forelle, & ancora che la tauola sua era piena di persone, se ne poneua quando una, & quando un'altra à sedere à canto da man sinistra, hauendo sempre la moglie da man destra. Et credefi ch'egli togliesse la virginità à Drufilla, essendo ancora fanciullo. Et dicono che Antonia sua auola, in casa della quale si alleuauano insieme, lo trouò una uolta à giacersi con lei. Giuraua spesse fiato pel nome di Drufilla, come di quella, di cui teneua piu conto, che dell'altre. come leggiamo in Dione, lui hauer dimostrato nella sua morte. Ond'è che vedendo il popolo Romano queste sue forelle tanto amate da lui, gli fece per adulatione battere la medaglia con l'immagine di quelle deificate dal riuerso, si come in Suetonio si legge nella uita di Caligula, il quale puntalmente scriue quanto di sopra s'è detto.



T I B E R I O C L A V D I O .

LA MEDAGLIA di Tiberio Claudio, di metallo Corinthio, con lettere, che dicono. TI. CLAVDIVS. CAESAR. AVG. P. M. TR. P. IMP. con una bolla, con lettere tali dietro alla testa. N. C. A. P. R. cioè. Nobis. concessum. à. populo. Romano. Ha per rouerscio vn bellissimo arco, che ha sopra vna statua equestre in mezo di due trofei carichi di spoglie, con S. C. & con altre lettere intorno tali. NERO. CLAVDIVS. DRVSVS. GERMAN. IMP. Questa medaglia fu battuta à perpetua memoria & onore del trionfo Britannico. Percioche questa sola impresa scriue Tranquillo, che fece Claudio à suoi giorni, che fu l'impresa della Inghilterra. Conciosia cosa che hauendo ordinato il Senato, che per suo onore gli fossero concessi gli ornamenti trionfali, desiderando Claudio di trionfare, clesse per mandar ad effetto questo suo desiderio, l'impresa della Inghilterra. Onde partitosi da Ostia, & andandosene alla volta di questa Isola, per mare, & hauendola senza alcuna battaglia, & senza sangue, ridotta in brieve in suo potere, tornò à Roma, & trionfò con grandissimo apparato. Et questo è vn'arco, con la statua equestre di Claudio; & quelle sono le spoglie de' Britanni. Ma per auentura noi potremmo ancora dire, che quest'arco posto dal riuerso nella medaglia di Claudio, fosse quell'arco di marmo trionfale, che il Senato fra

F 3 molte

Fig. 5

Sebastiano Erizzo, *Discorso sopra le medaglie de gli antichi*, 4th ed. (Venice c. 1585), p. 85: medal of Claudius.

humanists—seem familiar and accessible to all literate Europeans. Claude Lévi-Strauss reminds us that one of the functions of art is to provide a miniaturized “homologue” of the phenomenal world, creating the illusion that these phenomena can be comprehended, mastered, grasped as it were: “being smaller, the object as a whole seems less formidable. . . . This quantitative transposition extends and diversifies our power.”¹⁶ In turning the pages of Enea Vico’s 1548 *Imagini con tutti i riversi*, filled with rows and columns of coins showing scenes and symbols of Roman religion, war, commerce, and politics (fig. 4), we find it hard to avoid the “cinematic” sensation that the ancient world is here revealed as a parade of phantoms observed through tiny lenses or portholes, like the eyepiece of a Kinetoscope.¹⁷ In the case of a map, this faculty of art to render the universe accessible through miniaturization is obvious, and we are not surprised to learn that a number of the numismatic writers of the Renaissance—Ortelius, Lazius, Symeoni, Sambucus—contributed to the history of cartography as well.¹⁸

In many instances the medals of Greece and Rome were regarded by humanists as literal miniatures, reduced versions of great sculptural and architectural monuments of antiquity long ago destroyed or buried. Coins showing riders on horseback were identified with the lost equestrian statues mentioned by ancient writers, such as the one set up by Trajan in his forum;¹⁹ and we are not surprised that Leonardo da Vinci copied or adapted coin types of imperial triumphal arches, like the one erected by Claudius to celebrate his invasion of Britain (fig. 5), in his ambitious designs for the equestrian monuments of Francesco Sforza and Gian Giacomo Trivulzio.²⁰ A frequent topos of Renaissance humanism is to compare, contrast, or identify the tiny coins with the colossal architecture of antiquity, a fancy encouraged no doubt by the frequent appearance of temples, palaces, and other public works on Roman imperial medals.²¹ In a Latin poem by Thomas More praising the collection of one of his Flemish friends, we read: “The pyramids, Busleyden, are not such monuments to their noble dead, as is your little box of coins.”²² At the end of that ambitious checklist of Roman imperial coins, Adolf Occo’s *Imperatorum romanorum numismata* of 1579, there is a four-line epigram addressed by the book to the browsing customer in the bookshop, urging the reader to “buy me—the price is not great,” and promising that he will find in these coins the monuments of the men of antiquity, yet “I will be neither heavy to lift nor awkward to carry.”²³ Both More and Occo, of course, play upon the double meaning of *monumentum*, which can connote a memorial of any size and medium, or a monumental structure in the modern sense.