

Coin circulation in Nijmegen during the reign of Augustus: the evidence of small hoards

In recent years a great deal of research has been done on coin circulation in the region of the Rhine frontier during the reign of Augustus (27 BC-AD 14)¹. In particular camps that were occupied for only a few years provide interesting data, and these finds show –contrary to what happened in the decades after Augustus– how fast the composition of the stock of bronze coins (but only bronze) changed over time. Several successive coin issues arrived in the North, and each series dominated the coin circulation for some years². The first bronze issues that were used by the military on the Rhine in the penultimate decade BC were halved asses of the Republican period and of Vienne and Lyons; then came the Nîmes asses (struck in 16-8 BC?); followed by the bronze coins of Lyons with the altar on the reverse (two series: 7-3 BC and AD 10-14). This quick turnover of bronze coins can be explained by the ever-growing demand for coins in the region, which was due to the presence of the army and the increasing monetization of the entire region. That old bronze coins actually seem to disappear from circulation within a few decades can be explained by a continuous drain towards the hinterland, and the gradual romanization and monetization of the areas towards the North Sea. It is also possible that the metal of the old coins was used to forge copies of a lighter weight. Another reason could have been the fact that due to an increase in the velocity of circulation bronze coin actually became worn very quickly, and had to be countermarked or withdrawn from circulation.

The purpose of this short contribution is to draw attention to some new material that was recently published in an important book concerning the coin finds at the Kops Plateau at Nijmegen (the Netherlands) by Jos van der Vin³. It contains the description of 4,482 Celtic and Roman coins found in a fort, probably constructed just before 10 BC. The archaeologists who excavated this site consider it to be the headquarters of Drusus, commander-in-chief of the Rhine armies from 12 BC. Almost 70% or 3,121 of the coins are from the reign of Augustus. Seven small groups of bronze coins were

published by van der Vin and can be considered as hoards, perhaps the contents of purses. They offer a rare insight in the successive stages of coin circulation during the reign of Augustus, and serve to strengthen the ideas we already have on the evolution of the monetary stock of bronze coins in use.

Let us start with two hoards of the so-called *Avauca* coins, struck in the last decade BC by an unknown local authority⁴. The first contains only 4 specimens of this type together with a Nervian bronze coin, while the second has 19 *Avauca* bronzes⁵. It is quite strange to

-
1. Berger F.: *Kalkriese 1. Die römischen Fundmünzen* (Römisch-Germanische Forschungen, 55), Mainz am Rhein, 1996; Chantraine, H.: *Varus oder Germanicus? Zu den Fundmünzen von Kalkriese*, *Thetis. Mannheimer Beiträge zur Klassischen Archäologie und Geschichte Griechenlands und Zyperns*, 9, 2002, p. 81-93; Heinrichs J.: *Überlegungen zur Versorgung augusteischer Truppen mit Münzgeld*. In Mooren L. (ed.): *Politics, administration and Society in the Hellenistic and Roman World* (Studia Hellenistica, 36), Leuven, 2000, p. 155-214; van Heesch, J.: *Les monnaies augustéennes sur quelques sites belges. Contribution à l'étude de la chronologie de l'occupation romaine du nord de la Gaule*. In M. Lodewijckx (ed.): *Archaeological and historical aspects of West-European societies. Album amicorum André Van Doorselaer* (Acta Archaeologica Lovaniensia Monographiae, 8), Leuven, 1996, p. 95-107; Wigg D.: *Coin supply and the Roman Army*. In Groenman-van Waateringe W. e.a. (eds.): *Roman Frontier Studies 1995. Proceedings of the XVIth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies* (Oxbow Monograph, 91) Oxford, 1997, p. 281-292; Wigg D.: *Die Rolle des Militärs bei der Münzversorgung und Münzwirtschaft am Rhein in der frühen Kaiserzeit*. In Schlüter W. and Wiegels R. (eds.): *Rom, Germanien und die Ausgrabungen von Kalkriese*, Osnabrück, 1999, p. 327-346. On the coinage of this period in detail see Wolters, R.: *Nummi Signati. Untersuchungen zur römischen Münzprägung und Geldwirtschaft* (Vestigia, 49), München, 1999. On army supply in general see the contributions in Erdkamp P. (ed.): *The Roman Army and the Economy*, Amsterdam, 2002.
 2. This is an oversimplification of course. For more details see the publications in note 1.
 3. van der Vin, J.P.A.: *Die Fundmünzen der römischen Zeit in den Niederlanden, III,1, Nijmegen - Kops Plateau*, Mainz, 2002.
 4. Scheers, S.: *Traité de numismatique celtique, 2, La Gaule Belgique* (Annales Littéraires de l'Université de Besançon, 195), Paris, 1977, no. 2178 cl. II. For the Nervian coin: Scheers: *op.cit.*, no. 171 and plate 22 no. 633 (bronze epsilon-stater).
 5. van der Vin, J.: *op.cit.*, p. 213 no. 12002 and p. 218-219 no.12008.

find a hoard of a single bronze denomination, especially small coins such as these, but other examples are known. There is a similar depot of Avaucia bronzes from Cologne⁶. Why the hoard contained only coins that could not be worth much more than a Roman quadrans is not known. But we can perhaps compare this find with a depot of small change excavated in a bar in Pompeii that contains 1,237 quadrantes and 374 asses⁷.

What is more interesting is the fact that at least 13 coins in this second hoard share the same reverse die. The fact that 726 Avaucia bronzes are known to have

been found in Nijmegen, and the presence of these die-links suggest that the mint for these coins (or one of the mints) may actually have been situated at Nijmegen.

The other hoards (see table 1) are also of interest as they clearly illustrate how fast old bronzes were replaced by the newer series⁸. Hoards III and IV contain mainly bronzes of Nîmes, probably struck between 16 and 8 BC, and they match the circulation pattern found at Oberaden, a legionary fort occupied between 11 and 8 BC⁹.

	Hoard III	Hoard IV	Hoard V	Hoard VI	Hoard VII
Avaucia / Atuatuci		I			
Republic			½		
Vienne		I			
Nîmes (16-8 BC)	4	8 + ½	1 + ½		
Rome (16-2 BC)	I			I	
Lyons I (7-3 BC)			5	5	I
Lyons II (AD 10-14) <i>Sest.</i> <i>Dup/As</i>				3	4 4
Countermarks	IMP, wheel	"VAR", wheel, IMP	wheel, VAR, AVG	AVG, Rc, TIB, TIBCAVF	-
Total:	5	II	8	9	9

Fig. 1. Nijmegen: purses containing bronze coins (asses unless otherwise specified). [½ means a halved coin].

6. Nuber, E.: Der frühromische Münzumsatz in Köln, *Kölner Jahrbuch für Vor- und Frühgeschichte*, 17, 1974, p. 28-88.

7. Breglia, L.: Circolazione monetale ed aspetti di vita economica a Pompei. In *Pompeiana. Raccolta di studi per il secondo centenario degli scavi di Pompei*, Napoli, 1950, p. 59 no. 59.

8. See van der Vin, J.: *op. cit.*, p. 213-226, hoards nos. 12003, 12006, 12007, 12009 and 12012 (for the details of these hoards the reader should consult the original publication).

9. See van der Vin, J.: *op. cit.*, p. 213-226, hoards nos. 12003 and 12006; for Oberaden see Ilisch, P.: Die Münzen aus den Ausgrabungen im Römerlager Oberaden. In Sebastian, J. (ed.): *Das Römerlager in Oberaden III, Die Ausgrabungen im nordwestlichen Lagerbereich und weitere Baustellenuntersuchungen der Jahre 1962-1988*, Münster, 1992, p. 175-201. For the Nîmes coins see Burnett, A., Amandry, M. and Ripollès, P.P.: *Roman provincial coinage*, I, London/Paris, 1998, no. 523 and *RIC* 155-157.

The issues from Nîmes are more or less absent in the later purses. Hoard V contains almost only altar coins of the first series struck in Lyons (7-3 B.C.), one with a Varus countermark that cannot be earlier than AD 6 or 7¹⁰. Hoards VI and VII illustrate the gradual arrival of the second altar series from Lyons, struck between AD 10 and 14¹¹.

When the composition of hoard IV is considered in more detail it is surprising to find that it contains coins with the countermark VAR. As this purse contains no Lyons bronzes it should be dated before 7 BC. But if the well-known VAR countermark indeed occurs on these coins, and this is what we have to conclude from the publication, it would mean it cannot be a countermark of Publius Quinctilius Varus, who

became legate of the Rhine armies only in AD 6 or 7¹². After having checked the three coins with these marks, it became clear (Figs. 2-4) why they were read as VAR, but also that they are completely different from the ones attributed to the famous Roman general Varus, defeated by Arminius in AD 9. Their reading is difficult and uncertain, and lacks any explanation for the time being¹³. It should be a warning to us all that it is very dangerous to study countermarked coins without having examined the originals.

Small Roman coin hoards like these purses are quite rare. Their statistical value is perhaps limited as they only contain a few coins. But this evidence is still worth looking at, as it gives us a rare insight in what actually circulated at a precise moment of time¹⁴.

-
10. See van der Vin, J.: *op. cit.*, p. 213-226, hoard no. 12009. On the dating of the Lyons asses see van Heesch, J.: Proposition d'une nouvelle datation des monnaies en bronze à l'autel de Lyon frappées sous Auguste, BSFN, 48-4, 1993, p. 535-538 and Amandry, M., Estiot, S. and Gautier G., *Le monnayage de l'atelier de Lyon (43 av. J.-C. - 413 apr. J.-C.). Supplément II*, Wetteren, 2003, p. 15-16.
11. See van der Vin, J.: *op. cit.*, p. 213-226, hoards nos. 12007 and 12012. On the dates of this second series of altar coins see also van Heesch, J.: Some considerations on the circulation of Augustan and Tiberian bronze coins in Gaul. In Wiegels, R. (ed.): *Die Fundmünzen von Kalkriese und die frühkaiserzeitliche Münzprägung* (Osnabrücker Forschungen zu Altertum und Antike-Rezeption, 3), Möhnesee, 2000, p. 153-170. On the chronology of the Augustan coins but with divergent ideas see Martini, R.: *Cesar Augustus. Collezione Veronelli di monete di bronzo: catalogo critico*, Milano, 2001, *passim*.
12. On the Varus countermark see Werz, U.: Die Gegenstempel von Kalkriese und der Münzumlaufl in früh-tiberischer Zeit in der Germania inferior und superior. In Wiegels, R. (ed.): *Die Fundmünzen von Kalkriese und die frühkaiserzeitliche Münzprägung*, Möhnesee, 2000, p. 237-252 and also Martini, R.: *Collezione Pangerl. Contromarche imperiali romane (Augustus-Vespasianus)* (Nomismata, 6), Milano, 2003, p. 98.
13. On this countermark see Martini, R.: *Collezione Pangerl. Contromarche imperiali romane (Augustus-Vespasianus)* (Nomismata, 6), Milano, 2003, p. 74.
14. I should like to thank for their help: the coin cabinet of Leyde for providing the photographs as well as my colleagues Harry van Enckevort, Hans Jacobi, Jos van der Vin and David Wigg-Wolf.



Fig. 2 The “*VAR*” countermark on an as struck in Nîmes (van der Vin no. 12006/3)



Fig. 3 The “*VAR*” countermark on an as struck in Nîmes (van der Vin no. 12006/6)



Fig. 4 The “*VAR*” countermark on an as struck in Nîmes (van der Vin no. 12006/4)