

CONTEMPORARY IMITATIONS OF CONSTANTINE'S WOLF & TWINS COINAGE

Adrian Marsden

PART ONE

One of the commoner types of coins of Constantine's reign is that showing, on the obverse, a helmeted and left-facing bust of the goddess Roma with an *VRBS ROMA* legend and, on the reverse, the she-wolf together with the twins Romulus and Remus. This type was struck in great numbers at all of the 13 mints operating throughout the empire from AD 330-335. The type was extensively copied in the western provinces, alongside its sister-type showing, on the obverse, a bust of the personification of the city of Constantinople with the legend *CONSTANTINOPOLIS* and, on the reverse, a Victory standing on a prow. This also applies to the issues with a *GLORIA EXERCITVS* reverse and obverses of the emperor Constantine and his sons. These copies are common as site-finds throughout Britain.

This article will look at the general physical characteristics of these imitations, the context and circumstances of their production, and will then take a closer look at several different groups of these coins. I shall confine myself mainly, both for reasons of space and simplicity, to the copies with a wolf and twins reverse since these can be easily placed in one separate group for study.

Finally the die-alignments of official coins are at 6 o'clock or 12 o'clock in the vast majority of cases.

Physical Characteristics

Official coins of the period AD 330-335 were struck at a weight standard of 120 to the libra, giving a rough weight range of 2.3-2.5g. Pieces do, of course, exist outside these ranges, sometimes being as little as 1.5g and sometimes nearly 4g but the vast majority fall fairly closely within this range. The average weights of several large hoards give a figure of around 2.39g. Diameter varies ever so slightly by mint but averages, with very slight variations, around 17mm. The products of imperial mints in this period were washed with a very thin silver layer although this was more apparent in the eastern empire; the products of western mints very rarely retain even a trace of this coating though analysis reveals they contain a 1-2% silver content. Official dies were probably produced with the use of hubs, giving the products of a particular workshop a very similar appearance (see Fig.1.). There are variations but these are very rare; indeed, perhaps the truest indicator of whether a coin is officially produced or not is its style.

Imitative coins in general show no such uniformity (see Figs.2. and 3.). Their weight range goes from below 0.5g to over 2g whilst their diameter can vary between 8mm and 19mm with most falling around 12-14mm. They contain no silver nor, taken as a nebulous whole, is there any hint of stylistic similarity although, as I will explain later, individual groups do display stylistic similarities as they also display some amount of consistency in terms of weight and diameter. Finally, although most imitations hover around 6 or 12 o'clock in their die-axes, there is nothing like the same sort of regularity encountered on official coins. Mules with inappropriate obverses or reverses are also relatively frequent in the unofficial series (see Figs.4. and 5.); they never occur in the official series. Some examples even have two obverses or two reverses (see Fig.6.). Finally, as is usual with imitations, bungled and garbled legends, and mintmarks are common.

Some pieces with these confused and garbled legends are quite illuminating. One example has a laureate and cuirassed male bust facing right accompanied by an *VRBS ROMA* legend whilst another has a similar bust facing left accompanied by the legend *CONSTANTINVSOP*, perhaps a bizarre confusion between the obverse titulature applicable to an imperial prince and one applicable to a Constantinopolis bust.

Yet another piece has a crude cuirassed male bust facing left with the legend *VRBS ROMA* and a *Gloria Exercitus* reverse (see Fig.7.). Other pieces vie with each other for the most extravagant mintmarks; garbled mint signatures are common on the series but some marks are quite exceptional. One copy (with a *PLG* exergual mark) has the two stars above the wolf replaced by palm branches with a laurel wreath positioned between them (see Fig.8.). The resulting signature is beyond anything ever used at Lyons.



Fig.1. Examples of official issues of the *Urbs Roma* wolf and twins type.

Production Of Imitative Copies

No site in Britain has yielded clear evidence for the production of imitative coin in the 330s and 340s; dies, blanks and bronze rods have been found in connection with the so-called "barbarous radiate" imitations but nothing applicable to this period has so far appeared. However, it is possible to form conclusions from what is known of the manufacture of radiate imitations; it is likely that production techniques were much the same in both cases.

The vast majority, indeed probably all, of imitations from this period were struck and not cast. The flans or blanks used seem to have been manufactured from either roughly cylindrical bars of metal cut into pieces, or pellets hammered flat. There does not seem to have been any over-striking of earlier coins as there was to be in the 350s during the copying of the *Fel Temp* types; these imitations were the smallest pieces produced in around 50 years and so it is unlikely that any suitable old coin was available. No real evidence exists as to where production centres were located, assuming they were located in this country at all, although common sense would suggest that they were to some extent out of the way of towns and cities where their illicit activity might be noticed, and yet near enough to market centres for supply not to be a great problem. Certain large groups, which share common styles with occasional die-linkage, imply that a great deal of production was confined to several large centres with the possible existence of smaller centres produc-



Fig.4. Mule with a Constantinopolis obverse paired with a wolf and twins reverse (16mm, 1.87g).

Fig.5. Mule with an obverse of Constantine II and a wolf and twins reverse (13.5mm, 1.43g).



Figs.2. and 3. A group of wolf and twins imitations from the Nether Compton hoard.

ing a few imitations. The products of the larger centres, which are recognisable unofficial mints have their own characteristics and are often of greater weight and higher artistic quality. These will receive attention below.

Reasons For Copying The Type

This investigation will start from an assumption that the primary reason for copying coin springs from a profit motive. If official coin was melted down then the silver extracted before re-striking would represent some profit. The smaller size of imitative pieces vis-a-vis their official counterparts would also have furnished ample gain. However, this presupposes that unofficial coins were tariffed at the same rate as products of the regular mints. Given the small size and pitiful appearance of some of these imitations such a hypothesis is surely absurd. Rather, as the name given to the official version of these imitations, the *follis*, implies, it seems more likely that coins in this period circulated by the bagful or, more strictly, according to a system based on their weight. If this were the case, the profits forgers would accrue would amount to the difference in value between the weight of scrap metal and the weight of legitimate coin. It is likely this difference was relatively substantial, given what we know of the overvaluing of the imperial bronze

coinage in the 3rd and 4th centuries.

This being the case, to what extent were these imitations accepted? The answer differs depending on whether we look at hoards or site finds. In hoards the percentage of imitations is low, rarely much above 5%, except in specialised cases such as Maidenhatch (*Numismatic Chronicle* 1992) which is in any case almost certainly a forger's hoard.

With regard to site finds the proportion is much higher and would be much higher still if so many of these coins were not wrongly classified as official. Even in hoards examined by museum experts a few often slip through the net. This disparity between the percentages found in hoards and on sites is easily explained. Hoards usually represent savings where the best available coins have been picked out; site finds represent loss of coins in current use, being in addition often biased towards lower value pieces. Evidently imitations were used, and used freely, following Gresham's law that bad money drives out good. Better coins were slipped away and saved.

The next question centres on why these imitations were accepted at all. Harsh penalties were persistently laid down for forgery and coin users were under no obligation to accept bad coin. It seems reasonable to assume that bad

CONTEMPORARY IMITATIONS

coin would not have been accepted had better been available. It seems it was not. This deficiency of official coin probably began following the cessation of the *Gloria Exercitus* one standard issue around 341. This was followed by the commencement of the *Victoriae Dd Auggq Nn* coinages but it seems that these were either not struck in sufficient numbers to satisfy the needs of the coin-using public or did not reach Britain in great enough supply. It is likely in any case that supply was falling from 335 onwards, at least in real terms; the increasing reduction in the size of the coins would mean more and more were needed. Furthermore, if official coin was tariffed at an artificially high rate, the arrival of a lower value, imitative coinage would perhaps even have been welcomed.



Fig. 7.
Two imitations
with confused
obverse legends.

Dating Of Wolf & Twins Copies

It is most probable then that wide scale production of imitations did not begin until the late 330s; certainly relatively large hoards from the earlier 330s such as Killingholme (c333-334) do not contain any copies. It is interesting that the majority of copies are those of *Urbs Roma* and *Constantinopolis* types, *Gloria Exercitus* examples seeming to be less common; these would have been, by 337 or so, old coin types which were no longer produced. They were, however, struck at a higher weight standard than coins after 335 and it may have been in the minds of the forgers, at least initially, that the public would believe their imitations to be representatives of the heavier, earlier issues of 330-335. Interestingly, some groups of imitations do keep surprisingly close to the post-335 weight standard, although this is hardly a general trait and the weight range is, on the whole, far too great for the consideration that this



Fig. 6. An imitation with two reverses, showing the wolf and twins on each side (14mm, 1.52g).

was a conscious attempt to keep the weight of imitations in line with that of the reduced, post-335 coinage.

The cessation of copying came with the demonetisation of the type in 348 when Constans and Constantius II initiated their new *Fel Temp Reparatio* coinage. Copying may have persisted in outlying rural areas not affected so quickly by imperial decrees but 348 is certainly an important watershed.

Hence, the older view of writers such as Mattingley that *minims* of this type, together with the very small radiate and *Fel Temp* imitations, were manufactured in the 5th century and later must now be abandoned. The vast majority of imitations of Roman coinage were produced contemporaneously, or very nearly contemporaneously, with the coins they were copying.

Most hoards of the 340s such as Woodeaton (*Numismatic Chronicle* 1978) contain several small module copies, proving that some *minims* at least were being produced well in advance of the 5th century. There are a very few strange-looking copies which bear a resemblance to *sceattas* but that is no real reason to class them as being either precursors to, or contemporaneous with, that coinage (see Fig. 9.). There are other arguments such as those of Callu who dates copying of this type to the early 350s and ties it in with imitations of *Fel Temp* types; this does not, however, consider the fact that copies of types from the 330s and *Fel Temp* copies practically never turn up together in hoards. Once again, the 348 watershed for a discontinuation of copying seems compelling.



Fig. 9.
An imitation of
strange style
showing a
resemblance to
sceatta types.

Mintmark Disparity

One of the strangest factors in the study of this imitative coinage is the mintmarks that copies bear compared to those of legitimate issues. Out of all official coins found in Britain around 60-70% were struck at the mint of Trier in Germany, with some 20-35% coming from Lyons. Similar proportions might be expected in the case of imitative coin. However, this is not at all the case. Rather the proportions are practically reversed, copies bearing Lyons mintmarks representing about 55-60% of all British finds. There seem to be two possibilities here:-

1. That copies manufactured in southern Gaul (and hence copying mintmarks of the local mint at Lyons) were imported in bulk to Britain. Interestingly, finds from the north of Britain (for example, Womersley in Yorkshire) do seem to be represented by a higher proportion of Trier copies. This is what would be expected if large numbers of imitations with Lyons mintmarks were injected into the south of the province; fewer would reach the north where any



Fig. 8.
An example
with a fictitious
yet highly
extravagant
mintmark
(13.5mm,
0.99g).

copies produced would presumably follow official trends more closely.

One then comes to the question of who was responsible for importing these copies into Britain. Occasionally, earlier in the province's history, an economically hard-pressed central government had sent unusual consignments of coin to the province: this had happened during the reign of Trajan when a large batch of orichalcum Syrian *semises* stamped with a bucranium countermark were transported to the north-western provinces. This does, however, seem unlikely to have been the case here; even were the "forgers" working only and directly for the government as producers of a kind of low value sub-unit, it is difficult to believe that that same government, so orderly and organised in the production of its own coin, would conspire in the manufacture of an imitative coinage that was

not only inferior in weight to the official coinage, but which also, by its lack of silver content, actively undermined that same official coinage. It is hard to see, as Reece has argued (1978), these coins as part of an official supplementary coinage. That is not to say that they were not part of an officially tolerated "coinage of necessity" as it were, but it is surely going too far to actually say that such a coinage was produced and imported at the direct behest of the government.

Alternatively, there is the explanation that the coinage was brought over by merchants and thus found its way into the circulating medium by trade. This is also unconvincing; it seems impossible that passers of bad coin, even bad coin that was desired in the market place due to a lack of anything better, from southern Gaul would have been able to have had such a profound effect on the mintmark patterns of imitations in the province. It is possible that a detailed study of trade patterns between southern Britain and *Gallia Lugdunensis* in this period might cast some light on this situation but at the moment it is best to withhold judgement.



Fig. 10. Copies imitating issues of Rome, Arles and Siscia.

2. That the disparity is caused not by importation of imitative coin but rather by the effect of one or two large production centres in the south of the province. Assuming that a group of copiers would use one original to cut their dies it is not hard to explain the large numbers of Lyons copies, especially if forgers then copied their own earlier copies, thus adding to the preponderance of Lyons imitations. If coin users were more familiar with the style

of coins from Trier there is also the possibility that, by copying a less familiar coin of Lyons, the forgers hoped that their products were less likely to be challenged. This question of one or two large production centres is an interesting one and shall be investigated at greater length below.

This disparity then is still quite troubling. The second theory seems the more convincing of the two but nonetheless it remains only a theory.

Copies of mints other than Trier or Lyons are represented in roughly the proportions that one might expect, although they do seem to be a little less common than their official counterparts. Mainly it is the marks of the other western mints that are imitated, particularly Rome and Arles although some copies of Siscia are known (see Fig. 10.). Curiously enough, these copies of Siscia are usually mules with a *Constantinopolis* obverse; why this is the case remains a mystery since they seem to demonstrate no stylistic affinities to each other, nor are they similar in terms of size and weight.

Part two includes die-links between copies and establishing unofficial mints.

BALDWIN

The name for numismatics



BALDWIN'S
AUCTIONS Limited



Specialist auctions of quality coins, including Roman, Ancient British and English hammered.

11 Adelphi Terrace, London WC2N 6BJ
Tel. 0171 930 9808 Fax 0171 930 9450

A.H. BALDWIN & SONS LTD.

Established 1872
NUMISMATISTS

Ancient, mediæval and modern coins, medals and numismatic books bought and sold. Extensive stocks of all series for sale.

11 Adelphi Terrace, London WC2N 6BJ
Tel. 0171 930 6879 Fax 0171 930 9450

DETECTING 2000



Still the best guide to the hobby there is!

Even if you've been detecting for years, *Detecting 2000* will still teach you a thing or two. Covers topics such as choosing a detector, obtaining permission to search, cleaning and recording your finds and a great deal more.

only £6.95 + 55p postage

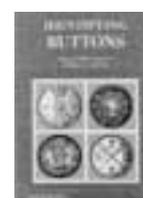
Other Essential Books:



Identifying Buckles
New 2nd edition
in A4 report format
£6.95 + 55p



Cleaning & Restoring Coins & Artefacts
£4.95 + 55p



Identifying Buttons
Military & Civilian together
-£4.95 + 55p

All titles available direct from
Mount Publications, PO Box 1916,
Chelmsford, Essex. CM3 1EY.

Visit our website at www.mountpub.com